

# LOCALIZATION FOR CULTURE SUSTAINABILITY: A LINGUISTIC OR CULTURAL MEDIATION?

## *Localización para la sostenibilidad de la cultura: ¿una mediación lingüística o cultural?*

Madiha KASSAWAT

Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3 (ESIT)

[madiha.kassawat@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr](mailto:madiha.kassawat@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr)

**ABSTRACT:** With the increasing importance of localization for products marketing in the globalized world, there is more need to identify whether localization contributes to cultural sustainability or not. Translators' strategies should, therefore, be analyzed to capture the limits or liberty in producing a local sounding text. Spotting the lack of use or use of cultural references in translating English marketing texts into Arabic should help in revealing the translators' approaches. It will also show if they handle such elements based on their understanding of the core of the target culture or that they stay on the surface of culture, changing technical and linguistic elements only. This qualitative comparison can further clarify the cultural gap which persists in the localized version and the need for a deeper approach and conceptualization of the purpose of localization.

*Keywords:* translation; localization; language and culture; cultural mediation; linguistic mediation

### 1. INTRODUCTION

While translation is becoming increasingly unavoidable in our lives, localization plays a pivotal role in products marketing to reach a wider consumer base in our globalized world, as represented in GILT (Globalization, Internationalization, Localization, Translation). In a survey where online buyers in 8 countries were asked about their purchasing preferences, it was found that 52.4% of the sample buys only at websites where the information is presented in their own language (DePalma 2006). This tendency highlights the importance of analyzing localization strategies in terms of marketing and translation. Although LISA defines localization as taking a product and making it linguistically and culturally appropriate to the target locale (country/region and language) where it will be used and sold (Esselink 2000, 3), determining the cultural appropriateness and how it should be reflected in a linguistic form are still unspecific. Moreover, specifying this appropriateness based on the source text and target culture can imply obstacles if the two cultures and languages do not have much in common like the English culture (usually present in international corporates) and the Arabic language and the Arab culture(s) with its diversity, as measured by Hofstede's dimensions («Compare countries», n.d.).

#### 1.1 Determining *cultural appropriateness*

Localization, in terms of the translation part and marketing objective, implies two aspects: linguistic and cultural. Both aspects are interdependent. On the one hand, the notion of culture itself implies language. In Hofstede's representation of culture in the Onion Model, there are two main layers: Practices (Symbols, Heroes and Rituals) and Values. Language (words) is represented in the outer, most superficial layer *Symbols* as these are easily developed and regularly copied by others. Such 'practices' are visible to an outside observer, but their cultural meaning is not; it is interpreted by the insiders (Hofstede,

Hofstede and Minkov 2010). Therefore, the translator or any agent who works on the localization of the text needs to have an insider's knowledge about the target culture to render the intended message successfully because "[h]aving to express oneself in another language means learning to adopt someone else's frame of reference" (ibid., 389). Otherwise, the translation is merely a copy of the source text, including its culture, without bringing any significant interpretation to the target culture. On the other hand, words are «the vehicles of culture transfer» (id.). This assumption leads to the following question: to what extent can a translator transfer a culture in a linguistic form successfully in a way that can be correctly interpreted by the insiders? Answering this question seems to be more complicated in translating cultural references or even in recreating a text to adapt it to a target culture. Although the translator can adopt several strategies in the translation process, whether he/she "decides to explain a reference or not depends on whether the target reader is assumed to be familiar with it and the extent to which the translator feels inclined to intervene" (Baker 2011, 244). Having said that, the translator's role is twofold: assessing the reader's background and knowledge, and choosing the appropriate strategy for each situation. The translator can decide to fill the gaps in the reader's knowledge through adapting, explaining or rephrasing, while keeping in mind the need to meet their expectations and those of the client as well (ibid., 250). More generally speaking, the translator can use the *Neutralizing* voice that is the most spontaneous; the *Ventriloquizing* voice, where the translator adopts the writer or the audience's voice; or the *Distancing* voice which disregards the audience or the translator's knowledge (Mossop 2007). In this regard, to realize the marketing goal of localization, the process should allow more liberty to the translator to provide a native version that would make the reader (customer) feel *home* while navigating the website or using the product. Based on what has been highlighted so far, localization can be considered a way to protect linguistic and cultural peculiarity. However, it can also change linguistic and technical aspects on the surface of culture while keeping the original culture of the content (Cronin 2006). Thus, it is important to observe how translators deal with texts which need domestication and their tendencies in tackling culture transfer. This article attempts to shed light on how cultural mediation is handled in localization and to what extent it succeeds in sustaining the cultural identity of the target audience in the marketing context. For this end, I will compare the translation and use/lack of use of culture-specific references and expressions with the source text. The analysis should help in capturing the limits and/or the liberty in transforming such elements or recreating others that suit the target culture.

