

Multilingual Websites. The European Schoolnet's Approach

Sophie Vandeputte

*Translation Coordinator
European Schoolnet*

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Abstract

This paper aims at giving a practical example of how an international organisation (European Schoolnet - EUN) manages multilingual websites. The paper will first describe the organisation itself and its translation resources. It will then analyse the way translations are managed and the system translators use to insert their contents on the Web. Finally, it will compare the main advantages and disadvantages of the system and suggest improvements.

Résumé

Dans cet article, on verra un exemple concret de la manière dont une organisation Internationale (European Schoolnet - EUN) gère des sites Web multilingues. Nous commencerons par décrire l'organisation elle-même et ses ressources en traduction. Nous décrirons ensuite la gestion des traductions et le système informatique où les traducteurs insèrent les pages Web. Nous analyserons les principaux avantages et inconvénients de ce système, pour finir par quelques suggestions d'amélioration.

Introduction

The Internet has taken a huge importance in our daily lives, whether on a professional or on a private point of view. More and more people use it for professional and personal purposes. Visitors became very demanding over the last few years and they now expect to find exactly what they are looking for. Even though most contents available on the Internet are published in English only, one should not forget that people always feel much more comfortable when they can read contents in their mother tongue.

Language serves two main purposes: it is an identity factor (people sharing the same language belong to a same community), but it is overall a communication factor. The more languages you know, the more you are able to understand and communicate with other people. In a European Union where the learning and usage of foreign languages is widely encouraged, the European Schoolnet, an international partnership of more than 26 European Ministries of Education, could not afford to provide its websites in English only.

When the organisation was first established more than 5 years ago, language diversity in Europe was already an issue and the enlargement of the EU (and thus the increase of EU official languages) was just ahead. It thus had to develop an easy system that would both allow as many users as possible to manage the various websites and that would be flexible enough to accept as many languages as possible.

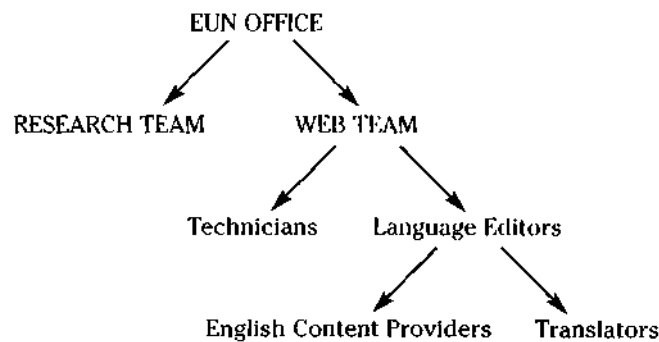
The present paper aims at describing the system the EUN developed and uses to manage its multilingual websites. It is structured as follow: Section 1 is a general overview of the EUN organisation, its aims and its composition. Section 2 describes the translation team, the kind of texts to be translated, the way translations are managed and the tool used to assign items to translators. It will also give an overview of the translation interface used by translators. The paper will finish by analysing the system used and state some of its advantages and disadvantages in Section 3.

1. What is the EUN?

The European Schoolnet (EUN - <http://www.eun.org>) is an international partnership of more than 26 European Ministries of Education developing

learning for schools, teachers and pupils across Europe. It provides insight into educational use of ICT (information and communications technology) in Europe for policy-makers and education professionals. This is achieved through communication and information exchange throughout school education using innovative technologies, and by acting as a gateway to national and regional school networks. The EUN serves schools and other communities in education by, among others, running a leading European education portal for teaching, learning, collaboration, and innovation to create a vibrant European community of educators and learners.

As shown in the graphic below, the EUN Office is divided into two main poles: a Web Team and a Research Team. The latter is made up of researchers and analyst in the field of ICT in education. The Webteam comprises technicians on the one hand and language editors on the other hand. Content providers write the various contents into English. Then comes the translation team, which provides the different language versions needed for each website.



