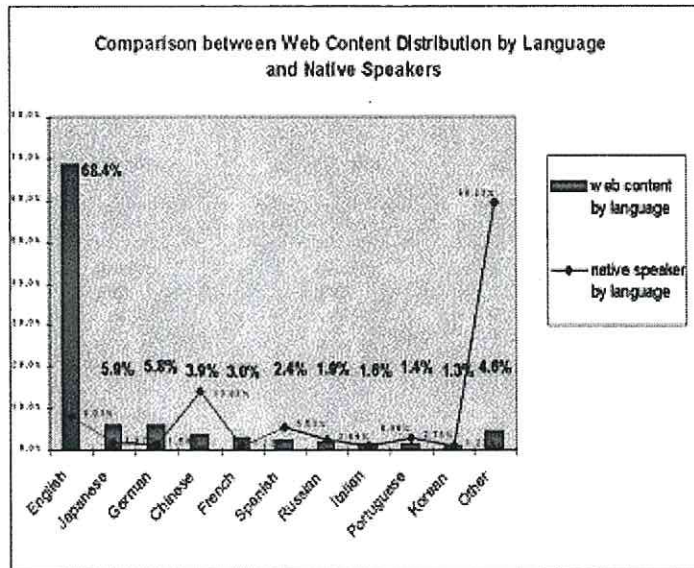




Multilingual Web Site: Some Considerations

Daniela Alderuccio, Luciana Bordoni
 ENEA/UDA/Advisor
 Via Anguillarese 301, 00060 Roma

alderuccio@casaccia.enea.it
bordoni@casaccia.enea.it



1. Global-reach.biz

The aim of the World Wide Web is to provide a new universal medium for communication, but making the WWW truly world-wide means that future web sites should be multilingual and multicultural-oriented. All users (regardless of their cultural background, language, ethnic origin, geographical location or disabilities) have the right:

- to experience the Web with equal results in terms of content impact, without the limits of specialised equipment or multilingual knowledge;
- and to preserve cultural and linguistic diversity.

Today most of the Web content is in English, although the majority of the Earth's peoples speak languages other than English.

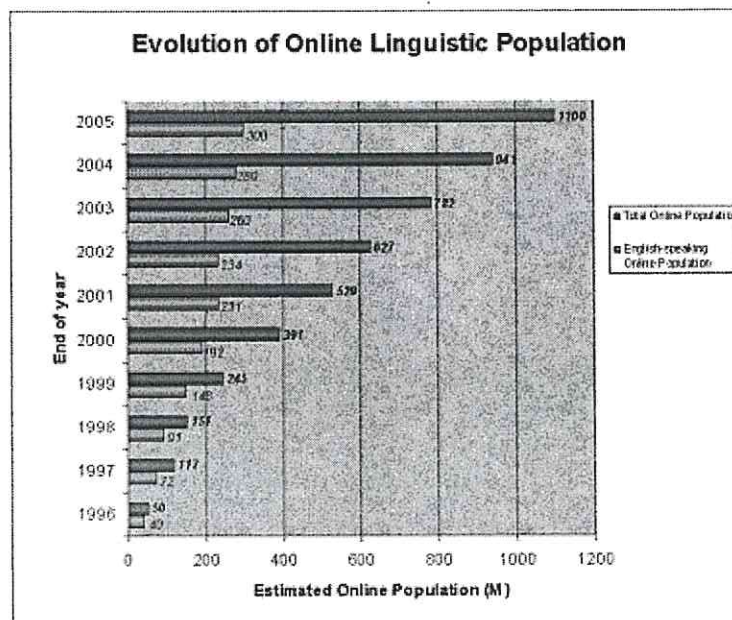
In the statistics of Web content language distribution English is at the first place with 68,4%, followed by Japanese with 5,9% and German with 5,8% (Fig. 1).

The estimated evolution of online population shows that in 2004 the total of English speaker on the Web will be 280 ML and the total of online population will reach 941 ML (Fig. 2).