## 1.2 Case study

In order to analyze the cultural adaptation level, Apple corporate website was taken as a case study as the largest tech company in the world according to Forbes (Stoller, n.d.). The reason why a tech company was chosen is the increasing consumption of such products by people of different ages and education levels around the world, which makes such content more visible to the public. In Apple's website, only blurbs were focused on for this study. These include a title and a short descriptive promotional paragraph about the product/feature. While English is the main language of the website, Arabic was examined as a target locale for this study. Arabic is increasingly becoming a common language in localization as it comes 4<sup>th</sup> after English, Chinese and Spanish in the most common languages used on the internet as of December 2017, by share of internet users («Internet», n.d.). The sample consists of more than 200 blurbs which were chosen based on the translation approach used, i.e. literal or free, and the issues resulting from adopting such approaches. The analysis of the sample focused on style-, meaning- and naturalness-related issues in the translation. The Saudi Arabia page was taken as an example of the Arabic version, knowing that certain Arab countries do not have a localized version and/or their pages were left in English. Images were not taken into consideration in the analysis as they are the same for both versions, i.e. the text was not influenced by the image and was not required to reflect the

image content. Having said that, the comparison and the analysis were more concentrated on the textual content that the translator deals with. In addition, back translation into English will be provided to underline the nuances between the original and the target texts. Having said that, it might not make perfect structures or sense in English in order to better highlight these nuances, although it will be structurally adapted to be linguistically correct. It is timely to note that multiple translators/localization agents are assumed to be working on the website and that the discussion will look into translation tendencies in general, particularly when they are repeated frequently in various pages of the website.

## 2. OBSERVED ISSUES IN LOCALIZED BLURBS

The obtained results represent examples of cultural adaptation and/or additions in very few cases and issues caused by either literal or free translation that can affect the required message. In general, it was noticed that there is a tendency to translate as closely as possible to the English text by following its wording, phrasing and even punctuation, without having the liberty to adapt, add or omit cultural references. Linguistic adaptation was of course applied to ensure structural compatibility in the target language mostly through Vinay and Darbelnet's strategies *Transposition* and *Modulation* (Munday 2009). Moreover, the changes observed in the translation were applied mainly on the titles, which will be represented and discussed further below. It is noteworthy that almost every title and/or blurb contains an English name or term which was either left in English or transliterated even if it has an Arabic widely used equivalence.

### 2.1 Cultural mediation

To start with, very few cases have been found to follow a cultural adaptation approach. In the following examples, the translator used local cultural references or rephrased the text in an appealing manner to the reader.

NO°	SOURCE	TRANSLATION	BACK TRANSLATION
1	FaceTime HD camera with Retina Flash. Your selfie just got more beautiful.	كاميرا FaceTime HD مع Retina .Flash الآن كل سيلفي أجمل من الأخرى.	FaceTime HD camera with Retina Flash. Now each selfie is more beautiful than the other.
2	App Store There's an app for that.	App Store لكل مقام .app	App Store For each situation there is an app.

Table 1. Cultural mediation

In the first example, the translator rendered the meaning, while rephrasing the title in an informal way that is closer to what any Arab speaker might use in daily life through transliterating “selfie”. Thus the translator found a cultural equivalence to make the title suit the context and its function. In the second example, the back translation provided above is literal of the Arabic proverb and means ‘circumstances alter cases’. We can note that the word “app”, among others, was used in English to play on words, knowing that a lay person who does not have any/have very limited English background might not get the point. Nonetheless, if the cultural adaptation approach is used, it is not always applied successfully. To explore the translators' tendencies further, other elements have been analyzed and highlighted.

## 2.2 Linguistic mediation and meaning

The first element which was focused on in collecting and analyzing the sample is the message of the blurb and how it was represented in the title:

NO°	SOURCE	TRANSLATION	BACK TRANSLATION
1	TrueDepth Camera Front facing. Forward thinking.	كاميرا TrueDepth كاميرا أمامية. تفكير إلى الأمام.	TrueDepth Camera Front camera. Thinking to- wards the front.
2	A beloved design. Now with more to love.	أسباب جديدة لتحبه من جديد.	New reasons to love it anew.
3	Live Photos. Capture more than a moment.	Live Photos. تعيش اللحظة.	Live Photos. You live the moment.

