

Reverse Localisation

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Abstract

This paper revises the general perception that localisation is about linguistic and cultural adaptation of digital content to the requirements of foreign markets; that localisation is successful if the origin of the material can no longer be detected. We will show that in a more and more globalised society (not just economy) publishers, and especially publishers of advertisements, play with 'strangeness' and stereotypes. For example, there are advertisements running completely in French on Irish television and radio advertisements in English-speaking countries that are completely in German (or in English with heavy German accents). Rather than adapting to the culture of the target country, rather than avoiding differences, in these cases publishers highlight the differences, focus on 'strangeness', introduce (rather than avoid) accents, embrace cultural diversity rather than avoid it - and all that to increase sales. As a complimentary, pleasant and valuable by-product, the entertainment value for the consumer increases significantly.

Uneasiness

When the localisation industry emerged in the mid 1980s, localisation was technically more complex than it is today. Applications were not properly internationalised; content was not separated from functionality; a full recompilation of the application after translation was almost always the norm, making extensive and labour-intensive testing obligatory. At the same time, however, the question of how to culturally adapt a word processor, a spreadsheet or a similar office-type application - the most common applications to be localised then - was not even asked. The idea was to use localisation as a vehicle to increase return on investment (ROI) in the original application by opening up huge new markets (mainly in rich, developed western European countries) through a relatively cheap and low-tech 'adaptation' of the products, which would then make them accessible to non-English speaking consumers.

Twenty years later the landscape has changed considerably. Much of the localisation effort has been reduced to simple translation tasks thanks to the use of sophisticated tools that automate much of the engineering and testing effort. Mainstream localisation is now far less technical than it used to be. However, *what* is being localised has changed so much that the question *how* localisation should be done has to be re-visited.

Web localisation has been and will for the foreseeable future remain the one area in localisation with the highest growth rates. Web localisation deals not just with simple user interfaces but with more general digital content. This digital content can include

material on a wide variety of topics, including history, education, politics, culture, entertainment and gaming. While the technical problems of localising this content have been solved in principle if not strategically, the question of how to adapt this content culturally has not yet been answered.

Although localisers have started to discuss the issue of cultural adaptation at conferences and in relevant industry publications, the solutions they are recommending largely follow old principles: design for a global audience, i.e. internationalise your service or your product, keeping the required localisation effort to a minimum; when localising adapt your digital product or service to the expectations of your target audience, i.e. give the Germans a ‘German’ product, the French a ‘French’ product and the Italians an ‘Italian’ product.

The general idea is to hide the origin of the original content, strive for the global common cultural denominator and make everyone believe the digital product or service they are dealing with was developed in their own country. To back up this strategy, experts invariably cite the godfather of cultural difference in the workplace, Geert Hofstede, without questioning or critically appraising the findings of his research which has its origins in the 1960s.

This contribution aims to clarify an uneasiness with this approach and to open up a better informed discussion about cultural adaptation as part of the overall localisation effort.

I18N-L10N-G11N

It might be hard to believe but it is true: after twenty years of localisation there is still no consensus of what internationalisation (I18N), localisation (L10N) and globalisation (G11N) mean and how they relate to each other. Definitions given by industry associations and companies on their web sites - although they vary considerably in detail - refer to localisation generally as the ‘linguistic and cultural adaptation of products to the requirements of foreign markets’. Most surprisingly, the fact that all internationalisation and localisation deals exclusively with digital material is always overlooked - or, maybe it is so obvious that it is not even worth mentioning? What makes this oversight so important is that its implications have never been explicitly discussed. The fact that some digital material, be it simple text, a graphic, audio or video, is not being adapted in a traditional medium such as paper or celluloid (what Negroponte described as the world of atoms) but in digital format has important implications on the tools and technology used, the process employed, and the knowledge required by the professionals involved. These implications are important, but can, unfortunately, not be considered in more detail in the context of this contribution.

For our purposes, we will use the terms as follows:

Internationalisation is the process of designing (or modifying) digital content (in its widest sense) and services so as to isolate the linguistically and culturally dependent parts of an application; and the development of a system that allows linguistic and cultural adaptation supporting users working in different languages and cultures.

