

The internationalization of institutional websites: The case of universities in the European Union

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This study focuses on the translation of the corporate websites of universities in the European Union. The main goal is to gain a comprehensive picture of institutional websites in higher education and try to shed some light on certain questions that have not been addressed so far in Translation Studies: Do all university websites have to be translated into English? Into which languages are online contents mostly translated? Are European language policies on multilingualism being effectively applied in the case of the Web? Are institutional websites localized for a particular market or rather globalized for the international audience? And finally, are university websites being adapted by professional translators? This paper reports on 800 corporate websites from universities of the 27 state members of the European Union.¹

Keywords: localization, internationalization, web translation, institutional websites, multilingualism

Introduction

Website localization is a thrilling research line where the nuts and bolts of the localization process are combined with the relevance and the global scope of the most powerful communication and promotional tool of the modern age: the Internet. The Web has effectively changed the way people

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communicate by providing millions of users with immediate and (usually) free access to information from any part of the world (Cronin 2003: 43, Schäffner 2000: 1). At the same time, in the framework of the global era, translation has become a key element, for cultural, social, economic and political reasons.

Internationalization and localization have been already analyzed in several papers and research projects, and the number of international conferences devoted to the topic has mushroomed in the last years. The very controversial question of the status of localization within Translation Studies has been widely discussed in the literature (Esselink 2000: 2, Fernández Costales 2008, Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006, Pym 2006) but that question lies beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on the particular case of institutional websites.

The overwhelming power of the Internet and the spread of globalization mean that corporate websites can have a tremendous impact on the international level. Even though there are quite a few studies on website localization (Corte 2000, Jiménez Crespo 2008, Nauert 2007, Pym 2011) and some authors have analyzed the internationalization of websites of multinational companies (Singh and Pereira 2005, Yunker 2002), the case of institutional websites has not attracted the attention of scholars to the same extent.

In the context of a multilingual and multicultural Europe, and taking into account the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), it is interesting to explore the case of university websites and assess if the guidelines and best practices promoted by the European Commission in the field of multilingualism are being applied successfully. The translation of university websites can be considered to be economically efficient if we assess the possible revenues and benefits in terms of international promotion and visibility, capacity to attract foreign students, talent acquisition (including young researchers, senior lecturers, etc.), or the possible impact on the international rankings of universities. In short, beyond social, cultural and political reasons, the return on investment could justify and support the translation of an institutional website into a particular language.

There are several areas that could be addressed in the field of university website translation. However, this paper concentrates on three main issues: the translation strategies (and policies) manifested in university websites, the existence of multilingual websites in higher education, and the obscure question of “who does what” in the adaptation of this kind of website. Accordingly, the three hypotheses to be tested are the following:

1. In the case of institutional webs, it cannot be concluded that the sites are being *localized*, as they are mainly adapted from the local language into English; moreover, it can be argued that there is a clear tendency to standardization, as websites tend to be more and more similar.

2. The number of multilingual websites (with contents provided in at least three different languages) is still very low and universities are not following the line established by the European Commission with goals such as the Barcelona Objective (which envisages that all European citizens should speak two languages besides their mother tongue²).
3. Online contents in university websites are mostly adapted by non-professional translators (mainly university staff).

In order to conduct this research, a database was extracted from 800 university websites that were analyzed over a two-year period (2008-2010).

Case study: European university websites

The corpus for this research is composed of the corporate university websites from the European Union that meet three different criteria: only *corporate* websites have been studied (websites representing a whole institution and not those ones belonging to faculties, schools or associated centers); only universities providing undergraduate and graduate education have been considered (those institutions that do not offer PhD programs, or graduate centers that do not offer undergraduate education were excluded); finally, only institutions of the 27 state members of the EU were eligible for the analysis.

