

Not love, but the right business model will bring us together



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With all the successes of the Internet and globalisation, the dream was once for a global village of freely communicating, distance-trading world citizens.

In this dream, common interest was to eliminate the arbitrary divisions of borders, level the playing fields between world markets, and end cultural and political insularity.

Instead, the world seems to have drifted further apart - also on the language front. Due to nationalism/tribalism and regional language variations, linguistic fragmentation is more prominent than ever, carving up communities and markets.

Bridging fragmentation?

With the world in this disintegrated state, can English, widely understood around the world, mediate affairs - if not to achieve peaceful coexistence, then to smooth commercial endeavour?

Unfortunately, not always. The belief that everyone should understand English (or French or Portuguese) is itself a grandly insular idea.

An example illustrates how imperative it is: A recent French ad in Senegal for a 'feminine' product was understood by only 15% of men, and more to the point, just 1% of women!

As far as practicable, your English language websites and software, which make extensive use of written language in their interface and code, should be translated and otherwise localised - and so, too, should computer hardware and other products with marketing and support collateral.

The good fight

Microsoft has done a huge amount to extend the reach and [support of languages](#). But while the list is extensive, many languages are left out, including five of South Africa's official languages and regional variants of Portuguese for Angola and Mozambique.

This is a shame, as it would be trivial for Microsoft to add support for regional languages in addition to the pre-existing Brazilian and Portuguese variants, making it easier to ship software specifically for the Mozambique and Angolan markets.

A commercial challenge

Sadly, what comes after that is not that easy. Commerce is often the final arbiter of what can and cannot sustainably be done. When a product is translated, it is expected that the value of the project will be recouped by selling the product to the new-language user base. But some language groups are simply less well-off than others.

Let's apply this to South Africa - Afrikaans is the third-most spoken language in South Africa, but the community is not as well served as the broad English user base (English is the fourth most common language spoken as a first language), because English speakers are more affluent. And isiZulu, despite being the most common first language (spoken by 23% of citizens), is "less important" in marketing spend than either English or Afrikaans.

Many world languages, such as the Australian aboriginal languages, are even worse off. Some have not even been codified, let alone produced dictionaries and translations, so here, too, translation is virtually a commercial non-starter. There's too much to do before one can even start.

NGO model?

So how do we overcome this? Where markets fail, the next alternative in cases of need (always assuming communities want to be part of the global village) is to approach it as a worthy cause, but this too has fundamental problems.

Even altruistic motives usually have some potential commercial justification or benefit - whether spreading the tenets of the benefactor's faith or creating awareness (and ultimately sales) for a food and beverage vendor via the spread of a secondary health message.

When non-governmental organisations (NGOs) run campaigns, these are often flawed or random in their conception and execution. Malawi, for instance, gets a lot of Scotland's international aid because of the historic link between Scotland and Malawi (David Livingstone), whereas other African countries may in principle be more deserving of assistance. Donor aid can moreover kill regional enterprise, "helping" by subsidising in-country services and pricing locals out of the market.

When governments get involved, language campaigns can further only be effective if there is political will, which in turn requires nothing less fundamental than a redistribution of wealth.

Serving the under-served

In other words, no translation project escapes being a commercial issue, whose specifics will be dictated by a need for sustainability.

This is not to be decried either. In our view the commercial approach is far more dynamic than other models, and is to some extent user driven - if users buy the product in their language, the provider has an interest in continuing to cater for other language. By contrast, NGO donations follow the preferences of donors, which are not necessarily linked to users' need.

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