Localisation is the linguistic and cultural adaptation of a digital product or service to the requirements of a foreign market and the management of multilinguality across the global, digital information flow.

Globalisation, in contrast, is a business strategy (not so much an activity) addressing the issues associated with taking a product to the global market; this includes world-wide marketing, sales and support.

The underlying rationale for localisation, the principal driver behind the localisation effort is the interest of the developers of the original product or service to increase their return on investment in that service or product. When software publishers were looking for markets in the mid-eighties where they could sell their products, they realised that there were several potential markets in Europe, ready to absorb their products, with all the right ingredients, i.e. a well-educated population with a sufficiently high income to buy their products. The only problem was that they did not speak English. That moment the localisation industry was born: its mission became to adapt software at a relatively low cost generating a relatively high revenue. While the subject localisers are dealing with has developed and expanded - localisers today deal not just with software but also with more general digital content - the underlying rationale behind this effort has remained the same.

There are a number of factors cited by localisation experts when asked what makes a successful localisation project. As in other industries, the successful balance between quality, cost and time required to complete a project are crucial. In relation to the acceptance by users, experts largely agree that localisation has been successful when the localised products and services have been linguistically and culturally adapted to the point that users do not realise that the product or service they are using was developed originally in a different country for a different target group.

Therefore, and here we extend the definition of the term, localisation is the linguistic and cultural adaptation with the aim to produce digital products and services for which the country of origin can no longer be traced. In other words, the measure of success is / *believe it's mine, you believe it's yours* - but, in its essence, it is all the same.

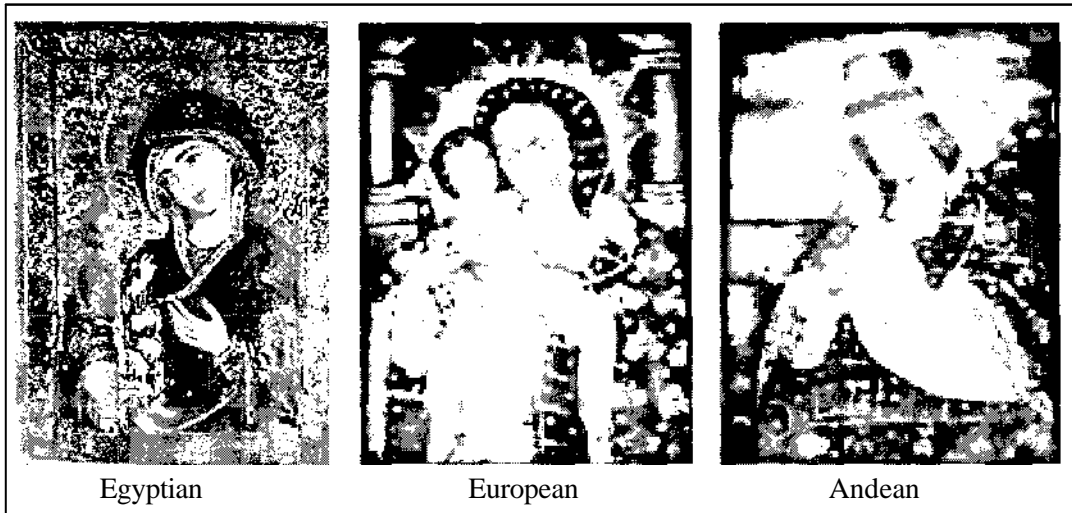
Cultural adaptation and localisation

Cultural adaptation in the context of localisation can only be understood on the background of its (short) history and rationale. Localisation is a tool used by digital publishers to sell products and services into markets where the original product 'as is' would not sell. The adaptation process aims to ease the use of products and services by removing linguistic and cultural barriers inherent in some digital products.

These barriers are present at a shallow level, which is now mostly understood, and at a deep level, which localisers still struggle with.

The shallow level includes the use of colours, symbols, sounds, and signals which have different meaning in a different cultural context. The deep level includes less evident but probably even more important aspects of the underlying value system, described, among others, by Geert Hofstede in his five categories of cultural differences which will be examined in more detail later in this paper.

