

# Intercultural e-Government

Peter Parycek, Hanna Risku

Danube-University Krems, Dr. Karl-Dorrek-Strasse 30, A-3500 Krems, Austria  
{peter.parycek, hanna.risku}@donau-uni.ac.at

## 1 Introduction

One of the areas in knowledge management is the representation of information, an area of particular importance in e-Government, given the State's social responsibility towards its citizens. Unlike the private industry, the State is not in a position to select its customers, and has the social responsibility to treat all citizens equally. Given this responsibility, three issues need to be addressed: the duty to provide information, the extent information is to be accessible to disabled individuals and to be provided in other languages.

These are three important issues the European Union and the individual member states need to take into consideration. In this paper, we investigate the situation in Austria, and discuss how the content of websites can be offered in more than one language.

This paper consists of two parts: The first part looks at the legal framework and compares the duty to provide information, the extent information is made accessible to the disabled and the provision of information in more than one language in the United States of America (USA), the European Union (EU), and Austria. The second part of this paper discusses three main concepts of Intercultural Communication (language, culture, and communication) and defines the requirements of professional translation management.

## 2 Accessibility

### 2.1 The Duty to Provide Information According to WAI Principles

Following the law of transparency (which itself stems from the concept of democracy), the public sector is committed to provide information. In the EU and in Austria there are no normative regulations for the duty to provide information. On the other hand, in the USA, the Clinton administration passed the Electronic Freedom of Information Act (E-FOIA), itself based on the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) from 1966, which committed the public sector to the publication of electronic information. Furthermore, there are a number of regulations which ensure that disabled people are able to access information, for example the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), the Amendment to Section 508 of the ADA (1998)

which could be called the civil rights bill for people with disabilities. Furthermore, the W3C guidelines were developed, which are not mandatory. In 1999, the W3C released the Web Content Access Initiative (WCAI) guidelines. These guidelines are based on three principles specifying that pages “transform gracefully across users and technologies; complex pages should provide context and orientation; and pages should follow good design practices to promote usability”. (cf. Peek, 1999).

Many European e-Government strategies include the provision of content according to WAI principles. Austria ranks at the top in web accessibility, and aims to provide information at AA and AAA level according to the WAI principles – except for the older websites which, given the high costs, will be adapted to the WAI principles gradually. Another problem is given by the 2359 municipalities in Austria, where 68% of the municipalities have less than 10,000 inhabitants. 98% of these very small municipalities have their own local websites, but in most cases they do not meet the WAI standards. This is a problem which can only be solved through the active support by the Federal Government. At present there are still no guidelines for the public websites’ webmasters, and the W3C guidelines are too complex for those responsible in the municipalities. Help.gv.at is the central and most important web portal in Austria offering services to the citizens according to the WAI A guidelines. This portal also includes the section “for disabilities”. Clearly, there is a rising awareness for people with disabilities at a national and European level, but, in comparison to the USA, still have a way to go. Particularly in Austria a strategy for the further development of this area is necessary. Great Britain has regulations similar to the USA. In future, the EU should include the issue of accessibility for the disabled in the e-Government benchmarks, to increase the State’s responsibility for the provision of information and thus increase its transparency and public appearance.

## **2.2 Multilingualism**

In the USA there are no legislative regulations governing the language in which the services are offered. Therefore, it is to be assumed that public websites which provide information in Spanish are done on a voluntary basis. This issue is of greater concern to Europeans, reflected in the 3 official languages and the 11 national languages in the European Union, as well as every citizen’s right to approach the European institutions using his or her national language and to receive an answer in this language. The EU faces the challenge of providing information in a number of languages to ensure transparency and legitimacy – an issue anchored in the European Parliament’s Charter of Rights. Austria faces a similar issue, though stemming from a different historical context. Since WWII, minority groups’ rights in Austria are legally protected – the article 7 of the Austrian Constitution protects the Slovenian minority in Carinthia and Styria and the Croatian minority in Burgenland, in particular their language and customs. In practice though, this protection has had to be legally claimed. A number of decrees regulate which municipalities have Slovenian, Croatian and Hungarian as the official language alongside German.

### **2.3 Example: Multilingualism in Corinthia**

As previously discussed, the legal basis for a further official language beside German is anchored in the Austrian Constitution. In Corinthia, there are laws for these minority ethnic groups and their education, which provide the basis for a number of decrees, for example in 1977, a decree to make Slovenian an official language in Corinthia. The decree clearly specifies which public offices need to provide Slovenian alongside German, including police offices, municipal halls, military posts, post offices and railway. Furthermore, members of these ethnic groups have the right to expect their language the regional and national offices. But the municipal's public websites are provided in German only, and, given limited financial and personnel resources will probably not change in the near future. Neither the regional nor the federal government have indicated any intention to provide public information in other official languages beside German. Only the federal webportal [help.gv.at](http://help.gv.at) offers the section "for foreign citizens" which includes procedures for foreigners living in Austria. The mandatory official languages for the ethnic minorities living in Austria are not provided at the local, the regional or the national level. At present there have been no discussions to presenting the minority groups' rights virtually.

