Multilingual websites widen the way to a new online world

The dominance of English on the internet is set to decline as companies realise that to leverage the full value of their sites in global markets they need to approach customers in their own language, writes Julian Perkin

Anyone who surfs the net regularly could easily form the impression that nearly all the world speaks English. The language, it would seem, is fast becoming a lingua franca, with all the benefits this would bring for communication and understanding, and threats to cultural diversity and regional independence.

English is everywhere — in Hollywood films, on TV and in pop music. The vast majority of international conferences and communications for business, science, academia and other disciplines are in English. English is typically the language of people who either come from richer nations, or is the second language used by a wealthy and influential professional elite. Hence its dominance.

As a consequence, English documents pervade the internet. Statistics vary, but the estimates suggest that around three quarters of the pages on the worldwide web are in English. Yet only 5.4 per cent — little more than 1 in 20 — of the world’s population have English as their mother tongue, according to IDC, the Boston-based IT market researcher. The majority of these are Americans. A further 7 per cent of the world’s population are proficient English speakers, so the language is a good means of communication for around an eighth of the world’s inhabitants.

There are fractionally more native Spanish speakers in the world, and the Chinese languages dwarf English as a native language, spoken by 20.7 per cent of the world’s population. Three-quarters of these, or 15 per cent of the world population, speak Mandarin alone — nearly three times as many people as are employed by Microsoft in the US

The pre-eminence of English in other fields may be unacceptable, but on the internet at least, its dominance is set to decline sharply as international internet access grows and more companies and institutions around the world put their information online and start to conduct e-business.

According to research by Steve McClure at IDC, growth in web usage and e-commerce in Europe and especially in Asia will outstrip that of the US by between two and five times over the next two to three years. IDC surveys and data from Forrester, another IT market research group, also show, not surprisingly, that the vast majority of people prefer websites in their native language, especially for leisure activities such as online shopping. Moreover, they are more likely to buy things online if they can use their own language.

GlobalSight, a consultancy firm that advises organisations on internationalising websites, estimates that, by 2003, only one third of the projected 600m internet users will be English-speaking.

LeAnn Barber of Science, an ecommerce consultancy, says: "There is an accelerating boot-strap effect, that is, as more content becomes available in a particular language, more people use the internet, and as more people use the internet, more artists and producers are incentivised to use the internet as a medium."

Websites needed in many languages

Government and venture capitalist investment in infrastructure, she adds, will be required to break the cycle in which there is not enough content to attract users, and consequently not enough users to justify the creation of content.

Companies of any size wanting to leverage the internet to reach global markets, therefore, need to offer versions of their websites in each of their language markets. But Mr McClure says there is little response from those companies to show the US and Europe regarding their plans to make their sites multilingual.

Europe, he notes, has natural advantages over the US, since it has local linguistic skills and inherent cultural diversity. But there is little evidence that European businesses are turning this to their advantage.

This may be because the problems of maintaining a multilingual website are formidable.

Translation is just the starting point. Automated translation is available for free to individuals, but for professional use, it can be expensive. Quality, however, is often a problem, and even good results can take many hours...

Alternatively, companies may choose to localise their websites manually, or use automated translation software in the hope that they can improve the quality of the output. Alternatively, some companies may choose to outsource the translation work to professional translators.

Computers can play a valuable role in the process, providing, for example, online bilingual dictionaries, term banks and translation memories that can speed up the translation process and reduce costs.

Once a website is translated into a number of languages, the users can choose the language they prefer and then use a search engine to find the content they need.

There are also opportunities for companies to localise their websites, and this can be done through localisation, including the use of localisation software, such as for developing websites for the Middle East and Asia.

"Localising and localising the website is the easy part," says Paul Johns, marketing director for Europe, Middle East and Asia at Broadbase (formerly Servicesoft), the company that produces localisation software. "The real challenge is to localise as many queries as possible without human intervention. This is known as multilingual auto-response."

Mr Johns reckons that "80 per cent of all inbound queries to a call centre or website can be dealt with through about 20 answers."

The problem is that these 80 per cent of questions can be deal with through a multilingual website.

Facsimile print of the Financial Times article, for detailed information contact the editors.