One of the largest, oldest and most global organisations is the Catholic Church. It has adapted not just its translations to reflect changing beliefs and value systems in different cultural spaces, but also the images of the members of the holy family. For example, the image of the Virgin Mary looks distinctly local in Europe, Northern Africa/Middle East and South America.



Modern publishing houses have followed suit. The cover photograph of a guide book to the fun island of Ibiza, originally published in Germany, shows two young women in bathing suits on a beach having fun. This picture was kept for the Dutch version of the same guide book. When the French publishing house Hachette *localised* the guide book into French, they not only required the author to remove the *unsuitable* references in the guide book to the large gay community and the widespread use of drugs on the island, they also decided that the cover picture had to be changed. They believed that when French people go on holidays, they are looking for local costumes, folklore and traditions. Therefore, the two women on the beach had to make room for a middle-aged lady dressed in a traditional *ibicenco* dress. In essence, they adapted the guide to match the expectations of their potential readers; the reality of island life was rather less important.



Although the examples above are taken from the traditional world of paintings and printing presses, the same principles hold in the digital world. In fact, they are probably even more prevalent because changing or replacing images in the digital world is easy, in comparison with the world of traditional publishing.

In the following chapters we will explain in more detail the difference between what we have defined as the shallow and the deep levels of cultural adaptation in localisation.

Shallow level

The shallow level of cultural adaptation has been of relevance in localisation since the introduction of the graphical user interface (GUI). It includes the use of:

- Colour
- Sensitive pictures and images
- Hand signals
- Symbols
- Sounds
- History
- Product names and acronyms

The following paragraphs provide some example for each of these areas.

Use of colour

For example, in many Western countries red is an alarming colour, white can indicate a pure or basic state, and black is sombre. This is different in Asian countries like China where red expresses joy, white indicates mourning and black is “the lucky colour”. Green is associated with lush growth and ecology in Western countries, while it is the holy colour of the prophet in the Islamic world.

Sensitive pictures and images

For example, the national flag of a country is widely used to identify products aimed at specific markets and is, therefore, often printed on packaged software products. The Saudi Arabian flag contains holy symbols associated with the Koran, which Muslims are forbidden to destroy or bin.

Hand signals

Hand signals probably represent the most dangerous area of non-verbal communication. For example, a hand held up with the forefinger stretched out and the palm towards the viewer could be used to indicate “Danger!” or “Stop” in many countries — but in Greece it could cause serious offence. The “thumbs-up” sign, and “ok” sign (index finger and thumb forming a circle) used in many Western countries are regarded as sexual gestures in others.

Symbols

Icons not directly related to system components (disk, printer, monitor etc.) or application-determined elements (drawing, writing, opening files etc.) usually do not cause problems. However, symbols and icons that do not form part of the culture of the target country can cause serious problems for users in that country.

Sounds

Different cultures use sounds in different ways. For example, while a gong sound alerting a user that he made a mistake is perfectly acceptable in Western cultures, it should not be used in applications aimed at the Japanese market, where it would be seen as embarrassing for the user in front of colleagues.

History

Historical items frequently dealt with in multimedia encyclopaedias can be especially contentious. For example, which European was first to land on the American continent: was it St. Brendan, was it the Vikings, was it Columbus or was it a representative of the Mormons?

Product names and acronyms

Acronyms cannot be carried over into different languages and markets, even if they refer to international organisations. NATO is NATO in German, but it is OTAN in Spanish, for instance.

Deep level - entertainment, education, information, eContent

While at least some aspects of cultural adaptation at the shallow level are well understood, there are no strategies or guidelines helping localisers struggling with the deep level of cultural adaptation, probably best captured by Geert Hofstede and his framework of cultural differences in the workplace.

Prof. Geert Hofstede conducted perhaps the most comprehensive study of how values in the workplace are influenced by culture. His study analyzed a large database of employee values scores collected by IBM between 1967 and 1973 covering more than 70 countries.

He first used the 40 largest countries only and afterwards extended the analysis to 50 countries and 3 regions. In the editions of his work since 2001, scores are listed for 74

countries and regions, partly based on replications and extensions of the IBM study on different international populations.

Subsequent studies validating the earlier results have included commercial airline pilots and students in 23 countries, civil service managers in 14 countries, 'up-market' consumers in 15 countries and 'elites' in 19 countries.