After gathering a corpus of 800 websites complying with these requirements, a subsequent selection process was carried out in order to choose a final set of 215 sites to be analyzed in depth. The criteria applied in this second stage were the following: the foundation year of the institution, the total number of students, the percentage of international students, and the private or public status of institution (see Figure 1). A cross-analysis was carried out to find out the position of all these universities in three international rankings: the Top 500 Shanghai of the Jiaotong University, the World University Ranking published by *The Times*, and Webometrics, developed by the Cybermetrics Laboratory of the *Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas* (CSIC). Institutions reporting exceptional values (very high or very low) in these criteria were given preference: for instance,

² Information on the Barcelona Objective and the language policy of the European Commission can be accessed at the official website of the European Commission for Multilingualism: http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/eu-language-policy/index_en.htm. Visited August 2011.

universities with a long tradition (e.g. the University of Bologna) and also institutions that have been recently created (e.g. the University of Strasbourg), institutions receiving a very large or a very small percentage of foreign students, etc. The aim was to observe any possible tendency among certain types of institutions.

Figure 1: Screenshot of the database showing the record corresponding to the institutional information of the University of Heidelberg

Uniweb 1.0
Base de datos páginas web de universidades europeas

Find Save as PDF Save as Excel

Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg
Universidad de Heidelberg

Institución: Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg
País: Alemania
Fecha consulta: 03/03/2009
Fundación: 1386
Número estudiantes: 26.227
Estudiantes extranjeros: 4.940
% Extranjeros: 18.84%
Ranking: 63 (Shanghai), 57 (Times), 135 (Webometrics)
Puerta enlace idiomas: Sí / No
Colores: Blanco, Rojo
Lema: Semper apertus
Tipo institución: Pública Privada Estatal
Web: http://www.uni-heidelberg.de/
Idiomas: Inglés, Alemán (2)

Alemania

RUPRECHT-KARLS-UNIVERSITÄT HEIDELBERG
EXZELLENZUNIVERSITÄT

Startseite
Universität
Fakultäten
Einrichtungen
Studium
Exzellenzinitiative
Forschung & Kooperation
Internationales
Alumni
Stiften & Fördern
Presse
Rankings
Daten & Fakten
Stellen & Karriere

AKTUELLES

Dem lebendigen Geist
Gesucht werden Beschreibungen des „lebendigen Geistes“ – Was verstehen Sie unter dem lebendigen Geist? Senden Sie uns Ihren Beitrag! [Mehr...]

Kurzfilm aus Heidelberg: Netzwerke in der Exzellenzinitiative
Seit Mitte Januar ist ein Kurzfilm zur Exzellenzinitiative an der Heidelberger Ruprecht-Karls-Universität auf den Seiten der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft abrufbar – Am Beispiel des Exzellenzcluster „Cellular Networks“ wird die interdisziplinäre Zusammenarbeit in dem Cluster beispielhaft für die verschiedenen Projekte der Exzellenzinitiative in Heidelberg vorgestellt. [Mehr...]

„Ruperto Carola 300“: Die Herren der Ringe
Was geschähe Tangenten über das Herrschaftssystem des minoischen Kreta verorten, beschreiben Diamantis Panagiotopoulos und Yuval Goren in der „Trilogie“ des aktuellen Forschungsmagazins „Ruperto Carola 300“ der Universität Heidelberg – Breites Themenspektrum aus Angewandter Optik, Transplantationsmedizin, Psychologie, Physik und Bibliothekswissenschaft. [Mehr...]

Nobelpreisträger Prof. Harald zur Hausen im Campus-TV-Interview
Honorarprofessor der Universität Heidelberg erläutert die Bedeutung seiner Forschung und spricht über seine Gefühle bei der Preisverleihung. [Mehr...]

INHALTE
A B C D E F G
H I J K L M N
O P Q R S T U

In Heidelberg studieren und forschen

Suche Personen
Nobelpreisträger
Institute Fächer
Verwaltungsportal

INHALTE
A B C D E F G
H I J K L M N
O P Q R S T U

Observaciones

Besides institutional details, the database also included relevant information on the translation of the websites such as the source and the target languages, the translation strategies observed, usability and accessibility issues, meta-tags (i.e. keywords and description), and the level of adaptation (see Figure 2).

The primary objective of this database was to collect an extensive corpus that provided a truly representative spectrum of the European institutions of higher education and allowed quantitative and qualitative analyses. This database was also supported by a questionnaire sent to all universities studied enquiring about the translation process of each website (authorship, language selection, use of CAT tools, future plans, etc.).

