

Managing Libraries for Multilingualism

Using the Web for Non-English Language Retrieval and Translation

Patrick M. Valentine

Librarians and educators like to talk the user-friendly talk, but do they walk the user-friendly walk when it comes to providing services for someone who is less than fluent in English?¹ Excellence in a twenty-first-century library would seem to demand attention to language matters. Information literacy in today's world requires a commitment to providing computer services by way of the Internet, as well as access to print resources for all library clients, including limited English-speaking patrons.² Yet very little has been published about the library's role in the multilingual or cross-language aspects of information literacy, with most of the relevant research conducted in Europe and Asia.³

Before library managers can commit resources to these efforts, they must define what they want to do, where to do it, and how to do it. Otherwise, without a map for planning and implementation, the result could be a quagmire of good intentions and wasted effort. This paper examines issues concerning instruction in, and the use of, multilingual and cross-language computer and Web resources in libraries. School, college, public, and special librarians need to assume more active roles as multilingual and cross-language digital information mediators and content providers—or, in plainer words, they need to help clients who are not proficient in English to use computers and the Internet despite language barriers.

Language Diversity

In a multilingual country like the United States, with a glut of complex information sources, how does one help non-native or limited English-speaking clients in the most productive way? Is it fair to deploy only one strategy for developing linguistic literacy? Does the exclusive use of English in libraries and on websites create a digital language divide? Librarians should be aware that there can be digital divides along linguistic lines, as well as the more commonly cited divisions of race, class, gender, and education.⁴ Educators, librarians, webmasters, and information specialists need to keep multilingualism and cross-lingualism in mind when planning and executing library services, although managing information across languages offers some difficulties to both the user and

the librarian. It is essential to keep these services agile, not static.⁵

While America is a country with one predominant language, it is not a monolingual country. Linguists prefer the term *spread language* to the more politically charged word *dominant* when speaking of the role of the English language in the United States. America may be described in linguistic terms as a mosaic with one spread language, but hundreds of others are spoken in the home, workplace, schools, and recreation areas. Minority groups with their own languages are scattered across the land, sometimes in locally significant numbers. One should also be aware that people can be native-born Americans of many generations and not be a native English speaker.⁶

Many educators and librarians think of multilingualism as primarily Spanish and English bilingualism, but in America today numerous languages are spoken, heard, written, and read. English is the *de facto lingua franca*—yet even in this sentence there are “foreign words.” That these words come from a foreign language, and a dead one at that, indicates that librarians must maintain an awareness of the linguistic and non-English aspects of communication for information literacy.

Good communication skills, of course, include putting oneself in the other person's place. Imagine typing on a Chinese-only keyboard or trying to understand an arrivals-and-departure sign in Arabic at an airport. Librarians and libraries must ensure that their instructions, websites, and services take into account the person who is not fluent in written English.

The U. S. Census reported in 2006 that almost 20 percent of Americans (55 million people) spoke a language other than English at home. About 9 percent admit not speaking English very well, and that self-reported number is undoubtedly low. Spanish and Chinese are the largest minority languages spoken in the United States, while American schools list more than four hundred languages used at home.⁷ According to a 2002 government survey, for instance, more than 13 percent of Native American households used

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non-English library materials—a percentage that might have been higher if there had been more materials with a greater linguistic diversity available for them in the library.⁸

Improving information literacy means more than posting some links to help with a translation.⁹ Simplicity is an important but elusive goal in developing multilingual resources. The problem is threefold:

1. websites are portals to such a variety of information that simplicity is difficult to achieve;
2. information specialists who design and maintain them are themselves sophisticated users; and
3. meeting multilingual or cross-lingual needs is not that simple. Being complex, however, defeats the purpose of helping the end-user.