From the initial results, and later additions, Hofstede developed a model that identifies four primary Dimensions to assist in differentiating cultures: Power Distance – PDI, Individualism - IDV, Masculinity - MAS, and Uncertainty Avoidance - UAI. He added a fifth Dimension after conducting an additional international study with a survey instrument developed with Chinese employees and managers. That Dimension, based on Confucian dynamism, is Long-Term Orientation - LTO and was applied to 23 countries. These five Hofstede Dimensions can also be found to correlate with other country and cultural paradigms.¹

Power Distance Index (PDI) focuses on the degree of equality, or inequality, between people in the country's society. A High Power Distance ranking indicates that inequalities of power and wealth are prevalent within the society. A Low Power Distance ranking indicates the society de-emphasizes the differences between a citizen's power and wealth.

Individualism (IDV) focuses on the degree society reinforces individual or collective achievement and interpersonal relationships. A High Individualism ranking indicates that individuality and individual rights are paramount within that society. A Low Individualism ranking typifies societies of a more collectivist nature with close ties between individuals.

Masculinity (MAS) focuses on the degree society reinforces, or does not reinforce, the traditional masculine work role model of male achievement, control, and power. A Low Masculinity ranking indicates the country has a low level of differentiation and discrimination between genders. In these cultures, females are treated equally to males in all aspects of society.

Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) focuses on the level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity within society, i.e. unstructured situations. A High Uncertainty Avoidance ranking indicates the country has a low tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. This creates a rule-oriented society that institutes laws, rules, regulations, and controls in order to reduce the amount of uncertainty. A Low Uncertainty Avoidance ranking indicates the country has less concern about ambiguity and uncertainty and has more tolerance for a variety of opinions.

Long-term Orientation (LTO) focuses on the degree society embraces, or does not embrace, long-term devotion to traditional, forward thinking values. High Long-term Orientation ranking indicates the country prescribes to the values of long-term commitments and respect for tradition. A Low Long-term Orientation ranking indicates the country does not reinforce the concept of long-term, traditional

¹ See <http://www.geert-hofstede.com/> for more details.

orientation. In this culture, change can occur more rapidly as long-term traditions and commitments do not become impediments to change.

Geert Hofstede's work and beliefs correlate almost perfectly with one of the central aims of localisation: adapt (foreign original) digital content to reflect not the culture of the source culture, but that of the target culture. In his view "*Culture is more often a source of conflict than of synergy. Cultural differences are a nuisance at best and often a disaster.*" Thus, not only can sales be increased but *nuisance at best and often a disaster* can be avoided if material is localised appropriately.

The one problem digital publishers and localisers alike are faced with is how to *translate* Hofstede's findings into guidelines for the localisation of digital content. How can individualism, masculinity or uncertainty avoidance levels be adapted when localising, for example, a web site developed originally in the USA for the Chinese market? How are or how should web sites be designed on the basis of a country-dependent deep cultural value system?

These and similar questions have been examined by authors in the US-based publication *Multilingual Computing & Technology* and by tutors and presenters at recent Unicode conferences². They looked at web sites published by multinational corporations and attempted to map Hofstede's categories to these sites. They essentially adapted Hofstede's findings as a blueprint for guidelines on cultural adaptation.

Here are some examples of what they came up with:

Power distance

The following elements on a web site were seen as an indicator for a high power distance, i.e. a large inequality between people in a country's society:

- Focus on hierarchy
- Focus on leaders
- Focus on tradition and/or religion

An indicator for a low power distance, in turn, was detected if the following elements could be found on a web site:

- Focus on equality between leaders and population at large
- Mutual respect between inferiors and superiors
- Focus on personal development

Along these lines, pictures of individuals, flags and heraldic signs were all interpreted as indicators of a high power distance type country.

Individualism

The presence of the following elements on a web site was seen as an indicator for a high individualism ranking:

² For details of recent Unicode conferences and tutorials on culture in the context of internationalisation and localisation, visit www.unicode.org.