The corpus was analyzed by country in order to find out possible differences or similarities among the 27 state members of the European Union. In addition, a final cross study was carried out focusing on the

selection criteria used in the database and comparing countries according to their number of official and co-official languages.

Figure 2: Screenshot of the database showing observations and commentaries on the translation of the website of the Catholic University of Louvain

Uniweb 1.0
Base de datos de páginas web de universidades europeas

Alberto Fernández Costales
Universidad de Oviedo

Buscar Guardar como Excel

Université Catholique de Louvain
Universidad Católica de Lovaina (UCL)

Volver

Bélgica

Título	UCL - Université catholique de Louvain / UCL - Université catholique de Louvain / 欢迎光临法语鲁汶大学
Keywords	UCL, Université, University, études, studies, Belgium, Belgique, formation, enseignement, recherche, research, service, formation continue, rhetos,
Descripción	Site officiel de l'Université catholique de Louvain à Louvain-La-Neuve, Belgique. Enseignement, Formations, Recherche, International.
Imágenes	Las imágenes tienen un texto alternativo pero no está traducido en la versión inglesa. En la versión china las imágenes no disponen de un texto alternativo.
Observaciones	<p>-Se ha utilizado una estrategia de traducción literal al inglés</p> <p>-Se opta por una estrategia de no traducción del nombre de la institución.</p> <p>-Se incluyen algunos términos en inglés en los metadatos ("Belgium", "University"...).</p> <p>-La página sólo dispone de algunos niveles traducidos y en muchos documentos conviven el inglés y el francés.</p> <p>-Es posible encontrar algunas expresiones confusas como "PhD and Doctoral Studies".</p> <p>-Los contenidos dinámicos como la agenda, las noticias y los eventos no están traducidos al inglés ni al chino.</p>

Selección de idioma Bandera Texto Ambos NA

Icono URL Sí No

Logo acceso inicio Sí No

Categoría No adaptada Semi-adaptada Adaptada

Main results

The corpus analysis rendered rather interesting results in various areas and directions. For the purpose of this paper we will briefly comment on the three initial hypothesis mentioned in the introduction.

There is a clear tendency toward the standardization of university websites in the EU. This homogenization can be observed not only in the kind of textual contents and the information provided to the users but also in the type of language used and in semiotic and non-verbal elements such as colors, images, website organization and distribution, etc. Regarding translation strategies, literal translation seems to be the standard approach used in the adaptation of university websites. However, since in most cases the sites have been adapted by amateur translators, it cannot be concluded that this is a fully conscious and deliberate translation *strategy*.

On the other hand, it cannot be stated that university websites are *localized*, since there are almost no examples of sites specifically adapted to a particular locale or market. It is possible to find some Spanish universities translated into Chinese or some British institutions addressing specific groups of international students, but this is not a general rule and the adaptation level does not allow us to consider these as examples of localization. On the contrary, the common trend is toward an internationalized version of the website in which contents and information are provided to a global audience. In this regard, the role of English as the international lingua franca can be easily confirmed in the case of European university websites.

This brings us to the second issue to be considered: the question of multilingualism in institutional websites. The degree of multilingualism in university websites is still very low, as very few websites contain information in more than two languages. Luxembourg is at the top of the list, since the only university in its territory provides information in English, French and German. With the exception of Romania, where 32% of the analyzed universities have multilingual websites, the remaining 25 state members show percentages below 25% regarding the number of websites with information in several languages. Whether or not we agree on the importance of providing information in different languages in institutional websites, it can be concluded that institutions of higher education are not acting accordingly with the policies promoted by the European Commission, which states that European citizens must be guaranteed their right to read digital information in their own language (European Communities 2008). Taking into account that only 56% of Europeans are able to communicate in a foreign language (European Commission 2006), it seems that multilingualism should at least be on the radar of educational institutions.

Obviously, it is not possible for universities to reproduce the complex pattern of a website like that of the European Union, and probably that is not needed. However, the commitment of institutions of higher education to provide information in at least two languages on their sites should be reinforced, since it is also their duty to represent the variety and diversity of Europe. In other words, for the construction of a multilingual and multicultural society, English may not be enough. It is also noteworthy to mention the apparent contradiction between the current role of English as the global language and the growing amount of content being translated or written in other languages, especially on the Web (Pym 2001).