All the contents of the portal and project websites are originally written in English and translated into French and German (the two most studied languages in Europe). Dutch translations are provided thanks to a grant from the Flemish Education ministry of Belgium. When resources are available, other languages are also provided. Some projects are fully provided into the 11 official languages of the EU. The EUN sometimes has to provide translations into other languages like Catalan or Norwegian.

All contents (original and translated versions) are stored in a Cold Fusion database that is accessible via the Internet through an interface developed inhouse by technicians.

2. EUN's Translation Workflow

EUN translation workflow is quite typical in a way since the system used by the organisation has been developed inhouse by technicians and hasn't been purchased from a professional translation software company. The section 2.1 describes the translation team's structure and the way translations are assigned. The section 2.2 describes what happens once an item is awaiting translation and needs to be inserted in the database. As updates often happen on the Internet (documents have to be inserted quickly, so mistakes and content updates are very common), the section 2.3 describes the way translators can change or correct their translations very easily. Finally, the paper tackles what the EUN calls 'static texts'. Their definition and function are detailed in the section 2.4.

2.1. Translation Management

EUN's translation team is made up of several translators for each language. Only three translators work inhouse: a French speaker, a German speaker and a Dutch speaker. People working at a distance provide the other languages. English is the source language of all items published on the website. Translators always work into their mother tongue.

The translation team is managed by a Translation Coordinator (TC) who receives every request for translation by email from the content providers. When a content provider inserts an item in the database and needs it to be translated, he/she sends an email to the TC with all the necessary information: if possible the type of item to be assigned¹, its ID (ie. the identity number of the item), its title and the deadline for translation.

¹ EUN's websites are generally structured in the same way and in 3 levels. The frontpage contains different sections called 'areas'. Each area may have several 'subareas', which contain the third level: 'documents'. A 'Commented Links' is small description of a document that is generally published directly on a frontpage. Each item to be assigned can thus be something different according to the role and place it has on the website. E.g.: the document entitled 'Certificates and Competition' and published at http://futurum.eun.org/eun.org2/eun/en/SpringSite_News/content.cfm?ov-26499&lan=en belongs to the subarea 'Spring Day', in the 'News' area of the Spring Day In Europe website.

Once a translation request is received, the TC logs in into the Webmaster's Interface shown on Figure 1 with a personal username and password. This Webmaster's Interface is a kind of gateway to the general management of the websites: it is used by content providers to insert their items, it allows all users (content providers and translators) to edit an item, to refresh a page, to add sections to existing websites, etc.

To assign an item for translation, the TC uses the 'Assign' tool framed in the middle of Figure 1. The TC selects the type of item to be assigned: commented link, document, subarea, etc. Once defined, the TC is redirected to another page containing several search criteria.

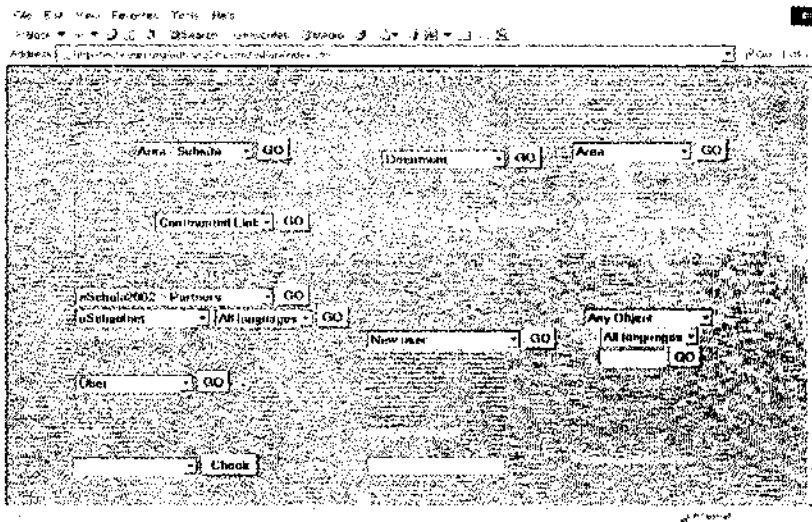


Figure 1: 'Assign' and 'Final Assignment' tools

In order to find the relevant item, the TC defines the different criteria shown on Figure 2 and makes a search by ID or keyword. Those criteria allow the TC to restrict the search by defining the publishing date, the name of the content provider, the area in which it is published, etc. Since the EUN deals with thousands of items, it was important for the users to be able to restrict the scope of search as much as possible.