- Focus on freedom
- Focus on personal development and self-realisation
- Focus on individual interests rather than those of the collective

An indicator for a low individualism ranking, in turn, was detected if the following elements could be found on a web site:

- Focus on consensus
- Focus on tradition and/or religion
- Focus on collective interests rather than those of the individual

Accordingly, the presence of many pictures of individuals on a site were interpreted as an indicator of an individualist culture, the presence of many group pictures as an indicator of a collectivist culture.

Masculinity

The presence of the following elements on a web site was seen as an indicator for a high masculinity ranking:

- Gender (men / women) are addressed separately
- Focus on ambition, competition, material success
- Women shown as tender/modest/caring, men as hard/ambitious/assertive

An indicator for a low masculinity ranking, in turn, was detected if the following elements could be found on a web site:

- Gender are addressed indiscriminately
- Focus on equality, solidarity, quality of life
- Women can be hard/ambitious/assertive, men can be tender/modest/caring

Accordingly, the presence of many pictures of nurturing, home-staying, cooking, cleaning, caring women on a site were interpreted as an indicator of a feminine culture, the presence of many pictures of decisive, leading, competitive, fighting men as an indicator of a masculine culture.

Uncertainty avoidance

The presence of the following elements on a web site was seen as an indicator for a high uncertainty avoidance ranking:

- Focus on formality and rigid rules
- Focus on precision and punctuality
- Focus on tradition and religion

An indicator for a low uncertainty avoidance ranking, in turn, was detected if the following elements could be found on a web site:

- Focus on flexible rules and tolerance for informality
- Focus on tolerance of ambiguity or vagueness
- Focus on evolution and change

Accordingly, the presence of a clear and simple navigation system on a web site was interpreted as an indicator of a low uncertainty avoidance culture.

Long-term orientation

This category has not been considered by most researchers, probably because it represents a concept which they found difficult to *translate* into elements present on a typical web site.

European Union - funded projects

There have also been EU-funded projects trying to find the answer to the question of how to adapt web sites to different countries. They evaluated existing sites and came up with templates for different countries, apparently modelled along the lines of their cultural value system and preferences.

- Germany: well structured, laid out in tables
- Scandinavian countries: nature loving, lots of trees and lakes
- Mediterranean countries: very lively, lots of strong colours

A trendy Web site in France will have a black background, while bright colors and a geometrical layout give a site a German feel. Dutch surfers are keen on video downloads, and Scandinavians seem to have a soft spot for images of nature - wrote Ben Vickers in the European edition of the Wall Street Journal reporting on the EU-funded Multilingual Digital Culture (MUDICU) project. Interestingly enough but hardly surprisingly is that MUDICU was coordinated by Helene Abrand, an internet consultant working for Real Media France, the French subsidiary of US-based Real Media Inc.

The result of this kind of adaptation effort is that a programme or a web page sends out all the right signals to the user - something like a chameleon that tricks its enemies. But, in many cases, users know and, most of all, feel that something is not quite right. Because no matter how much you change the colour of a web site, the hand signals, the symbols and the sounds used, the *content* will always remain the same.

The cultural dilemma

The approaches advocated by Hofstede and his followers, as well as by the researchers working in the EU-funded project quoted above, lead to a cultural dilemma.

When you travel to Spain, do you really want to find out from a web-based, localised US travel guide where to eat in Santiago, Madrid or Seville? Or when you travel to the Middle East, read up on the history of the region on a localised US web page? - Sadly, this is what you will most likely be offered when you search the web for this kind of information.

Search for background information on any region of the world and the likelihood is that you will be presented with information not coming from the region itself but from

US-based, localised websites which are registered with the major search engines and which are listed at the top of your list of search results.

Like travel writer Macon Leary in Anne Tyler's book *The Accidental Tourist*, who hates both travel and anything out of the ordinary, many eContent publishers dislike diversity, difference and divergence from standards - for the simple reason that it makes their life more difficult and, very importantly, their projects more expensive. They create perfect 'accidental' web sites, which are acceptable to every global citizen's taste, beliefs and customs. There are no surprises, there is no deviation from the norm - there is an almost clinical feel of global political over-correctness to them.

Travel writer Macon Leary needed Muriel, a deliciously peculiar dog-obedience trainer, to end his insular world and thrust him headlong into a remarkable engagement with life. Local content producers and local cultures need the technical experts to bring their content to the world so that the world can enjoy the different perspectives and approaches offered by them. What is needed is more local content and better access to this content - not more localisation of content originating from one single culture.



