

## Oligocultures: Intercultural Web Bridges

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Strategies adopted by multinational corporations have largely been defined in terms of centralising at the source-root (globalising and internationalising linguistic, cultural and technical requirements) only to ultimately branch out and create myriad local versions. While internationalisation was born from the very palpable technical need to homogenise linguistic and cultural traits and references at the source so that it would be technically feasible to transfer diversity, its evolution over the past few years has resulted in a standardisation and uniformisation of the language deployed. Instructions given to writers at IBM for writing for international audiences, for example, illustrate the point well and reveal the pressure exerted on writers to "economize" and shun linguistic and cultural diversity. Not only has this kind of template become a professional norm by default; it is now also advocated and explicitly taught in training and educational programs and courses, both online and onsite.

Localised versions of commercial websites indeed do appear diverse at the surface, but are they really? "Local" can admittedly be problematised. We could think of it in terms of an adaptation of ghost-writing, a language, a system of linguistic and cultural meanings, that is written at the source in pared-down multinational corporatese, but which the localised versions clearly shadow in their translation. As operating costs have continued to climb, due to the sheer number of languages and countries continually being brought onto the marketing radar, multinational corporations have been opting to group these diverse local linguistic/cultural areas into actual linguistic-cultural regions. This grouping by linguistic-cultural traits into linguistic-cultural regions is facilitated by the fact that the overall target market is substantially defined as being comprised of a certain middle class of consumers, with an expected level of purchasing power, or even financial and professional clout, which allows them access to the products and services being offered. Consumer tastes and class values are promoted, but at the same time they are internalised and defined by the users themselves "locally". One nourishes the other mutually, in a circle that by definition shifts according to the trends and technologies nurturing them. Additionally, as technologies and the navigational interface on the Web become standardised, they produce an equally uniformising effect on the experiences of users and consumers in domains that increasingly range from online shopping to online information-gathering.

Supra-national cultures as we know them are linked regionally to economic trade blocs defined and consolidated by regional agreements and treaties [EU; NAFTA; CSN; Mercosur; ASEAN; etc.]. They have clearly experienced further growth and evolution through international marketing and regional localisation strategies implemented by multinational corporations. While regional economic treaties focus precisely on financial transactions and trade and commerce exchange, regional localisation strategies generated through source globalisation and internationalisation decisions and policies, focus –

mainly through the Web— on linguistic and cultural exchange, with heavy emphasis on specific cultural traits. They create complex socio-economic cultural entities that we define as "oligocultures". Their complexity is underscored and intensified by the continually evolving nature of the technologies used during every phase of the exchange: at conceptualisation of the core source content, right on through its transmission and reception by end users or consumers. Not to mention the recent upsurge in the sophisticated technological creation of content that is sourced by non-traditional world economic leaders and through non-proprietary channels such as Open Source...

Observations and questions related to the phenomenon of oligoculturalisation in commerce on and through the Web have led us to examine other traditionally non-commercial areas such as education. It is no secret to educators in secondary schools and post-secondary academic institutions that "education" itself has been undergoing a process of commodification much like other products and services. Currently it is packaged as one integral component driving the widely acclaimed and promoted "knowledge society" and "knowledge economy". Obviously this raises a host of interesting questions, ones that range from the very definition of "knowledge" – historically debated vigorously worldwide over the ages in philosophy, ethics, humanities, and the sciences– to the commodification of knowledge that we presently witness as the result of technologies being integrated in every imaginable facet of our daily lives, including most definitely – education.

We began by looking at general educational experience as it is being defined presently in diverse areas of the world: 1) monolingual-monocultural; 2) bilingual-bicultural; and 3) multilingual-multicultural. Certainly, there are variations on these general categories. The experience in Canada has notably been channelled through the lens of bilingualism, perhaps less so through biculturalism, and even through bilingual multiculturalism. The recent experience by the European Union to promote multilingual multiculturalism through its educational infrastructure has captured our attention, especially if analysis takes into account certain trends and practices observed in Internet oligoculturalisation in the non-educational domains already favoured by professional globalisation, internationalisation and localisation strategies. Some questions emerge:

1. If oligoculturalisation entails a regional regrouping of cultural (including linguistic) traits facilitated through technologies, and if technologies –utilitarian as well as social– reflect and determine "culture", then how can we most adequately (re)define the word "culture"? Localisation, internationalisation, and globalisation in relation to the translation industry are quick to demand that the transfer of source content be appropriate in terms of culture. Culture is learned and taught. It has the capacity to form and to be formed as well as transformed, and is the engine driving societal organisation. Technologies play an increasingly important role within societal organisation. Can the elements of uniqueness that distinguish individual societies and cultures be preserved while at the same time allowing these societies equal right of participation in a globalising world? Where is the limit? The discourses on cultural sensitivity should perhaps include a more

profound analysis of contemporary cultural dynamics. Analysing oligoculturalisation should provide us with important insights.

