Localization and the Dehumanization of Discourse

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*L*ocalization is a buzzword for the translation and adaptation of documents to meet the requirements of new 'locales' (country/regions and languages), especially in the fields of software and websites. A useful industry-derived term, it is closely associated with the electronic processing of texts by coordinated teams. The highest value in its discourse is probably efficiency, which is undoubtedly a good thing.

As such, talk about localization deserves to overtake much of what is being said about translation, which is still largely associated with the isolated individual, with fidelity to the source, and with modes of perfection that have little to do with efficiency. The only problem is that localization projects, in their practical rather than theoretical dimension, tend to dehumanize the communicative use of language. This is not always a good thing. We increasingly string together words to meet time constraints, to fulfil regulations, to explain the world in a way that does not depend on what came before and what will come after. Localization rarely interacts with people co-operatively. And the linguistic work it creates is often simply boring. My purpose here is to formulate these complaints as a general problem, and to suggest how that problem might be solved.

Two examples to illustrate the issue, neither of them from anything remotely high-tech:

Trainee translators were given the following text to render into English:

> *Los alumnos que hayan estudiado en el extranjero y deseen iniciar estudios en las universidades españolas deberán convalidar u homologar sus estudios.*

This runs well enough as

> *Students who have studied outside Spain and wish to enter a program at a Spanish university must* **convalidar** *or* **homologar** *their foreign studies.*

Now, what should be done with the verbs in bold? After a few seconds of Internet searching the trainee translators had located parallel texts giving *accreditation* as a general term for what is going on here. A few more seconds and they had descriptions

of how the specific terms *homologación* and *convalidación* are used in bureaucratic processes (basically, the former is for degrees and diplomas as bits of paper, the latter is for the actual courses studied). But how were the translators to make the one English term cover the space of the two processes? They had few ideas. And nothing coherent emerged until they were asked to consider the position of the readers, the foreign students. What might those readers require? If they do not need accreditation, then the two Spanish terms are superfluous and can be combined into a simple *accreditation*. And if they do need accreditation, they will need those terms in Spanish, along with descriptions of the processes involved. So the source-text information has to be either reduced or increased, without any real need to match the two Spanish terms with two English terms. Yet none of the trainees embarked on any such reasoning. None of them thought about the future readers of this text. They were too busy searching for the words.

Our example adds little to functionalist or pertinence-based theories of translation. What we are saying has been said for decades. And what we are saying might fairly be said by localization theory, which also wants us to think about the end-user's purpose. Yet things are not working that way, often for the same reasons why the trainee translators did not think that way. The availability of abundant information--abundance is the really new problem--meant that the translators were translating for the text, for the terminology, for the bureaucracies that need the terminology, but not for people that need help when facing such things. And the technologies, here no more than rudimentary terminology mining and management, kept the students looking in that backward direction. That would be one kind of dehumanization: the text as object was more important than the reader as person.

As a second example, I have in front of me an instruction booklet that begins:

> *Welcome to Dragon NaturallySpeaking, the world's most acclaimed large-vocabulary continuous-speech dictation system. With Dragon NaturallySpeaking you can dictate to your computer instead of using the computer to enter and revise text.*

Two pages later the same booklet tells me:

> *Welcome to Dragon NaturallySpeaking, the world's most acclaimed large-vocabulary continuous-speech dictation system. With Dragon NaturallySpeaking you can dictate to your computer instead of typing.*

What has happened here? The same text has been reworked to suit the requirements of either space, variable specificity, or weak syntax (repetition of *computer* in the first

text). The information is given in both cases. But what effect is the double presentation of the text supposed to have on someone who reads the booklet linearly, from beginning to end? I felt confused and then insulted. More to the point, I felt I was not supposed to be reading in a linear way at all. Such texts are more commonly online help files, to be read in fragments as required. And as long as the reader is no more than a finger on an electronic search engine of some kind, dipping into text fragments to scoop out quick information, such texts are probably best kept well away from print culture.

This example has rather more to do with localization, here in the more specific sense of taking a generic text and adapting it to a variety of new purposes or locales. Rather than write a new text on each occasion, simple efficiency demands adaptation of existing material. In large multilingual projects, the source information will be made expressly generic (it will be 'internationalized'), denuded of local dependencies so that it is easily rendered into many locales at the same time. Texts thus become information objects, chunks available for electronic modification and combination, written in such a way that no linearity is presupposed. Writing becomes a process of constantly modifying existing material; we spend our lives updating and improving. And translation becomes just one further step in this process, introducing the updates and improvements to the already-translated, modifying on the margins in ways similar to what we have seen in our monolingual example. This is wondrously economical and progressive. So what could be wrong?