In the next few years monolingual web sites will evolve into multilingual and globally-oriented ones, in order to reach a wider audience and to meet cultural needs around the world.

Culture impacts web site usability, therefore guidelines for web site design must be re-examined, considering and adhering to social, linguistic and religious conventions.

The tasks of designing and maintaining high-quality usable web sites in a single language show considerable difficulties. Working simultaneously with multiple languages (and different cultures) creates further special technical and cultural challenges, because users apply unconsciously their cultural preferences, when browsing web pages.



2. Global-reach.biz

In the design of multilingual web sites, web page structure and content are involved in cultural choices (Fig. 3-4). In the web site structure can vary:

- **colours:** i.e. in Egypt the green colour means fertility, in Malaysia it is related to the dangers of the jungle, in the U.S. it symbolises safety while in France it is associated to criminality;
- **images:** with emphasis on gender roles (presence/absence of feminine and/or masculine images), on individualism vs. collectivism, etc.;
- **symbols:** i.e. in order to identify the different monolingual version of the web site, in government sites flags symbols are used more often than words;
- **page size:** translated text blocks from a romanised to a non-romanised language (i.e. from English → Chinese, Russian or Japanese etc.) require more space than between two romanised languages (i.e.





3. Nokia.com

English → French);

- **spatial orientation of textual information**, links and graphics: focus on the left-side for American, orientation from the right-to-the-left for Middle Easterner.

Issues related to the content of a multilingual web site are numerous and inter-related. There are two primary approaches to content management: manual and semiautomatic.

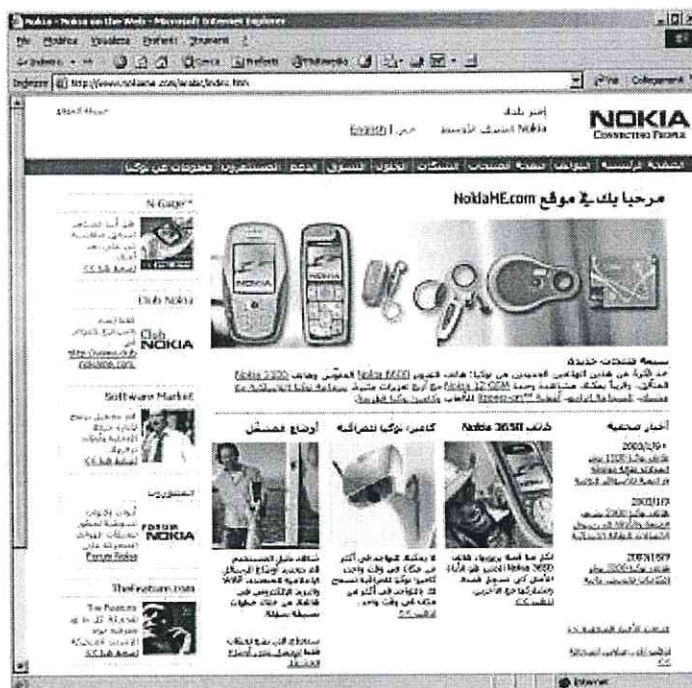
The manual approach is still the most common: many international web sites are still manually translated and manually maintained.

The semiautomatic approach relies on the use of globalisation and localisation software and services. Although automatic translations are faster, they are often not accurate because software cannot handle idiom and some of the nuances of word usages among languages.

The best approach is to combine automatic and human translation, because it is required a cross-cultural understanding of values that goes beyond mere text translation.

When we use (or translate into) a language, we do so in the context of a culture. English-only web sites will constitute a limiting factor in the intellectual exchange of ideas and information, and this problem will quickly become an important long-term consideration for successful web sites.

Culture affects one's perception of reality and influences the way we use languages, therefore the role of culture in the design of web pages is relevant. Cross-cultural models are needed to enhance cultural understanding and to support web sites customisation to specific cultures, Tim Berners Lee affirms: "The power of the Web is in its universality".



4. NokiaMe.com

