

IMPROVING THE INFORMATION SOCIETY THROUGH AWARENESS OF LANGUAGES

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On a planetary scale, the quality of communication, work, cross-cultural empathy, scientific and business development, health care, and leisure-time experience in the information society has been limited by the specific way in which English has been adapted as the global language. It is important to have at least one global language (Spanish and Mandarin Chinese are also candidates for this status), but it is also urgent that other languages be recognized and respected, and that the entire multi-lingual situation of the network society and the era of globalization be pragmatically treated with more awareness. The trend has been towards the unconscious creation of hybrids of English and a national language. We instead need to work towards restoring the separate autonomous integrity of both English and the national language. I will consider three areas, and present two empirical examples in each area. I will make concrete suggestions for improvements to the language situation in the context of case studies. First, in software development in the IT industry, in non-English speaking countries, the quality of communication among programmers and other IT experts has been affected by the reality of hybrid language situations. I will mention the examples of the software industry in Germany and Italy. Second, in museums, the same question of English-and-national-language duality with respect to the presentation of museum objects and artefacts (both to physically present and online-remote-virtual visitors) requires serious attention. I will discuss the examples of some prominent museums in Germany and Italy. Third, I will consider how communication in online social media like Facebook, Twitter, virtual world simulations, and chat rooms is affected by the global use of loosely structured English and netspeak. I will propose measures to upgrade social experience and interaction through the educational amelioration of the English in circulation, an expanded role for national and local languages, and an appreciation of the value of colloquialisms, slang, acronyms, emoticons, and other “digital culture” socio-linguistic practices.

Everyone on the planet who is not a native speaker of English is in some way disconnected from full participation in the information society. Even the top academic media and technology thinkers, who spend their days and nights informing themselves in real-time about all the latest developments in the online world, are faced with significant language obstacles in trying to disseminate their ideas – through books, articles, blogs, chats, facebook discussion threads - if their English is not at the level of native speakers. Should I go and live in Los Angeles, USA or Sydney, Australia for a few years to improve my English? Should I write in English with mistakes - or perhaps in my native German, Dutch, or Italian - and then have someone translate it? Or should I run it through Google Translate and then edit it? If these dilemmas are the case for digital citizens at the highest level of understanding, then just imagine how difficult the situation really is for “ordinary people” whose native language is not English. Or, to turn the observation around into a more positive formulation: imagine a future - a more advanced stage of the information society - where the reality of the world’s many languages has been thought about and handled

idiom. Having only one global language (English) immediately establishes systemically a crude binary oppositional hierarchy between the haves and the have-nots, between the one global language which is above the bar of separation and all the regional and local languages which are below. Having three global languages (English, Spanish, and Chinese) - which are not themselves involved in a relationship of strict equality with each other - establishes the basis for a system of relationships which are, in their structure, beyond the binary oppositional structure of one term of the relationship being strictly above the other term. One of the global languages may be somewhat more important than a certain regional or local language, but there is a built-in limit to how much more important than the other it is. Having three languages instead of one at the apex of the language system of the global information society triggers a cascading effect throughout the system of the unfolding of more complex patterns and mutually reciprocal relations. The entire multi-lingual situation of the information society should be treated with more awareness. So far we are sleep-walking in unconsciousness with the imposition of English in a simplified rather than well-thought-through way. We need to restore the separate autonomous integrity of English, the national language, and a normalized hybrid vernacular.

The accelerated propagation of global digital technology and global media culture has brought with it the accelerated predominance of English. The result is a two-tiered system, with English as the master code. This system no longer entails a relationship of domination of one of the system's elements by the other. It is rather a relationship of virus-like infiltration by the stronger element of the weaker. Taking the situation of German as an example, there is an implosion stemming from the epidemic proliferation of English terms in the interior of the German language. When a German speaker talks in an advertisement, movie, TV program, or on the Internet, she sprinkles her utterances liberally with English words. When a German speaker talks about business management, computer software, digital technology, telecommunications, financial markets, fashion, music, sports, shopping, consumer objects, or "personalized" emotions (Ich habe ein Happy Feeling), she supplements her speech with substitute or designer words taken from English. English words are used in the German language in any domain where the speaker wishes to enhance the prestige of her discourse by holding up a sign of globalized professional, technical, or consumer knowledge. But since the word is outside its living English context, and is not integral to any German context, it is like a fish out of both waters in a hybrid language called Denglisch.

The first case study that I will consider while making concrete suggestions for improvements to the language situation of the information society is software development companies in the IT industry in non-English speaking countries. My two empirical examples will be the software industry in Germany and Italy. I have worked on many software development projects in Europe and the USA, and I have observed the quality of communication among programmers and other IT experts being affected by the reality of hybrid language situations. Currently, I am working on a language internationalization project in Germany, and I am seeking to expand this area into part of a business that I hope will grow into what I call a radical technology company. I call the business that I am in: humanities informatics or Computer Science 2.0. Our slogan is: "Upgrade Information Technology with real knowledge from the arts, sciences, and humanities."