What to Do

How can library managers offer library or institutional services in a multitude of languages? How can they shape and market those services in public settings where many different languages are spoken and read?¹⁰ How user-friendly are library websites and computer stations in an officially mono—but actually multilingual—society? How many campuses and libraries have Chinese or Arabic keyboards, or even Spanish—of which there are at least two versions? Are there even directional signs that can lead the limited-English student or worker to an appropriately equipped workstation? Are special keyboards stashed behind a reference desk? How many staff members are ready to switch a workstation to another language, or can use free services like Google, Yahoo!, or Babel Fish for translation? Are links provided to translation sites, and how can the quality of these sites be assessed?¹¹ For example, one sample phrase, “we are testing for accuracy in translation,” translated back from Russian on Babel Fish becomes, “we experience for the accuracy in the transfer.”¹²

Library users from abroad may read or speak English minimally and not understand American concepts like open-access libraries, or are unfamiliar with the plurality of information resources available at American institutions. Instructions for access points in libraries and on library computer systems are frequently hard to follow. Web designers, as well as library designers, need to simplify signage and provide cross-language links and tools. Designers and administrators must keep the diversity of end-users well in mind.

In terms of helping patrons and staff find or use multilingual services on computers, there are three basic approaches. Libraries can:

1. do nothing;
2. provide translation and transliteration; or
3. provide translation and transliteration tools.

The first option may sound untenable, but is sometimes politically mandated.¹³ Where English-only is a matter of public policy, librarians must consider the context and whether a course of action will only create controversy. On the other hand, it is fair to make the point that relying on English-only is not merely inappropriate and inefficient, but also possibly dangerous. Consider the need to understand disaster warnings and health issues, or simply how to apply household and field products without being able to read the container.¹⁴

A good example of the second, more positive and proactive approach, can be seen on the website of the Spencer S. Eccles Health Sciences Library in Utah (see figure 1),¹⁵ where health information is, or will be, posted in twenty-four languages. For this approach to work in another situation, the librarian or information specialist must first know the political and linguistic environment that the library serves. Questions that need to be asked include: Which languages should be included? What are the priorities? Does the target group actually read in that language or script? Will the mix of languages being supported evolve, or is it different when distance users are considered?

The world’s largest information generator, the United States government, also provides multilingual translations, although the extent of publications, such as those available at the Federal Citizen Information Center, varies with the target language.¹⁶ The collection of such cross-language resources obviously has political, as well as economic and cultural implications. Whatever one thinks about what to translate or where to post it, libraries must be politically astute as to what consequences may arise from language decisions.

The Queens (N.Y.) Borough Public Library has long been noted for its open response to new Americans. Its webpage is available in five non-English languages and has links to WorldLinQ (see figure 2), which was developed by the library to provide hotlinks to information sources in eleven different languages.¹⁷ Some of the source databases are only in English, but if so, that is the choice of the host country.¹⁸ The Danish State and University Library FINFO has an even more extensive selection, with some impressive visual effects.¹⁹

The Spencer S. Eccles Health Sciences Library, Queens Borough Public Library, and the United States Federal Citizen Information Center are examples of sites providing translations and links to resources in non-English tongues. Creating these translations and links is not easy or inexpensive, so budgets are a consideration. Related points to also consider are planning on how to market and distribute them to the target populations, and how to update and maintain relevancy.

Schools face similar cross-language difficulties, but may not have the resources to handle their rapidly changing environments. Bilingual, multilingual and cross-lingual resources for school libraries often are unavailable, fragmented, or only available to larger systems. Political consid-

erations sometimes trump actual needs.²⁰ Nonetheless, some of the tools mentioned on these pages can be mobilized for use on school websites, as well as public and college sites.

