

## **Julieta Coirini and Patrice Martin**

### **What is localisation all about?**

Technology has revolutionised our lives. There is no doubt about it. Just think of all those everyday activities. Do you go to the bank or do you do your e-banking from the computer? If you go to the bank, do you go inside to the line of cashiers or stop outside and key everything in at the ATM? How did you buy your last book? Online or at the bookshop? And your last CD? Not to speak of the supermarket: you can even do supermarket shopping on the Internet. We have the technology to do anything, any time...

This is also a fact in the translating profession. Technology has revolutionised translating, changed everything: our methods, the jargon we use and ourselves as professional, human, translators. Have you recently been faced with questions like these? Do you know about localisation? Can you localise? What localisation tools do you use? And when the client decides to transfer the UI strings to an Excel sheet and tells us to do just a “rough translation” but to take special care in locating all the strange characters dotted around the text “correctly and grammatically” explaining soothingly that they are “variables” that will be replaced using their own software “when it is run”. I beg your pardon?

Translating is not merely a question of “source text”, “target text”, “grammar”, “spelling” and “style”. Today it seems to be more a question of “locale”, “UI”, “strings”, “variables”, “I10n”, “I18N”, “CAT”, “TM”, “MT”, “LISA”, “GALA”, “TILP”, “PAL” and “GILT” to mention only a few of the new concepts. In recent years we translators have been gradually absorbing a new jargon generated with the evolution of our profession. Localisation seems to be everywhere, it has permeated everything. But what is localisation and what has happened to translation along the line?

According to LISA (Localization Industry Standard Association): "Localization involves taking a product and making it linguistically and culturally appropriate to a target locale (country/region and language) where it will be used and sold, while translation "...is only one of the activities in localization...".

Don't despair! Despair would have been the inevitable reaction in the early days of localisation. In those primeval times (the early eighties) localisation referred strictly to the localisation of software. Software translators called themselves “localisers” to differentiate from those translating other types of documents because translating software called for different, more specific skills: understanding certain programming codes, working under tremendous deadline pressure and being sufficiently flexible to adapt to the continual updates and changes. But localisation also assumes the utilisation of specific tools adapted to the digital format of the material and following a meticulous sequential workflow process where the translation is only a small part of the procedure. This sounds familiar, doesn't it? Even for those who have not even a vague idea of what localisation is all about...

Why does everyone recognise these specifically localisation elements as part of the profession? Actually because translation has learned a great deal about the localisation industry since those early days. It has incorporated concepts and processes that shift the bias from being exclusively a craft to gradually move it towards something more industrial. Aspects like efficiency, teamwork, problem solving, client orientation, standardised processes and technology have been penetrating the field of translation as it evolved. Endorsed by globalisation, localisation is no longer a prerogative of the software industry but has moved into the more traditional domains of translation. Doing business in a global integrated economy with an increasingly overwhelming volume of electronic transactions

and worldwide access to products and services generates an urgent need to break through cultural and idiomatic barriers. Companies want to speak and communicate in their clients' language and in harmony with their culture. Localisation embraces such disparate worlds as software for the production and planning of resources, games, electronic banking, education, entertainment, retail marketing systems, medical instruments, mobile telephones, personal digital assistants (PDAs) and the Internet. In other words, almost all aspects of our civilised life and almost all the classic fields of translation.

The evolution of technology has accelerated this trend. There have also been changes in the focus of translation in conjunction with the introduction of new standards in publishing and possibly management and content systems as well as the general use of XML. So much so, as we said above, that translation is only "one" of the tasks of localisation. These new standards of publishing strip the text of its technical complexities, separating format and structure from content. We need the filters of technology to reveal the bare bones of linguistic form. Today more and more practices and technologies that used to be specific to localisation are encroaching on the more traditional translation industry. Translation memories are normally used to produce material that is not necessarily linked to the software. Legal translators are confronted with documentation in XML format whereas the traditionally humanist translators can find themselves translating "chunks of software" integrated in a medical appliance, to mention only a few examples. We could say that technology has made any text "translatable" (from a purely technical point of view, not linguistically) and that it is up to us, the translators, to give the texts a local touch.

Clearly, translation and localisation are characterised by two pronounced tendencies: one concerned with the efficiency and distribution of information (millions are invested to make the translatable text increasingly easy to identify) with an extremely important technological bias; the other a permanent concern for how the cultures see one another, with the relevant linguistic aspects. Traditionally, localisation deals with the first and translation with the second. But today this distinction is beginning to blur.

We stress the technological aspect of localisation: it could be summed up in the technology of language and the fact that today, thanks to the immense range of tools available everywhere, virtually all translators are familiar with one or the other form of technology in our everyday work (with their word processors, Internet, CD dictionaries, CAT tools, terminology managers, localisation tools, etc.). As we said above, the identification of the translatable text is becoming increasingly simple: we must accept that very often the translation is only one of the steps, particularly in the case of localising software. Take, for example, a user interface with its dialogues and menus. The text fields must expand so that the translated/localised text is not truncated. Shortcut keys must also change to adapt to the translation of the menu elements (except for oriental languages that take the same space). What is more, the shortcut keys must be unique in each menu. That sounds rather different from translating a straightforward Word document, doesn't it? But, like everything in this world, each of these tasks has its own tools, process and even its own terminology (this aspect leaves the door open for another article...).

On the other hand, though we emphasise the linguistic and cultural aspect of localisation, we could say that every translation is to a greater or lesser extent characterised by a certain degree of adaptation that is not exclusive to localisation. When we translate a legal, commercial or marketing document we know that a literal translation will not make sense to the target audience and that we must adapt the "spirit" of the text for the environment where it will be used. In the case of software localisation, it could be said that the spirit of the text is determined by a broad range of "cultural subtleties": from the time, date and currency formats, colour codes and time zones etc., to mention only the most common, to the colour and form of the images and icons used. It is often the translators who detect any "internationalisation" errors, particularly in the translation of software strings as these are generally developed in a rather ethnocentric idiom without taking into account that in

contrast to English, for example, there are languages with inflexions of gender and number (not to mention the ideograms of oriental languages). This can lead to some very amusing (if it were not so tragic) renderings in the localised versions because, as a rule, the English generic strings just do not work in other languages.

Idioms and definitions evolve parallel to the evolution of the speakers. Words very often lose their original meanings and evolve to adapt to new circumstances. Our profession cannot stand aside. So, what is localisation all about?

Localisation involves the idiom, culture **and** technology in the same way as translation does. Today we could say that, slowly and without being aware of it, we translators are gradually morphing into localisers... or that the localisers have always been translators, but ahead of their time...

*Translated from Spanish by Jacqueline Gartmann*

