

Localizing Software

Americans are past masters at coining short, to-the-point words. But just try translating "marketing" into any other language with just one word.

by Peter E. Tik

The Japanese have a word for it: "suri-awase." It means "rubbing the bottoms of two teacups together." An everyday good housekeeping practice. For as every dutiful Japanese housewife knows, putting an unrubbed porcelain teacup onto a bare tabletop can cause one highly dishonorable scratch – since the rim at the bottom is unglazed. Any obedient Japanese schoolgirl can tell you the golden rule: lest you ruin the furniture, rub those roughly textured bottoms together till they're nice and smooth.

How do we translate a word like "suri-awase?" Does any foreign language have its equivalent? Or is it one of those words that can only be paraphrased in translation, as above? This is certainly the case in English and presents an example of a well-known translation stumbling block – one which often results in unwieldy prose and is common not just in translations across widely divergent cultures. Perhaps surprisingly, it's also a typical problem in the translation of software packages.

Ashton-Tate, as one of the world's biggest suppliers of standard PC software, has extensive first-hand experience of the pitfalls of software translation. Since starting out in Silicon Valley six years ago, the company has translated much of its software into many languages. It began doing so three years ago, and its eventual aim is to release local versions of practically all its packages. A mammoth task!

LIMITED NUMBER OF CHARACTERS

In software translation, not only is it often hard to find adequate synonyms for certain words, but many words have to be restricted to a certain length. Americans are past masters at coining short, to-the-point words. But just try translating "marketing" into any other language with just one word. "WYSIWYG" (What You See Is What You Get) is another striking example of American lexical inventiveness.

As an example of the necessity of limiting word length, take Framework, an integrated

software package working with a menu structure. The screen's top line is called a menu bar and may not exceed 80 characters in length. In the original version, one of the words on this bar is "APPS," commonly understood by Americans to stand for "Applications." But how many Italians, Francophones or Japanese know that? An erudite few, perhaps. Therefore, local equivalents must be found.

Translations from English always take up between 10% and 15% more space than the original, which means that in the best of all



possible worlds, translators ought to have 90 menu bar characters at their disposal. Alas, life is cruel and the space isn't there, so four-letter abbreviations have to be coined. In Dutch, for example, APPS becomes GEBR.

Another potential headache for the same translator is that each word on the menu bar has to begin with a different letter, since menus are retrieved by keying in that particular letter at the same time as the control key. Limited space with a limited choice of words. The fact that translations from English are always a lot longer than the original often leads to another complication – and one likely to raise costs.

Imagine the original disk is crammed to the bursting point with 360 Kb of data. What do you do when the translated version won't fit into 360 Kb? You either have to shorten the program or continue on a second disk. In some cases – spelling checkers, for example – the latter solution is impracticable.

Computer science is a global activity, with the consequent advantage that many originally American terms have become international common coin. This is especially true in the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries. However, even here, quaint remnants of mankind's diversity stubbornly persist. The Germans call a diskdrive a "Data-laufwerk," and for the pluckily independent Flemish a floppy disk is a "zwabberende schijf."

However, the road to internationalization is mainly a one-way street, and American packages will usually not tolerate letters and symbols unknown back in what the defenders of their liberties awesomely call "The World." Characters such as "f" (guilder) and "£" (pound), the German "ß" (sz) and the well-known Scandinavian letters (which the present writer's state-of-the-art word processing package will not reproduce) all present problems. Even the fact that English-speakers use a comma for thousands and a period for decimals (in the rest of the world vice versa) and ignore the 24 hour clock, clinging to a.m. and p.m., trivial as they may seem, often lead to confusion and contribute to the inescapable reality that translating software packages never takes less than six weeks.

From its humble origins in the serenity of the living room, the word "suri-awase" has grown metaphorically in Japanese to mean the "coordination of varying standpoints within a group by means of mutual compliance, in order to present them all as the opinion of the group as a whole." Perhaps we could use some "suri-awase" when translating software packages. ●

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