For colleges, there is a greater language problem than many realize. The more serious problem on college campuses—as with distance education in general—is providing multilingual or cross-lingual access to a wide spectrum of already existing library resources. Often, however, all that can be done for the provision of scholarly materials is to post links, as the relevant databases may exist only in English. For instance, CSA Illumina provides interface in six languages but the actual materials are mostly in English. An example where the interface is available in at least fifteen languages, using several scripts, is FishBase.²¹ Some colleges, such as the University of Alabama, have translated their websites and established hotlinks to bilingual or multilingual campus services.²²

This leads to the third category or approach for helping patrons, the provision of cross-lingual or translation tools for myriad languages. For practical purposes, it is impossible for librarians to translate everything, much less to develop expensive tools. The cost in money, time, and expertise is daunting. Google and Babel Fish are examples of free Web translation resources relatively easy to use and access, if not necessarily always very helpful. Major systems

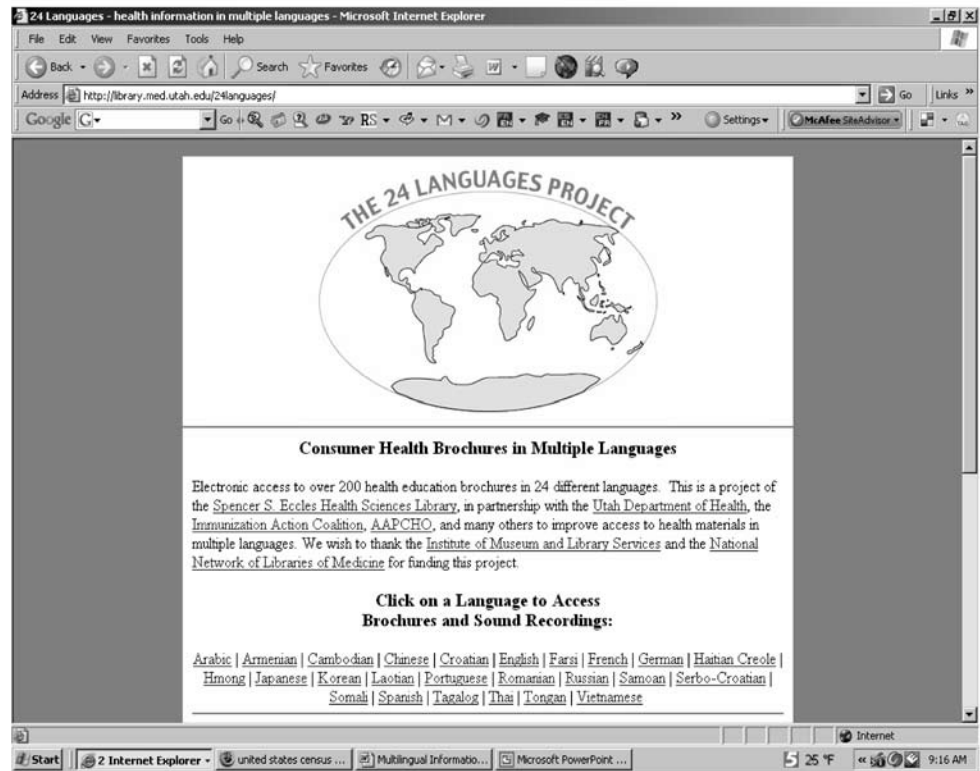


Figure 1. Spencer S. Eccles Health Sciences Library and the Utah Department of Health website



Figure 2. WorldLinQ, Queens (N.Y.) Borough Public Library homepage

like ProQuest are increasingly establishing a number of site-based translation tools. The concern here should be helping persons whose knowledge of English may not be perfect by enabling them to readily access multilingual tools and links. Librarians also need to be diligent in evaluating these tools.²³

Even if librarians keep abreast of resources developed elsewhere, there are at least five issues that can complicate machine translation:

1. Existing tools have not been developed from the user's point of view. Although the Association of College and Research Libraries' standard is that "the information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed,"²⁴ there is very little literature on multilingual information literacy tools from a user's point of view.²⁵ What guidance as there is, is often technical and not aimed at users or decision makers.
2. There are problems engendered by the differences *between* languages. Difficulties in computer translation escalate with the divergence of languages and scripts. For example, since English is closer to Spanish and further from Chinese, making computer translation and transliteration of Chinese to English much more problematic.²⁶ Difficulties increase not just because of vocabulary and grammar but also because of cultural differences, as concepts in a host language may not exist in the target language or vice versa. Computers cannot handle this; indeed, people barely can, and credible sources recognize these difficulties. Figure 3 illustrates how a European website treats this problem by including a caveat on the webpage: "Machine translation cannot compete with the accuracy or quality offered by professional translators. However it can be helpful, particularly when time is at a premium."²⁷
3. Similarly, there are colloquial differences *within* languages, which can result in significant divergence from the standard rubrics used by machines. In Chinese there is only one written language, so even if the spoken language is different from the dominant or most widespread form (Mandarin), one can