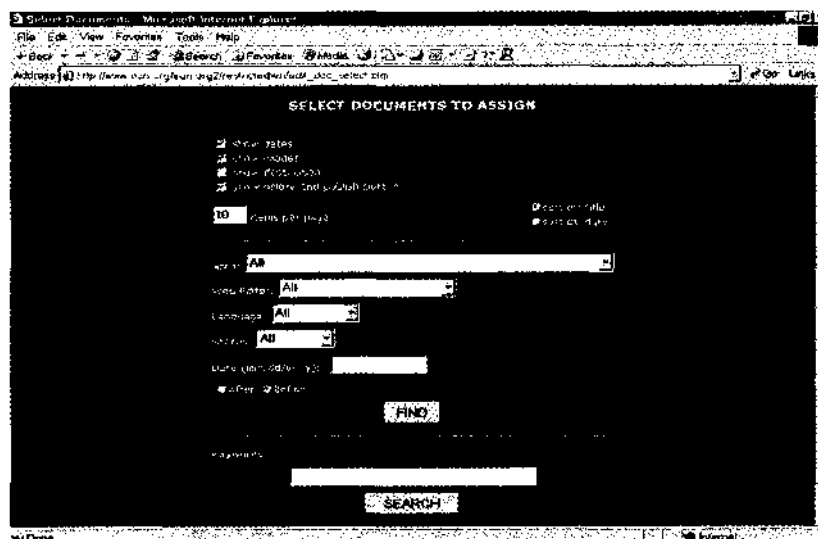


Figure 2: Search Criteria

The search gives a list of items as a result. If the search was well defined, the list only contains the item needed (see Figure 3). The TC clicks on the title of the item to assign and is redirected to the list of all EUN's translators, ordered by languages and in alphabetical order as shown on Figure 4. The TC ticks the boxes of the relevant translators and submits the query. In order to send the items into the Translators' Inboxes², the TC uses the 'Final assignment' tool in the middle of the Webmaster's Interface page (see Figure 1) and approves the relevant items.

² See Section 2.2 for more information on the Translator's Inbox.



Figure 3: List of results and abbreviations of languages already available in the database.

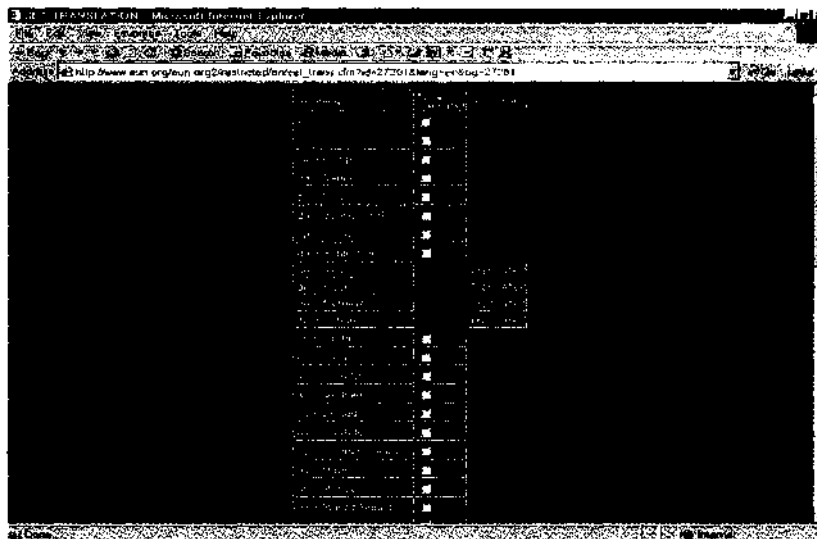


Figure 4: List of all EUN's translators, ordered by languages and alphabetically

Once approved, items to translate are immediately available in the Translators Inboxes. Each Inbox is connected to the translator's e-mail address. Translators thus immediately receive an automatic email from webmaster@eun.org notifying them that a new item has been assigned and is waiting for translation.