Three Coca-Cola web sites: South Africa, China and India (from left to right). Designers of global web sites try to reflect the cultural preferences of their local target audience.

It remains to be proven how successful and appropriate current approaches to cultural adaptation are. There are, however, even at this early stage of investigation, strong indicators suggesting that an adaptation strategy that effectively hides the origin of digital content could be at best subversive, misleading the consumers of this material and making them believe that what they are looking at was produced by someone with a similar value system to their own, thus at least potentially reducing their level of alertness and critical reflection on the content. At worst, at least from the perspective of the digital publishers, this strategy could have a devastating effect on the saleability and commercial success of the product or service in question by removing what could have been its most attractive selling point: strangeness.

Strangeness: how it works

There are many examples and lessons to be learned from international marketing strategies of how *strangeness* works for sales - lessons, which have surprisingly not even been considered yet by the localisation industry.

One example of how strangeness as a marketing strategy works is by association. Certain products are associated with certain countries and cultures: for example, perfume, fashion and romance are associated with France; technology and engineering are associated with Germany; Italians are perceived as sophisticated

coffee drinkers, which is why today a dictionary is required if one wants to buy a coffee, or rather a Macchio, Café con Latte, or an Espresso. Strangeness, far from being a cause of disruption and chaos as suggested by Hofstede, can be a source of attraction and differentiation. It works using existing stereotypes, or creating new ones. *It works, not by adapting digital content to the culture and the language of the target country but by doing exactly the opposite. It works using reverse localisation.*

Reverse localisation

We define *reverse localisation* as keeping or intentionally introducing linguistic or cultural strangeness into digital content for a particular target locale with the aim of intentionally differentiating a digital product or service from the dominating culture in that locale. The effect of reverse localisation is many-fold: the product or service in question is certainly set apart from potential competitors; the values and connotations associated with it play on a spirit of adventure, sometimes they just plainly take advantage of existing stereotypes, and almost always cause a sense of curiosity and heightened sense of attention.

Examples of reverse localisation can currently be found primarily in advertising, less in other types of digital content publishing, such as in audio, video or web site publishing. We suspect that the reason for this might be the strong business focus in the marketing and advertising industries, the concentration of a high level of creativity and the funds made available to them to realise their ambitions.

Following are some examples of reverse localisation. (Sound and video files of these are available but could not be included in the paper.)

Audio

Volkswagen

This advertisement was broadcasted in the U.K. and Ireland to promote cars manufactured by the German company Volkswagen. It played on the image of German engineering excellence and featured a manager and a designer trying to come up with yet another technical improvement for a Volkswagen - an impossible attempt as it turns out. The interesting aspect of this ad in our context is the distinguished German accent of the actors and the odd German word thrown in, in particular the almost universally recognized German word *nein*.

D.I.D.

D.I.D., the Irish Do-it-Yourself store, commissioned a series of advertisements also playing on the universally recognised German word *nein* and, in addition, on its phonetic closeness to the English word *nine*. Again, these ads feature an actor with a heavy German accent. While the first ad in the series introduced the main theme and setting, the second ad expanded on it.

Video

Toyota

Building on the engineering theme associated with the advertisement campaigns of many German car manufacturers, and specifically on the tag line used by Audi in their English promotional shoots *Vorsprung durch Technik*, this advertisement is set in a board room where the Chief Executive or Chairman shows a video of a perfectly engineered, seemingly flawless car on a test drive whose only problem is that *it is not*

built by us. Throughout the video, the actor speaks German which is translated for the English speaking target audience using subtitles.

Stella Artois

The Belgium beer manufacturer commissioned a whole series of highly successful and extremely expensive, multi-million euro advertisements by prominent directors involving well-known professional actors. All of them play on Stella Artois' tagline *reassuringly expensive*; all of them are presented as short films (rather than advertisements) and are set in *strange* settings; none of them is in English, the latest one has no spoken dialogue whatsoever. Examples are Last Orders (entirely in French), The Pilot (featuring dialogues in German, French and English), and Ice Skating Priests (without any dialogue at all).