still read Chinese. In fact, although the variant forms of Chinese are often really distinct languages rather than dialects, there is little to no difference in the written form that would appear on a computer screen. The same, however, is not true for English, Spanish, or Arabic, where there is a great spread of dialectal and colloquial forms, so the standard written languages on a computer may be significantly different from that spoken by native speakers. The written or codified language may not even be the standard or majority dialect.²⁸ This should not be a major factor at the literacy level of teachers and college students, but for public and school librarians, the effect of variant forms of languages is significantly increased in machine translation.

4. Then there is the difficulty of written heteronyms—words that are spelled the same but have different meanings and are usually pronounced differently.²⁹ Machine translations have great difficulty with context, much less heteronyms. For instance, English has multiple meanings sometimes for a single written word, so much so that the same word can have vastly different meanings when translated. These differences may be easily recognizable in spoken language but deeply hidden when written. An example would be *lead* (noun, a dense metal) and *lead* (verb, lead a horse to water), both spelled the same. Machine translations have little success in picking up heteronyms and giving correct meanings.
5. Finally, there remains a major problem with alphabetization and transliteration. Limited English

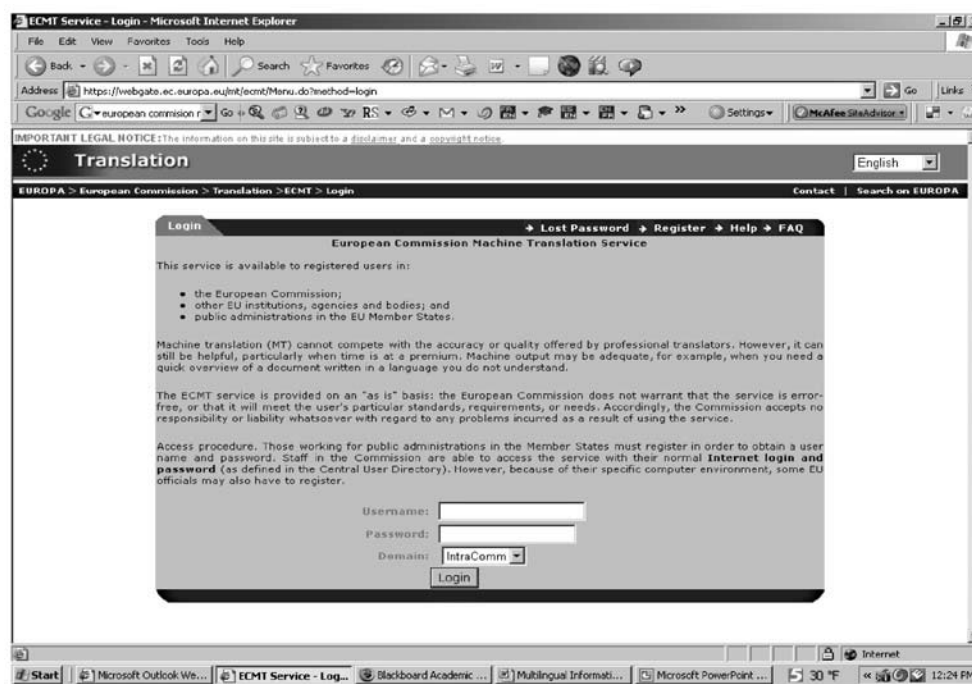


Figure 3. Translation Service with Disclaimer

speakers may have great difficulty maneuvering around alphabetized sites, such as library catalogs. Names and book titles transliterated and alphabetized according to American rules may be almost impossible for native speakers to find.³⁰ How one transliterates a language like Russian can greatly affect how or where a name or title appears in an English-language catalog or database. Ukrainian is a related example, for the Library of Congress transliterates Ukrainian one way, while most Ukrainian book publishers use a different way. Such transliteration is even more problematic for Asian languages (such as Chinese) which have no alphabet, or where alphabets and scripts have changed repeatedly in recent years (such as Turkistan).