Subareas, commented links and documents are assigned immediately through the Webmaster's Interface, so translators can work immediately in the database. Areas can't be assigned and thus need to be sent out in a Word document. A technical person is in charge of creating the areas in the system.

2.2. Translation Interface

Translators log in into their personal inboxes and see the list of items to be translated (see Figure 5). The different columns available in this list show the title of the item to translate, the website where it is meant to be published, the person who assigned it and the date of assignment.

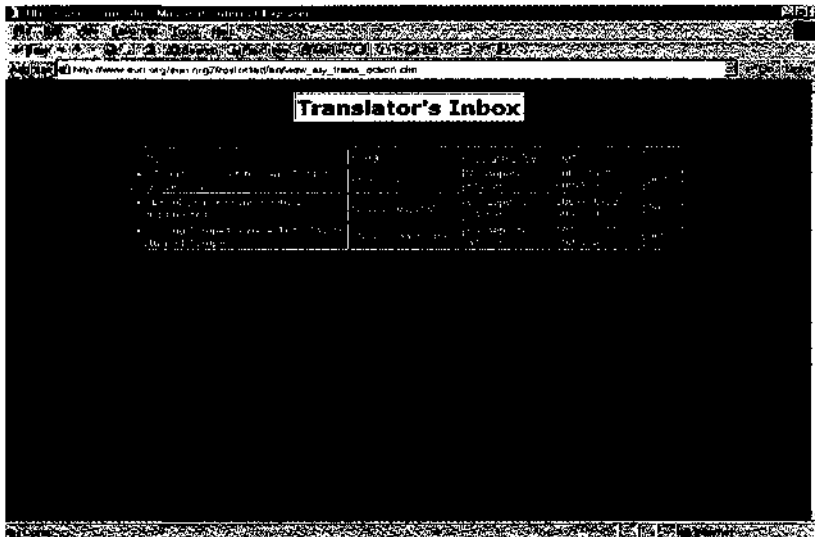


Figure 5: Translator's Inbox

The translation interface has been designed and implemented to match the requests of as many different users as possible. Therefore all the references to HTML code or to other technicalities have been removed or hidden, numbered tags have replaced HTML tags. The interface for translation consists prima-

rily out of two columns, with the original version on the left, and the translation on the right. Only text fields appear as shown on Figure 6.

Once the translation is put in the right-hand column, translators just need to click on 'Insert' at the bottom of the page. If a tag is missing or not closed properly in the translated version, the translator receives a pop-up notification asking to check and spot the problem. This function avoids the publishing of translations that wouldn't display properly on the website due to tags problems.