2. Because oligoculturalisation is so tightly wedded to “culture”, hence “identity”, it behooves us to not analyse it exclusively in terms that are purely economic – even though economies and commercial activities and exchange constitute a fundamental part. Well-known philosopher and professor Kwame Appiah (2005), citing historian-professor Benedict Anderson, insists on this importance of identification, of identity:

Who will willingly die for Comecon –the old Eastern European Council for Mutual Economic Assistance– or the EEC? Supranational economic organisations don’t seem to involve the shared memories, the thick narratives, that nations (or families or religions) do. They don’t furnish *identities*. Their sway is purely formal; a matter of contract and treaty. If nobody will *give* his life for these organisations, it might have something to do with the fact that nobody *makes* his life out of them. [p.243]

With the branding of “identity” in the current marketplace, and with identity articulated at the core of the marketing message in localisation (i.e. the linguistic, cultural and technical transfer of the source content), how are we to reconcile the notion of local identity packaged for consumption with the reality of multiple-tiered, more nuanced, versions of local identity? Whose identity are we talking about anyway? The translator's or localiser's perception of local? A standard stereotype? A local “native” representative? A composite of merged traits and symbols that ultimately represent ... whom exactly?

3. As articulated on various European Union Web sites –both institutional and commercial–, the move to define a contemporary globalising world in terms of multilingualism and multiculturalism, in which technology plays a major role, has become part and parcel of deliberate policy-making. This is mirrored by world organisation reports such as those issued by UNESCO and the UN, advocating linguistic diversity and linguistic rights, and a policy of multilingual education. In 1999, General Conference Resolution 12 used the term “multilingual education” to mean “the use of at least three languages, the mother tongue, a regional or national language and an international language in education.” The Resolution “supported the view that the requirements of global and national participation, and the specific needs of particular, culturally and linguistically distinct communities can only be addressed by multilingual education.” At the same time, researchers Michael Singh [research professor in education in Australia] and Christopher Scanlon [researcher at the Globalism Institute] note an unprecedented worldwide consumerism that is growing hand-in-hand with transnational and global languages (such as American English) and the actual commodification of linguistic and cultural diversity. They write of the “rise of *multilingual knowledge*

*economies*” where “value is increasingly derived from knowledge-based products and services” and where “the creation of [this] value is derived from tapping into the knowledges embedded within the world’s different languages [and cultures].”

The confluence of market forces promoting multilingualism and multiculturalism as “good for business” and the commodification of knowledge as a pillar for constructing multilingual, multicultural knowledge societies and economies is indeed a powerful one. The traditionally non-commercial sphere of “education” is bound to take a hit. “Knowledge management”, from the time the term was used by Sveiby in relation to the Scandinavian intellectual capital movement, has since become an object of research and debate within academia and at international conferences, by administrators, professors and researchers alike. Clearly, as noted by Ian Reid of the University of Southern Australia, “the business of universities is all about knowledge”. To what degree, then, can we expect translation and localisation activities to have an impact on the creation and development of this knowledge society and economy, and education overall?

4. The European Union gives evidence that it is already dictating the terms of what being an “educated” individual entails. Eurojargon and Euroconcepts on education websites maintained by diverse European countries will continue to support this trend. Is the strategic process of the Europeanisation of education analogous to the globalisation and internationalisation strategies manifest in the corporate world? Given that the Web and technologies are essential to information transfer and access, can we consider standardisation and uniformisation processes currently underway in the field of education and delivery of educational content to be the manifestation of oligoculturisation in the realm of education? As time goes on, will there be evidence of localisms affecting the “global European”, in a kind of playoff between local, national, regional, European “identities”? Is there resistance to homogenisation, for example, a local presentation of education-related content that still speaks of local national concepts? What differences do we see in all this between Eastern and Western European websites, for example in those maintained by their respective ministries of education, etc.?

Questions such as these provoke still larger questions. Does an oligoculture of education already exist, does it show signs of emerging, and does it really matter? Does it reflect a new category of “belonging”, as in “citizenship” for example? Is a significant trait of an oligoculture of education to be found in the current desire to manage “knowledge”? Does the European experience have any significance for other regions of our globalising world? Finally, does a conceptual model of oligoculturisation and/or oligoculture require a reformulation of theoretical apparatus and terminology to describe the practical phenomena? What import does all of this have for those persons and entities participating in translation, localisation, internationalisation and globalisation activities, indeed for the academic discipline of Translation Studies overall? Interesting trends, in the way of empirical evidence, continue to emerge.