One of the most important professional aspects of software development is documentation. Written documents support the design phase of a project, the analysis of the functional-business area, the conceptualization of the software architecture, the technical implementation, and the operation and maintenance of the running system after it goes live and into production. It is very important to the success of projects that the documents written by one programmer or technology expert be useable and understandable for the subsequent readers of the document. Otherwise, there is very little point in the document having been written at all. Programmers and people involved with computing in German-speaking

countries are very attracted by the English language, which is seen as being the “native language” of information technology. So they tend to write documents which are principally written in German, but which use a lot of conceptual and technical terms taken from English (sometimes applied incorrectly), including acronyms. The result is documents written in a mixed hybrid language which is not especially comprehensible to readers. I think that what we need to do is to restore a high-quality original German version of documents, and, in addition, have a high-quality English version, and then have a third version which is hybrid, but also work on some sort of codification and standardization of the hybrid language. Many young people in our society want to become doctors, lawyers, and computer engineers, but I believe that there is a lot of potential and very interesting work to be done in humanities informatics, such as in this language internationalization business area. Our goal is also to upgrade the language in which information technology is discussed to a qualitatively richer and more sophisticated language in the humanities sense.

Another language that I speak well is Italian. I have especially enjoyed reading great Italian novelists like Italo Svevo, Leonardo Sciascia, Italo Calvino, and Carlo Emilio Gadda in the original Italian, and even partly in local dialects. It is in some ways painful to imagine the beautiful Italian language getting corrupted by the infusion of English and hybrid IT terminology into its heart. At the University of Pisa, where computer science was first introduced to Italy in 1969, there is an academic programme in English-Italian translation studies, designed to train language specialists in professional domains like law, economics, IT, software localization, environment, energy, bio-medical and pharmaceutical industries, meeting the standards of the curriculum of the European Master’s in Translation, as established by the Director General of Translations of the European Commission. But take a close look at the English-language Wikipedia article on the University of Pisa. It contains sentences whose relationship to English can only be described as accidental: “The Computer Science course at University of Pisa was the first one in the area to be activated in the whole Italy, during the 1960s.” Activated? “After the second world war the University of Pisa returned to the avant-garde in many fields of knowledge.” Which avant-garde would that be? The artistic avant-garde? The futurists? The dadaists and surrealists? The best in computer science and the best in translation studies together at the same university. Wow! But the Pisa University administration seems to be neither aware of the importance of Wikipedia in the information society nor of the English-language skills available to it within its own faculties.

I believe that the scope of the academic field of translation studies should be greatly expanded to include subjects and goals concerning language in the information society like those that I have discussed here. Italy has been suffering badly from the global financial and economic crisis which began in 2008. The computer industry has been hit particularly hard. An Italian vice-president of Microsoft recently stated that he believes that 40,000 jobs are in danger of being lost in the IT sector in Italy. Perhaps one way out of the crisis would be to start projects having to do with language awareness.

Museums are another area where the question of English-and-national-language duality with respect to the presentation of museum objects (both to physically present and online visitors) requires attention. I recently visited the Berlin Wall Museum and the Film and Television Museum in Berlin. At both of these museums, texts that accompany exhibitions are in both German and English. I noticed that the quality of the English-language texts is rather mediocre, with German-influenced sentence structure, mistakes in historical usage of terms, and difficult to comprehend phrases. Yet I have been told by several individuals that these museums would not be interested in spending more than a little money on getting these translations right. The original German texts may have problems as well (so it seemed to me); some of the difficulties in the English texts may be derived from ambivalencies in the German ones. I apologize for not having the time in these 20 minutes allotted to me to present specific examples. I need to revisit

those two Berlin museums and take detailed notes. At a famous art museum at the Piazza del Duomo in Milan I noticed similarly problematic English texts, although there seemed to be an inconsistent mixture of translations done by both native and non-native speakers of English.

As I reach the end of writing my own text – the paper serving as the basis for my talk at ISEA2011 in Istanbul on language and the information society – I realize that I will not have time to immediately keep my promise to discuss how communication in online social media is affected by the global use of loosely structured English and netspeak. I intend to keep this promise someday, but I will have to defer its fulfillment for now. I will say that I believe that the quality of online social experience and interaction could benefit from some real improvements in education in the schools in self-expression via language, and some real love for the English language and other languages. And what is the value of colloquialisms and slang? They are an important object of socio-linguistic inquiry. And what are we to make of all those acronyms and emoticons? LOL! Smile please!

References and Notes:

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