As for possible differences between multilingual and monolingual territories, it cannot be stated that there is a direct link between the number of official languages and the translation of the sites. On the contrary, university websites seem to be a reliable representation of the political and linguistic situation in certain countries: while almost all the Spanish universities based in regions with co-official languages (Catalonia, Galicia

and the Basque Country) have versions in Spanish, English and the corresponding language (Catalan, Galician and Basque), providing an example of the linguistic pluralism of this country, other European states like Belgium show a clear segregation strategy when avoiding two of the three official languages in university websites: all the institutions in Flanders avoid using French, and the universities in the francophone area forget about including contents in Dutch (translations into German cannot be found in any website).

The analysis of our corpus produced interesting results to support the idea that English is also the global language in higher education. Table 1 shows the target languages into which the 215 websites have been translated. All the websites included in the corpus were (partly or totally) translated into English.³ This supports the idea that English is still regarded as the *lingua franca* for institutions of higher education.

Table 1: Target languages in the translation of EU university websites

Target language	Number of websites
English	197
German	16
Spanish	16
Chinese	14
Russian	12
French	11
Italian	7
Bulgarian	2
Czech	2
Hungarian	2
Japanese	2
Portuguese	2
Slovak	2
Slovene	2
Swedish	2

As can be observed in Table 1, the preferred target languages for the translation of university websites are German (with 16 websites), Spanish (16 websites), Chinese (14) and Russian (12). Note how Chinese now ranks higher than important European languages like French and Italian. This may be explained by the increasing interest of European universities, especially in the United Kingdom, to attract graduate students from Asia.

³ In order to elaborate this graph, only target languages are being taken into account (languages in which the websites have been *translated*): for example, websites originally developed in English (10 from the United Kingdom, 7 from Ireland and 1 from Malta) were not included in the statistics for English. The result is that out of the 215 websites being studied 197 were translated into English.

One of the most striking issues is the fact that, in 70% of the cases no translators were hired to adapt the websites from the source into the target language. Only 20% of the universities reported having outsourced some part of the translation to an external agency or freelance translator, while 10% worked with their own translation service or unit. As for the rest of universities, the online contents were translated by lecturers, researchers, staff or students. Also, in a good number of cases it is not possible to trace back the authorship of the translation due to the tremendous complexity of many universities and the changes in their governing bodies. The evidence that most websites are usually translated by university staff (with “a firm command of English”) poses some questions that are in tune with the emerging phenomenon of crowdsourcing: is this practice harmful for the translation profession? What about quality issues (the output in the English version of many websites seems to be rather poor)? Are universities fully aware of the relevance and the impact translation may have in their websites? Why are professional translators being ignored by institutions of higher education?

Conclusions

This paper presents some of the results of a research project conducted in the field of web translation. Although the study focuses on the particular case of university websites, some of the ideas and hypotheses can be applied to institutional sites in general, since they share many common features.

The study leads to the conclusion that university websites go through a process of globalization or standardization, instead of localization for particular locales. Within this homogenization, the use of English as the main vehicle of communication not only helps define a common framework but also highlights its monopoly as the international lingua franca. According to the results presented, the translation of university websites into English seems to be the main priority for universities and the adaptation into other languages is not being considered in many cases. In this sense, the low number of multilingual websites does not match with the efforts being made at the European level to promote the command of several languages by the citizens living in the EU.

Finally, the translation process followed in most cases by European institutions of higher education suggests that the relevance of professional translators as cultural mediators and communication and linguistic experts is being ignored or underestimated. In the particular case of Spain, the 2009 call of the Campus of International Excellence launched by the Ministry of Science and Education encouraged many universities to contract professional translators to work on the internationalization of their corporate websites. However, in general terms, these are still exceptional situations.

The translation of institutional websites is an interesting research line where the tension between the global and the local can be clearly observed. Surprisingly, in spite of the number of papers written on localization and internationalization in the last years, the field of institutional websites has not been addressed by researchers working in Translation Studies. In view of the results of this research, this is an area where there is still a long way to go.

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