Table 2. Linguistic mediation and meaning

While sticking to the source is often adopted by translators, taking the liberty to change can also lead to a different meaning. In example no.1, literal translation has led to an illogical sentence in Arabic. Although «Forward thinking» has an equivalence in Arabic «تفكير متقدم», it can be unsuitable for this context. However, the sentence needs to be rewritten in order to render the intended message. In example no.2, the translator of the title took the liberty to omit the first part and to change the wording of the second part. However, instead of “loving the product more than before”, the product “should be loved anew”. In both examples, the translator played on words to add an Arabic touch. For stylistic enhancement, the word “front” and the word “new”, in the first and second examples respectively, were repeated. One can assume that the style and music of the sentence are important in the marketing context to draw the reader’s attention, and that the meaning and logic of the sentence can be sacrificed if the translation provides an attractive output. In such cases, the translator is the decision maker regarding the appropriateness and clearness of the message. In example no.3, there is an omission of an important element of the title without providing a stylistic value or even rendering the intended message.

## 2.3 Linguistic mediation and naturalness

Having looked at few meaning-related issues, the analysis has dealt with the naturalness and foreignness of the translated text, and its suitability for the Arab reader. Such issues result generally from the translator’s limitation to the wording of the source text.

NO°	SOURCE	TRANSLATION	BACK TRANSLATION
1	All-New Design The most durable glass ever in a smartphone, front and back. Surgical grade stainless steel. Wireless charging. Water and dust resistance.	تصميم جديد بالكامل زجاج هو الأكثر متانة في أي هاتف ذكي على الإطلاق من الجانبين الأمامي والخلفي. ستانلس ستيل بالجودة نفسها المستخدمة في الأدوات الجراحية. شحن لاسلكي. مقاومة للماء والغبار.	All-New Design The glass is the most durable in any smartphone ever in the front and back sides. Stainless steel of the same quality used in surgical tools. Wireless charging. Resistance of water and dust.
2	Stacks	Stacks	Stacks

	A really neat way to manage files.	رتب ملفاتك بطريقة مرتبة.	Organize your files in an organized way.
3	iPhone + iPad Start something here. Finish it there.	iPhone + iPad ابدأ هنا. أكمله هناك.	iPhone + iPad Start here. Finish it there.

Table 3. Linguistic mediation and naturalness/foreignness

In the first example, the words of “Surgical grade stainless steel” only explained the intended meaning in the English text but they did not add value or interpretation to the Arabic version. Instead, the meaning sounds vague at least for the average Arab reader, in what is the usefulness of such material in a smartphone. In the second example, the meaning was conveyed; a weak structure for a title was used though. Using two words of the same root reflects either a lack of vocabulary from the side of the translator or an inclination to shadow the source text. In the last example, we notice that even literal translation contains grammar errors as there is no noun in the first part which the pronoun of the second part refers to. Moreover, the translator seems to look at the surface of the text, finding linguistic equivalences, without attempting to render the main message. In the eyes of the reader, the title can be more confusing than drawing the attention. The blurb is about using two devices as one but it is not clear what to *start* or *finish*, where is the *here* or the *there*. The use of “something” and “it” in English was not replaced by another element or explained in Arabic, which left a gap in the comprehension of the title. In addition to meaning and naturalness issues, style treatment seems to be influenced by the English style as well. This can be noticed clearly in punctuation and structuring the sentences in a way that is not very common in Arabic. Using too many full stops, for instance, is not popular in Arabic writing. In example no.1 in Table 2, punctuation was mirrored from the source as well as the writing style. Punctuation was even copied from the source regardless of its usage in English, for a verbal sentence, although the Arabic translation uses a nominal sentence that does not need a full stop, as in the two examples of Table 1.

### 3. DISCUSSION

In general, international companies tend to internationalize the content of their ads and websites and exclude any cultural references as much as possible to make the content suitable for all locales. This strategy helps in reducing the need for cultural adaptation in translation. Therefore, linguistic-only translation is expected to be used in such contexts. What is not being considered is the fact that this translation lacks assessment in terms of its usability and impact on the target audience. As it was illustrated earlier, mirroring the words and meaning of the source text does not always express their feel and touch. Furthermore, using cultural references that provide the same message of the source and suit the majority of the targeted audience is rare and seems to be based on intuition and spontaneous thoughts, i.e. the translator uses mostly his/her *Neutralizing* voice that the audience is neither clear nor defined; it can be considered the whole public in our case. In the examples of Table 1, linguistic-only mediation could have been used as in the other cases. The translator’s linguistic biography, though, intervened to use a different structure and/or different words or expression for a certain situation and time. From this perspective, spontaneity can be linked with Baker’s point of view in that explaining a reference depends on the audience’s readiness and the translator’s feeling of the need to intervene. Having said that, this intervention implies clearly a deep knowledge of the target culture; but this knowledge is not, and cannot be, employed in each case. Furthermore, in example no. 1 in Table 3, the translator seems to use the *Distancing* voice to avoid explaining the technical aspect of an idea and its usefulness for the product.