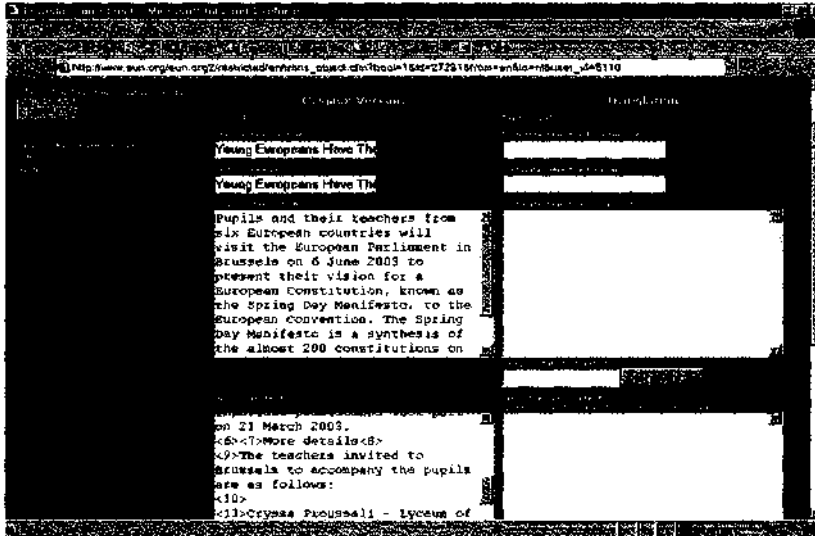


Figure 6: Translation interface and numbered tags

2.3. Edition Interface

In case of update in the original document or if a translation mistake has been spotted, translators have the possibility to go in the database and look for a translated document in order to make the changes necessary. The search tool is the same as the one described in section 2.1 and used by the TC. The Edition interface shown on Figure 7 also allows them to localise the HTML links by working immediately in the HTML code and change it.

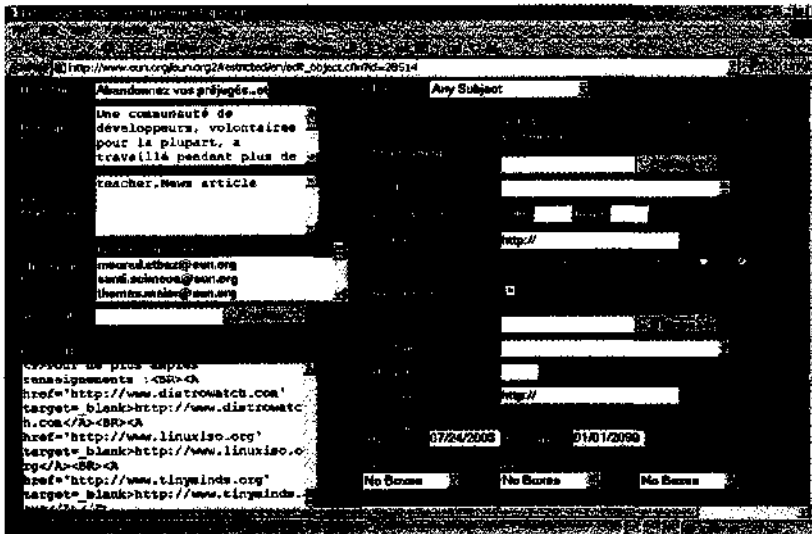


Figure 7: Edition interface

2.4. Static Texts

‘Static texts’ is a phrase commonly used within the EUN organisation. It refers to frequent terms that are translated once and kept in the system so that they can be used consistently in other websites and don’t need to be translated again. A very simple example of static text could be the word ‘back’ which can be often used as a link or a button.

In order to translate static texts, translators visit a specific URL and just select the site for which static texts need to be translated. He/she is then redirected to the list of static texts available for this site. This interface also shows the abbreviation of the languages already available (see Figure 8). If a static text is not translated yet, the translator just selects it, clicks on ‘Translate or Edit’ and is redirected to a page where all versions can be inserted (see Figure 9). Once the translation is inserted, the translator just clicks on ‘Update all’ on top of the page and is redirected to the list of static texts to be translated.