### **2.4 Conclusion**

In conclusion, front-end accessibility is of great importance, in public web portals more than in private web portals, as the state has a greater responsibility towards its citizens. The comparison between the USA and the EU shows how different the cultural framework concerning accessibility needs and the sensitization to this issue is. In the USA, the provision of information is bound to the law, whilst there are no similar standardised regulations in Europe. Europe has focused more on anchoring the different languages to the transnational and national legal frameworks. At the national level, virtual multilingualism has not yet been perceived as the minorities' right, and a great deal of work will be necessary to support those regions and municipalities with ethnic minorities. This paper aims to provide a guideline for the provision of information more than one language.

In the USA, disability has been a political issue for decades, and has therefore provided legal support for its disabled citizens. In the last couple of years, the topic of virtual and real accessibility has been investigated in a number of projects initiated by the EU.

## **3 Intercultural Communication**

The provision of electronic information in different languages requires professional translation management. However, this cannot be restricted simply to the translation of the actual texts: we also have to analyze the needs and suppositions of the future readers and users and take into account their cultural background. For a better understanding of what lies behind this process, we must first define the theoretical

foundations of communication across linguistic and cultural borders and then outline the project management required in translation projects.

### **3.1 Defining Culture and Communication**

Language is not just as a set of symbols and rules that enables us to communicate. Words and sentences form only a part of the complex system involved in understanding and communication. The foundation of social competence is culture: culture is the source of potential coherence that enables us to communicate. Through permanent interaction and reciprocal modification of knowledge, we learn to predict other people's actions and develop social norms, expectations and roles through the repetition of goals and situations. This flexible result of modifying reciprocal knowledge and building compatible knowledge structures is what can be referred to as culture (cf. Köck, 1987; Schmidt, 1987; Maturana, 1982/1985).

In communication, we use large sets of effective cultural norms and conventions. Their repeated use form conventional symbols and symbol systems. One very special system is language, and language learning seems to have a genetic basis, developed over the course of evolution. Communication does not, however, necessarily depend on the existence of arbitrary symbol systems (like natural language) but on the possibility and ability to interpret something as a "text" – as a message intended to influence the interpreter's actions (cf. Posner, 1994). All manner of actions and objects – from coughing, clothing, movements, gestures and pictures to spoken or written language – can be used and interpreted as "texts".

The borders between different cultures are thus not set by region, nationality, language or climate, but by the ability to cooperate (using jointly established compatible actions/representations). This flexible and constructive definition of culture clearly indicates that individuals in fact belong to many cultures and subcultures, and that these cultures themselves take many different forms (e.g. the Scandinavian culture, the Anglo-American scientific culture, the Internet culture or the private family culture).

What kind of concrete phenomena are included in this broad definition of culture? We have all experienced typical "intercultural" situations – I myself faced many such situations when moving from Finland to Austria. In Finland, for example, the correct way to enroll at the University or apply for official documents such as a driving license is to fill out and submit the appropriate forms and supply copies of any relevant certificates, and I had been used to proceeding in this manner. However, in Austria, I had to learn that these things progress at a very slow pace until you actually visit the civil servants dealing with your application in person or call them a couple of times to remind them politely that you are still waiting for your documents.

The difference between specialized and popular culture is a good example of cultural differences within what is commonly referred to as a "language community". When translating internal governmental texts into a form accessible to a general audience (i.e. to popularise them), it will not be enough to simply change "difficult" words into "easy" ones.

The different meanings attached to the way we greet one another is another very good example of how different communicative actions can be in different cultures and situations: For instance, in Austria, a person would be considered impolite if they do not utter a greeting when entering an elevator, a waiting room or even a local shop. Finns, on the other hand, would be startled by a total stranger suddenly greeting them. In Finnish convention, even business letters should be left without any form of greeting, whereas in France it is customary to conclude a business letter with a complex salutation. Thus, it is not enough to concentrate on the words uttered; we should also know whether we are expected to greet at all, and if so, whether we should hug or shake hands or simply bow. Intercultural communication in this sense means looking beyond both the words used or the process of encoding/decoding linguistic units and moving towards situations and actions. Consequently, recent developments in the field of Intercultural Communication have led to a paradigmatic shift:

The traditional  
*1 nation – 1 culture – 1 language* or  
*1 group – 1 culture – 1 'native' language* has changed to  
*1 person – multiple cultures/languages*  
and the traditional  
*cultures/languages meet at political/social boundaries* has changed to  
*cultures/languages meet in individuals* (Johnstone, 1996).