At this relatively early stage of Europeanization in education, demand is clearly offset by supply when it comes to translation and localisation. The need for translators is increasing exponentially. In the European Union there are currently not enough specialists to meet the actual demand in translation, and outlooks for the future do not look any more promising (Outinoff 2003: 213). If the authorities of an EU country, Greece or Finland, for example, want to advertise their academic programs to potential students from other EU members via their web site, they will have to deal with such rare combinations as Greek-Danish or Finnish-Portuguese (Seleskovitch and Lederer 2002 : 243). By January 2007, there will be 27 EU members with 24 different languages. This means 552 possible combinations. Obviously, managing a web site localised with 24 European languages is not an easy task, and if one counts the inevitable Mandarin (as is the case for the Italian site) acknowledging the growing importance of China's international students for the EU "education economy", it becomes very difficult to find enough qualified translators.

Moreover, if we take into consideration that web sites have to be congruous and kept up to date with national and European legislation, changes in programs, etc., then we see how day to day management becomes very expensive very fast. As Oustinoff says: "on voit ainsi les gigantesques problèmes techniques (et financiers) que pose l'élargissement sur le pan linguistique" (2003: 213) [We thus see the huge technical (and financial) problems brought about by expansion on the linguistic level].

As such, the use of English in national education web sites has become more a question of pragmatism than anything else. English is already being used as the *lingua franca* of the European Union, but as Moore and Varantola note: "In certain contexts, the *lingua franca* role of English changes into an interlingual role" (2005: 148). Education is certainly one technical domain in which English serves as a bridge between communities speaking various languages. Of course, the need for web sites that are easy and affordable to manage, linguistically at least, outweighs the need for real diversity. What, if any, impact on the content itself is visible in a transfer conducted inter-lingually through English?

Furthermore, we have to consider the different national views on the use of English among EU members: How do the people of any given country view English? And what is the official position of the authorities? Language use is not bereft of bias and ideology. The Poles, for example, think that the English language is their "main window to Europe" (Chłopicki, 2005: 110), so they are likely to promote their education programs in English. And this is exactly what we observe since, as of November 8 2006, the Polish web site is only posted in English – the Polish pages still being under construction, as they have been for weeks. The official position of a country can be even more drastic, promoting English at the expense of the official national language in the field of education. This is exactly what is happening in Finland:

Finnish universities inform their potential international students that a number of courses will be offered to them in an international language. This international language is unmistakably always interpreted as English.

Researchers are required to submit their national project proposals in English for the sake of potential international reviewers. The extreme view frequently promoted today is that Finnish academics should stop writing in Finnish altogether and resort exclusively to English to make sure that their research becomes generally accessible. (Moore and Varantola 2005: 148-149)

Here again, pages in English represent a large part of the Finnish site. They actually mirror the Finnish pages and contain extensive and detailed information about the education system of Finland. The influence of English in education is broadening, and the language is now being used in websites that already feature an international language. In today's Germany, for example, linguists worry about German losing ground to English as an "international medium of communication" (Barbour 2005: 153). It is a viewpoint that is shared by the general population. However, the German site recently became bilingual – German-English. None of the other international European languages are acknowledged – Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese.

As we see in the following table, the number of national European sites related to education and using the English language has recently increased from 17 in July 2006 to 22 in November 2006. Cyprus, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia have added English pages or documents on their web sites. However, Bulgaria took away the English pages. The sites from Bulgaria, France, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Spain do not use English at all. Actually, these five sites are monolingual and promote their education system in their respective official national languages. The Cyprian site is a borderline case since English is only featured in European program names, and so is the Slovakian site with a page exhibiting links to English documents on the Slovakian education system.

<b>Countries</b>	<b>Languages in July 2006</b>	<b>Languages in October 2006</b>
Austria	German, French, English	German, English, French
Belgium	Dutch, French, English	<u>Flemish site</u> : Dutch, French, English <u>French site</u> : French, English (Google translated) <u>German site</u> : German
Bulgaria	Bulgarian, English	Bulgarian
Cyprus	Greek	Greek with some English European programs names
Czech Republic	Czech, English	Czech, English
Denmark	Danish, English	Danish, English

Estonia	Estonian, Russian, English	Estonian, Russian, English
Finland	Finnish, Swedish, English	Finnish, Swedish, English
France	French	French
Germany	German	German, English
Greece	Greek, English	Greek, English
Hungary	Hungarian	Hungarian, English
Italy	Italian, English, Spanish, Chinese	Italian, English, Spanish, Chinese
Ireland	Gaelic, English	Gaelic, English
Latvia	Latvian, English	Latvian, English
Lithuania	Lithuanian, English	Lithuanian, English
Luxembourg	French	French
Malta	English, no Maltese	English, no Maltese
Netherlands	Dutch, English	Dutch, English
Poland	Polish	English, Polish not available
Portugal	Portuguese	Portuguese
Romania	Romanian	Romanian, English, French not available
Slovakia	Slovak	Slovak, English (only a page for document downloads)
Slovenia	Slovenian, English	Slovenian, English
Spain	Spanish	Spanish
Sweden	Swedish, English	Swedish, Easy to read Swedish, English
United Kingdom	English	English, plus a box at the top of the page offering a choice of 27 countries or territories from Asian, European and American continents. The opened pages are in English, or multilingual (English + national language-s) depending on which state is selected.