The resulting translation and transliteration difficulties can severely hamper information literacy in the host or retrieval language. Such cross-lingual forms can also change over time, such as where newly independent linguistic communities attempt to purify their language of colonial or foreign elements. George Bernard Shaw famously said that England and America are two countries separated by a common language. This process of differentiation continues today in many countries whose students and workers flock to our shores and must be considered when providing translation and transliteration tools. And there are other political and historical dimensions—such as those illustrated by the differences in Serbo-Croatian and Hindu-Urdu—that we have not even considered here.

Conclusion

There is a growing community of limited-English users that are not being catered to. To serve these groups, a variety of policy issues must be addressed so that appropriate resources can be developed. Library administrators must tailor their services to help specific clientele, and while there are already numerous, if not totally adequate, resources, texts, and tools that libraries can link into, they must be updated and evaluated on a regular basis. Thus, library staff must be mobilized at various levels, and library managers must lead.

Libraries must be willing to provide cross-lingual information literacy tools, as well as texts. While strategizing to meet these demands, librarians must also recognize that there may very well be real limits as to what can be done. The place to start is with a current analysis of one's target community, which may range widely in literacy levels, from immigrant workers to students and faculty. Next, librarians can locate and evaluate potential resources, acquire or share them where possible, and train staff in their use. The process is continual. Outdated Web links must be deleted or revised. Accuracy of translation and appropriateness of transliteration will remain a problem. Yet librarians cannot expect that all problems to disappear, or for some kind of

super software to come onto the market.³¹ As service-oriented professionals, library administrators must make the best possible decisions and allocate resources to provide language tools for the plurality of their users.

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a year or a project (e.g., Biotech curriculum design center), or a youth area for a summer/teen club (where the youth area could be the “summer tech shack”). One might think of this pilot or temporary name as the “doing business as” (DBA) approach to managing your environment. Often, people characterize this as your second title or name, such as “Comfort Public Library: Community Resource Center” or “Franklin College Library: Undergraduate Technology Research and Study Center.”

Do the proposed changes reflect who you really are or who you want to be?

We should be careful about picking names for where we want to be, not where we are now. If we choose a name such as “tech gateway,” we need to make sure that we really *are* a gateway. To propose this with few computers or no plan to have a gateway or portal, for example, in the hopes of attracting people in, leaves the library open to criticism. And, frankly, your target audience may not return once they have visited the gateway and there’s nothing there.

Ask this question of a bigger group, but make your decision with a smaller, educated group. Make sure any focus groups or small group discussions are characterized as information-sharing and idea-generation sessions. Don’t give the impression that when people leave the group at the end of the session, the name is chosen. It’s easy to interest people in participating in the final choice process,

but promise an explanation of comments for *why* the final decision was made.

Don’t Forget

Politically expedient is as politically expedient does. Be careful about choosing names to please administrators or those in power at the time. We need to be aware and include them in discussions, but making changes for a small group, or even sometimes one person, opens you up to criticism and, more than likely, future changes.

For a million dollars I would change *my* name. Although this column isn’t about naming opportunities per se (which is an entire other column later this year), there are urban legends in addition to real-life situations where naming opportunities have been a major issues in all types of libraries. A small rule of thumb includes temporary or one-year “adopt a library” initiatives, or summer club names, such as the gift that required a naming opportunity, some of which, like the “Heidi Fleiss Teen Girls Babysitting Club” might be—just maybe—problematic.

So “what’s in a name” *is* critical. I mean, can’t we just use the correct name? My new favorite is the title of my column. Couldn’t the salmon industry just rename the barge “Babies on Board?”

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