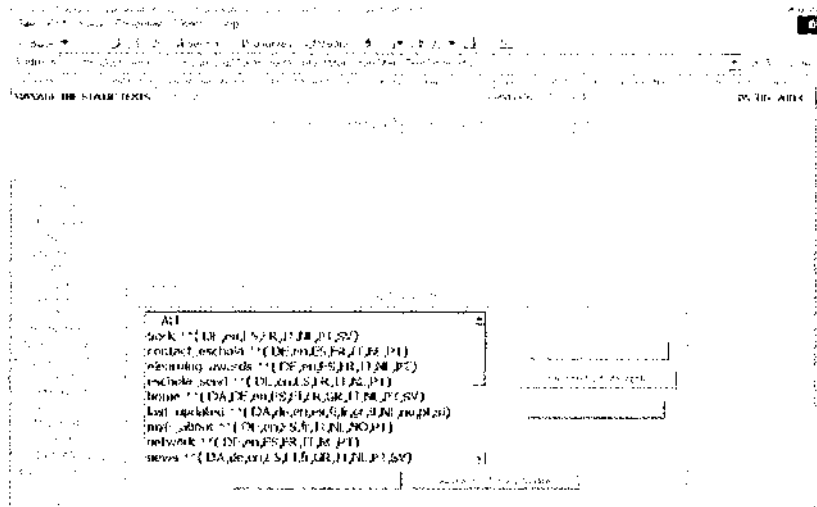


Figure 8: Static Texts interface

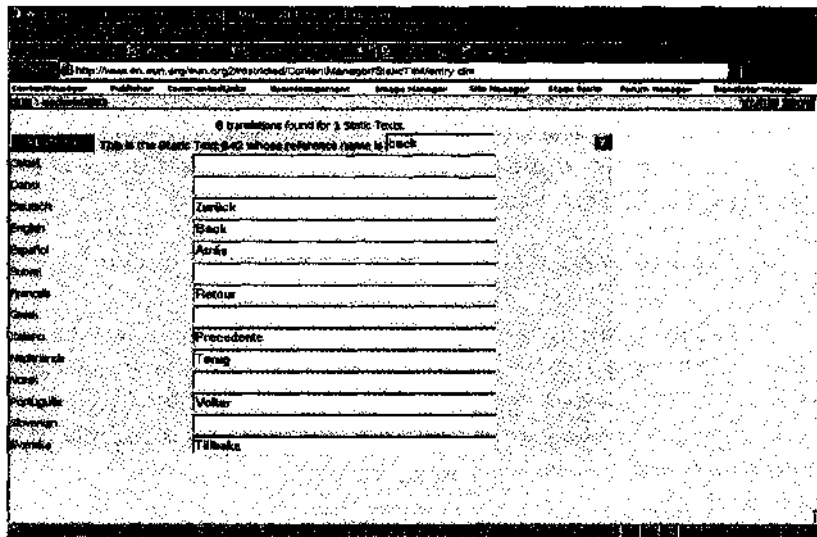


Figure 9: Inserting a static text translation

3. Discussion

As a conclusion, one could state that although EUN's system is not perfect and could be improved, it works and is easy to use. It has been designed to be used by as many users as possible. A knowledge of ICT or HTML is not compulsory since HTML tags are converted into the numbered tags, but experience shows that HTML-literate translators feel much more comfortable when working in the database and need less assistance from the coordinator when localising a link or when a bug appears.

3.1. Advantages of the System

As said above, the system has been designed to meet the requirements of as many users as possible. It is thus very simple to use and to manage, even though the EUN deals with thousands and thousands of items.

It is moreover robust as it is almost impossible for a translator to break HTML code or to insert an item with corrupted tags and thus layout. If there's an error in the HTML code, it most often comes from the source language, not the translations.

Translations can be inserted or updated very quickly on the websites. If errors are spotted, they can be corrected immediately, all the more since it is very easy to find an item in the database by defining the different search criteria and typing the ID of the item.

3.2. Disadvantages of the System

The database sometimes has troubles recognising special characters. Eg.: The non breakable space in French is converted into a simple space, which has consequences on the layout. It also has troubles recognising the Greek characters and will certainly have troubles with the new languages brought in by the EU enlargement (e.g.: Maltese).

The interface used is more a 'text insertion interface' than a real 'translation interface'. Most of the time, the use of small frames makes it impossible for the translators to translate a whole text in the interface. An alternative is thus to copy and paste the content to be translated into a Text Editor (generally MS

Word), translate it there and then to copy and paste the translations into the right column.

3.3. Possible Improvements

Since the non-recognition of special characters is one of the main encountered problems, a possible and major improvement would be to convert the 'translation interface' into a real text editor. This would at least allow translators to insert special characters that would be recognised by the database and have a better overview of the whole document to translate.

Another improvement could be to implement a 'Wysiwyg' tool in the translation interface that would allow the translator to see the result of his work anytime, in context.