In light of these observations, one could fear that the EU's policy of multilingualism, i.e. equal rights for all official languages, is rapidly losing ground. But it is not the case. EU programs may actually help by promoting lesser used national languages and achieving multilingualism. Indeed, the Maltese site, which publishes the island's education system in English, occasionally displays the Maltese language in the "Latest News" section as a link leading to a Maltese document or with a European logo opening a Maltese page. This shows the influence of the EU on its members. Moreover, Wagner states that the policy

“is firmly anchored in a legal basis which is confirmed in the draft European Constitution currently under discussion” (2005: 221). If this course of negotiation remains unaltered, EU’s institutions will be using and promoting the official languages for a long time.

Surprisingly, the most linguistically diversified site is from the United Kingdom: At the top of the home page, there is a drop-down menu with 27 countries or territories pertaining to Asia, Europe and the Americas. The pages are sometimes written in English only, but they are often bilingual or multilingual – English plus the official national language-s – depending on which country is selected.

The general use of English in 22 national European Union sites is revealing. Indeed, there seems to be a parallel unofficial policy establishing English as the EU’s education language, opening the door for terminological standardisation and uniformisation and, of course, oligoculturisation.

Yet language is not the only contributing factor of oligoculturisation, the culture of education is an important element too.

For the European Union’s members, knowledge plays a pivotal role in the economy and in society; this is why they aim to transform their economies into knowledge economies, and use measures, such as university-industry collaboration, to reach their objective (Merle 2003: 125). They believe that a change in education via an entrepreneurial culture will allow universities to be active participants in the emergence of the knowledge society and economy, thus the popular term: “entrepreneurial university” (Merle 2003: 126). The lack of public funds, however, constitutes a challenge for implementing such a profound cultural modification. Web-based education appears to offer an attractive solution to this dilemma. With the rapid expansion of the internet and the growing appeal of e-learning to potential students, universities are able to reach remote communities, and attract a new clientele. Of course, this means that information and communication technology is addressed on many EU members’ education web sites. The sites of Belgium, Denmark and Hungary, for example, all have links leading to pages and documents presenting their achievements in this domain. The terms *science*, *technology*, and *ITC* are common in these sites; and on the Polish site for instance, there are references to *e-content*, *e-safe*, and *e-dimension*. These terms possess a great promotional, if not commercial, value and help attracting international students from all over Europe and the world. But they also show standardization in the field of education.

In the 1990s, European countries became concerned about the qualification of their graduate students and their transition into the labor market (Guile 2003: 89). Policies and agreements, such as the *Bologna Declaration*, which aimed at creating a European zone devoted to higher education with the purpose of improving the mobility and employability of students and boosting the competitiveness of European higher education, were adopted in order to help these students find a job wherever they wanted within the EU(?). These agreements along with programs such as Eurydice, Erasmus Mundus, Leonardo da Vinci, and Socrates all call for and contribute to the harmonization of EU members’ education systems and the international recognition of European

diplomas. They also play a role in the creation of the knowledge economy by encouraging EU's citizens to register in graduate and postgraduate academic programs. This is why the concept of higher education is present in all EU members' education web sites. This consistent presence is a definite sign of uniformisation in the European education culture.

As preferences, tendencies and trends within the field of education continue to emerge and solidify, they will become a reflection of the intermingling processes of standardisation and uniformisation (as evidenced through Eurojargon and Euroconcepts) and differentiation and localisation. The contradictory movements to simultaneously homogenise and heterogenise are indicative of the contradictions inherent to the forces and flows of globalisation feeding them. Clearly, the move along the continuum from ideal to unacceptable representation in response is in part dictated by the pragmatics of the situation: lack of monetary resources to support 552 language combinations, and lack of qualified translators to carry them out. Partial localisation of the education websites is a tangible result. Observations of the continuing transformations of European education websites will yield not only empirical research for analysis, but also assist in articulating questions about the dynamics (social, political, economic, ideological) contributing to the processes that constitute globalisation – voicing the global through the local (language policies; political agendas, etc.) and the local through the global (sociolinguistic ideologies; identities, etc.) – and most importantly, to the tangible formative processes that constitute oligoculturisation from within.

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