Enabling intercultural communication is not about carrying a piece of information from source to destination. On the contrary, it includes making a contribution to managing the situation from the perspective of the different users, the construction of new meaning and the achievement of new goals within that situation.

## **3.2 Translation Management**

In order to achieve intercultural communication, we need people who are capable of analyzing both the text and the situation, carrying out research on user requirements and cultural conventions, managing projects and designing reader- and user-oriented information. Thus, what is needed are professionals in the fields of Intercultural Communication, International Information Design and International Usability Testing. These experts can be found in those modern translation agencies that define and market themselves as full-service intercultural, multimedia communication consultants.

### **3.2.1 Globalisation, Internationalisation, Localisation, Translation (GILT)**

The desire or need to offer information in different languages requires the adoption of a more global strategy in communication policies. In an ideal situation, this will include taking the subsequent translation(s) into account right from the outset, i.e. when the information is first written and designed. This is the “internationalization” process: dividing the information into the universal, non-translatable core structure and the material that will need to be translated. This ensures that it is clear which parts have cultural variations and which have not. In addition, the sizing of graphic (e.g. icons) and other elements has to be kept flexible, so that they can then be adapted to

suit the lengths of words in different languages. Since the translation of multimedia information always takes into account both the visual/nonverbal and the verbal aspects of texts, it is often referred to as “localization” and not “translation”, taking into account the adaptation of the whole (software) product and not just its linguistic elements.

### **3.2.2 Project Plan**

In order to provide a cost estimate, a translation/localization vendor must first analyze both the source material and the project objectives. The objectives, target audience, tools and deadlines are set in a kick-off-meeting between the representatives of the translation/localization vendor and the customer (e.g. a governmental office). In this phase, the governmental office (as the commissioner of the project) is responsible for providing all the necessary source material, including a definition of any layout requirements (if available) and specific terminology (if available). They must name a competent contact person who will be able to deal with any questions that might arise later in connection with the translation. The governmental office is responsible for clearing any copyright issues and ensuring the correctness of the contents to be translated. The planning phase of the project plays a critical role in ensuring uncomplicated and productive cooperation between the partners and enabling them to reach agreement on the common objectives for the whole project.

### **3.2.3 Use of Translation Technology**

If the volume of material to be translated is large and/or has to be updated frequently, then it makes sense to use translation management technologies to help provide cost-efficient translating and updating. A number of different technologies are available to support the translation process:

#### *Terminology Management Systems*

Terminology Management Systems ensure that uniform terminology is used throughout a translation or by a project team. They can therefore make a significant contribution to the quality of a translation by ensuring consistency.

#### *Translation Memory Systems*

Translation Memory Systems are particularly useful for handling large translation volumes, particularly when the project is coordinated from a central location and the customer places great importance on consistency. However, the risk with translation memory entries is that solutions devised for a different context may dominate the current text. Translation memories can only make a positive contribution to the quality of a translation and increase cost-effectiveness if a number of criteria and requirements are met. These include:

- Availability of specific text formats
- Adequate updates and maintenance
- Well-considered definition of program parameters
- High-quality reference material
- Link to a well-maintained terminology management system.

#### *Localisation Software*

Localisation tools, i.e. solutions for use in the translation of software applications, allow the translator to view the actual user interface during the translation process and thus take the context into consideration. Translators can adapt some items themselves, e.g. the size of a button, or delegate more extensive program changes to the software developers, e.g. if the syntax needs to be changed in a dialog box or navigation path, or the icons and images need to be swapped, removed or adapted.

#### *Machine Translation Systems*

Despite the decades of development and substantial research and development budgets that have been invested in Machine Translation Systems, fully-automated qualitative translation remains nothing but a dream. The old nightmare that kept translators awake in fear of their jobs has definitely had its day. Machine translation systems can only be used for limited purposes, e.g. to create pre-translations or to "skim over" a document.

The only translations worthy of the name remain "human translations", i.e. translations produced by translators (with or without the use of translation technology). Today's language technology industry now focuses on the development of tools to support translators, not to replace them.

Given the large amount of pre- and post-editing required, I would not recommend the use of fully automatic translation in this context. The translation vendor will be able to advise the customer on suitable technology on a case-to-case basis.

### **3.2.4 Quality Assurance**

Although the quality of a translation will be checked by the translation vendor, it remains essential that the translation be validated by the governmental office, and ideally by both internal governmental experts and potential future readers from the culture in question. This form of international usability testing can be organized by the translation vendor. In the case of electronic information, it is important that these checks are not restricted to the coherence and correctness of the content, language and terminology, but also include the functionality of the layout, links, pop-ups, navigation structure and other technical and communicative details.

### **3.2.5 Copyright**

According to the Austrian Standard for Translation Services (ÖNORM D 1201), the copyright for a translation belongs to the translator as the creator of the text. The translator therefore has the right to be named whenever the text is published. He/she is also required to accept any subsequent changes made to the translation.

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