In other cases illustrated above, linguistic-only translation is used, leading to meaning, style and naturalness issues, where the translator's knowledge of the target culture should be utilized more effectively, at least in evaluating the success of rendering the same meaning. In example no.1 in Table 2 and examples no. 1 and 3 in Table 3, the final version shows the translator's self-limiting attitude towards the source wordings. As such, it was the source text words that shaped the translated text, not the translator's knowledge of the target culture. This might seem contradicting to Hofstede's assumption that words are the vehicle to culture transfer. The translator seemed unable to think out of the source language box, and as a result, the translation carried a foreign sense in a local «format». We can consider the localized text in such instances as a sound track that is converted from a format to another to suit a different software without changing the content. The experience, though, is not always guaranteed to be the same.

Hence, we note that the cultural aspect in the localization of marketing blurbs is not being given enough attention although the goal is to sell the product by making it appealing and allowing the brand to talk to its customers according to their mindset. In what follows, I attempt to suggest possible reasons for the above discussed tendencies:

- Assuming that the translators of the analyzed pages are professional, there might be little training on localization and its purpose, and on marketing writing style itself.
- There can be a lack of evaluation of the final translation on the linguistic and cultural levels in order to ensure that the translation functions similarly as the source text.
- Internationalization can be considered a hindering factor of creativity. We noticed that the translators utilize, even spontaneously, their cultural package when they feel a need to do so. Using more cultural references in the source can motivate the translator to intervene and find equivalents or interpretations that sound more natural in the target culture and language. Having said that, internationalizing the text can lead to an opposite outcome in many cases. In other words, a source text with rich cultural references can enhance the translation further.
- The client's instructions play an important role as well in influencing the translators' choices when it comes to transliteration and borrowing.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study attempted to investigate the translators' tendencies in localization and how they handle cultural mediation. It explored how cultural references, if any, are treated; and how much liberty is practiced when translating in the marketing context. While the analysis focused on the use and/or lack of use of cultural elements, the results were classified into three categories based on the changed elements and problematic aspects: cultural mediation; linguistic mediation and meaning; and linguistic mediation and naturalness. The analyzed corpus shows that mediation was limited mostly to the linguistic level and rarely exceeded it efficiently by adding a cultural and local sense to the translated version. Moreover, linguistic mediation has proved to lead to misunderstanding, lack of meaning and sense, or foreignness. As localization is sometimes considered a way to preserving cultural identities, it is marketing-oriented in the first place. For both purposes, there seems to be more need to imply the translator's cultural package in localization and to adopt the frame of reference of the public to ensure both linguistic and cultural mediations are met.

## REFERENCES

- Apple Music*. (n.d.). Date of access: September 2, 2018. <https://www.apple.com/sa-ar/apple-music/>
- Baker, Mona. 2011. *In Other Words*. USA and Canada: Routledge.
- Compare countries*. n.d. Accessed September 9, 2018. <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/>
- Cronin, Michael. 2006. *Translation and identity*. New York: Taylor & Francis Group.
- DePalma, Donald A. , Benjamin B. Sargent, and Renato S. Beninato. 2006. «Can't Read, Won't Buy: Why Language Matters on Global Websites. An International Survey of Global Consumer Buying Preferences». *Common Sense Advisory*.
- Esselink, Bert. 2000. *A practical guide to localization (Vol. 4)*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Hofstede, Geert, Jert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov. 2010. *Cultures and Organizations - Software of the Mind - Intercultural Cooperation and its Importance for Survival*. New York: Mc Graw Hill.
- Internet: most common languages online 2017 | Statistic*. (n.d.). Accessed September 9, 2018. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262946/share-of-the-most-common-languages-on-the-internet/>
- iPad Pro*. (n.d.). Date of access: September 2, 2018. <https://www.apple.com/ipad-pro/>
- iPhone X*. (n.d.). Date of access: August 11, 2018. <https://www.apple.com/iphone-x/>
- macOS*. (n.d.). Date of access: September 1, 2018. <https://www.apple.com/macOS/mojave-preview/>
- Mossop, Brian. 2007. «The translator's intervention through voice selection». In *Translation as Intervention*, by Jeremy Munday. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 18-37.
- Munday, Jeremy. 2009. *Translation Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Stoller, K. «The World's Largest Tech Companies 2018: Apple, Samsung Take Top Spots Again». *Forbes*. (n.d.). Date of access: September 9, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kristinstoller/2018/06/06/worlds-largest-tech-companies-2018-global-2000/>