In both these examples, significant text-processing stands between the sender and the receiver of the communication act. This is true of all communication, of course. Yet here the mediation means the receiver has little idea of who the sender is (the sender has become a team of rewriters), and the collective senders are not asking many questions about who the receiver is (the receiver has become the type-description of a locale). And that, I suggest, is the key to dehumanization, on both the sending and receiving sides.

On the sending side, the concealment of receivers has a lot to do with the way localization projects are organized. Specialized service providers send work out to external freelancers, who receive the job as a source text and a glossary, both to be obeyed. The use of translation memories significantly strengthens this backward focus, emphasizing repetition of the same and making impossible any serious thought about future receivers. The documents thus gain great consistency, in both phraseology and terminology. The right things are said in the right places. And the person saying them need have no idea of the person being addressed.

This concealment becomes especially active when formats are changed. Software localization projects normally involve the leveraging (separating out) of natural-language strings (words-to-be translated) so that translators do not have to bother with the multiple mysteries of source codes. HTML documents may be farmed out to

translators as Word texts, similarly in the hope that the translators will not mess around with the source codes and graphics (DejaVu advertises this as a great advantage). The translators themselves are thus separated not only from the most lucrative parts of localization projects, but also from any possible human receivers. Their work cannot be for an addressee because they do not know who the addressee is likely to be; the translators have become simple repeaters of the repeated. The result is a very boring and miserable kind of translation. Thus does localization practice defeat the promises of its theory. Bert Esselink, a localization guru, envisages a brave new world where translators work on the minor updates, produced only every so often so that localization companies can spread their workloads more evenly. So here we have the new translator, a housewife at home, translating fragments of several different projects each day. Such fragmentation means, of course, that translators will never see the entirety of any project, and will never know to whom their work might be addressed.

True, the bulk of the localization workload comes later, with revision processes, product testing, updates and more updates, along with the manifold coordination problems of project management. This is usually in-house professional stuff, where we might hope to find a sender prepared to think about a receiver. In the real world, however, the factors dominating these processes tend to be the deadline, the legal regulation, and the market, rarely the person.

On the reception side, localization creates the receivers it deserves. We read with a search engine to get to a webpage, then with the Find function to locate keywords on that page. No one goes through an instruction manual page by page: we try things three times then, in cases of failure, we consult the online help file, once again reading with an index. Narrative linearity is a waste of time; information is all. Thus do we convert ourselves into no more than the finger able to press the right key. This, too, is dehumanizing.

Admittedly, technologies on the reception side enable users to become more than passive consumers of information. A lack of narrative may be liberating: we all create our own stories (except for the humdrum localizers). And there have long been unofficial Bibles running parallel to Microsoft; the Internet enables numerous informal discussions criticizing software; hacking and piracy abound, weaving webs of secret cants and resistant group identities. Yet all this surely happens because official localization lacks precisely those human qualities. The dehumanization is not in the technology, which can serve both sides of the issue; it lies in the ways we choose to use the technology.

In summary, I suggest that the more text processing we put between senders and receivers, the more dehumanizing our communication, and the more people will seek less mediated forms of communication.

What is to be done? Part of the answer should come from the practice of localization itself. Microsoft does want to sell its products in local languages and local cultures; global websites do change according to the (presumed) language and culture of the user; one might hope that a human touch was also intended by whoever invented that annoying little dog on WindowsXP. We live in a world of global products that want to make themselves local and human, and that desire for localization is not to be condemned. Certainly duplicitous, it nevertheless augurs well for the future of the languages and cultures selected. That is not what we have to change, even if we could.

Humanization, if it is to prosper, is better sought from within the economies of scale, among the people engaged in localization. It is better projected on a world where localizers and receivers of all kinds make the mental effort to think of texts as the work of people (in the second person), and not just as information objects (in the third person). At the same time, we must force ourselves to think of the faceless global localizers themselves as people rather than objects, since they too deserve second-person status. And that change, if it is to come, must surely start from the training of the people who are going to work in localization projects. Once they think of the people rather than the objects, they themselves should produce corresponding modes of localization.

That is why, of course, we took our first example from the field of translator training. It is there, in the training, that we might help implant a few human values, along with a welter of technical skills. This need not involve the vagaries of the humanities, of traditional erudition providing perpetual employment for aging professors. It is a lot simpler: when working with texts, think of the people. That might be enough humanization for a start.

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