Finches

Possibly the most striking campaign is that of the wholly Irish-owned soft drink manufacturer Finches, whose main products are orange soft drinks. This Irish company advertises its products with a campaign that is entirely presented in French, including the French tagline *pour l'amour de l'orange*. Two examples are The Poet and Orange Betty.

What are the lessons the localisation industry could learn from the advertisement industry in its efforts to linguistically and culturally adapt digital products? This is the question we will attempt to answer in the following, last chapter.

Lessons

The principal lesson to be learned by localisers is, arguably, that *adaptation* does not necessarily and exclusively mean the need to implement a lowest common denominator to comply with as many cultural requirements as possible, to remove all potentially controversial cultural aspects of a product or service, and to introduce elements reflecting the traditional cultural value systems of particular countries identified as target markets. To the contrary: if the aim of localisation is, similar to that of the marketing and advertising industries, to make a product or service as attractive, then playing on the *strangeness* factor could prove to be at least as successful as trying to follow the traditional line of avoiding any potential source of conflict by avoiding appearances of cultural differences.

One of the more recent examples of how *not* to localise is probably that of the Dubai-based network cable company MBC who bought the US-produced comic series The Simpsons from their US-owners for broadcast in Arabic countries.

According to a report by Brian Whitaker in the Guardian Newspaper (17 Oct 2005), the famously dysfunctional family from small-town America suddenly have all learned Arabic and started talking like Egyptians. The Simpsons have changed their name to Shamsoon. Bart, the skateboarding, gum-chewing delinquent has become Badr. Homer, his slobbish dad, has become Omar and has given up Duff beer and pork sausages, at least for the duration of Ramadan. Immediately, questions were asked about the appeal a sanitised version of the intentionally over-the-top appalling character of Homer (*aka* Omar) could possibly have, even to an Arab audience? Some viewers, indeed, are sceptical about the series, according to Whitaker. "I watched a promo segment and it was just painful", a blogger known as The Angry Arab wrote.

“They were so unfunny and so annoying, those Arab actors ... the guy who played Homer was one of the most unfunny people I ever watched. Just drop the project.”

Would it not have been infinitely more entertaining to the Arab audience (and, consequently, infinitely more profitable to the company) to see the original, exaggerated version of a “typical”, defunct, ridiculous and chaotic US-type family? Would a humorous approach to US-“culture” not have had the potential to foster an understanding between the two cultures? As some commentators pointed out, it is a well-know fact that people find it hard to hate what or who they are laughing about.

Our recommendation to localisers is to abandon the well-trodden path of localisation as we know it, with all its emphasis on the avoidance of even the smallest sign of cultural diversity and cultural differences. Instead, get the imagination working, get your audience involved and take advantage of their curiosity for the unknown, interest for the different, desire for exclusivity, spirit of adventure, and ambition to discover. Encourage your clients to get to know local customs, learn about other languages, taste the delights of foreign cuisine, wear strange clothes, learn how to play other cultures’ instruments; most of all encourage them to bring all their cultural baggage and enjoy the clash of cultures wherever they go and whatever they do.

This strategy will not only make digital products and services much more interesting and colourful, and therefore most likely increase sales revenues, it will also reflect in a much more appropriate way the world that we live in and thus help to prepare people to deal with it. Today, we are living in a world that is no longer defined by artificial country borderlines and cultures belonging to antiquated nation-states. After all, successful Chinese business people surely have much more in common with their European counterparts than with their cousins in the largely underdeveloped Chinese countryside. There are a large number of similar cross-nation state categories, all of them ignored by Hofstede’s framework, among them age (do the teenagers of the world not have more in common with each other than with their parents?), income (does income not largely determines access to information technology and therefore determine access to knowledge and information?), and education (is the ability to understand complex arguments and continually learn not more important than geographical location?).

Anyone still living under the illusion of the existence of “one state, one language and one culture” just has to take a trip on any of the public transport systems in any major European city, visit any of its restaurants, study at its university, visit its theatres, or go shopping in one of its food stores to realise that today we are living in a globalised, multi-cultural and multi-lingual society.

It seems that this time around, it is the localisation industry that has to be adapted, not the digital content it is dealing with.

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