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## Rethinking the Scope of Localization

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*Over the last three decades the scope of localization has extended from software localization to other digital products and is increasingly related to audiovisual and news translation and the translation of comics translation. The last decade has revealed a tendency to expand the concept of ‘localization’ to non-digital products and a range of business processes in cross-cultural management and marketing. Conceptual potential of the term ‘localization’ seems to exceed all other variants of naming linguistic, cultural, social, economic, political, legal, etc. aspects of product adaptation and is favored in industry, related research, academia and Translation Studies as a generic concept for all types of complex content modifications. This is indicative of the attempts to consolidate a highly diversified field of research referred to as Localization Studies.*

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### Introduction

It has often been claimed that the general idea behind localization is nothing new. Adapting and customizing texts to cultural, social, and intellectual needs and expectations of target audiences has been a common practice throughout the literary history. When taken broadly as ‘adaptation’, localization covers any type of interlingual or intralingual reworking or rewriting of texts, including cultural domestication, adaptation of plays for children or novels for broadcasting, or even more: “We might see the joke we tell as a localization of the joke previously heard, or Joyce’s *Ulysses* as localizing Homer’s *Odyssey*, or indeed most texts can be seen as whole or partial rewrites and thus recall

some sense of localization” (Pym 2004: 4-5). In Translation Studies such tentative observations have not evolved into any kind of systematic framework and are invoked by analogy to localization ‘proper’ that has been traditionally confined to digital products, translation technologies, and project management. As the Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies points out, “it is... important to highlight what makes localization, as we refer to it today, different from previous, similar activities, namely that it deals with digital material. To be adapted or localized, digital material requires tools and technologies, skills, processes and standards that are different from those required for the adaptation of traditional material such as paperbased print or

celluloid” (Schäler, 2009: 157). This restriction is made for a good reason. Localization as we know it emerged in the 1980s in software industry and has gradually embraced other digital products, in particular websites, video games, small devices, etc. On the other hand, over its three decades the concept of localization has expanded to include non-digital and non-verbal issues of product adaptation often addressed through ‘supporting’ terminology, such as transcreation, rewriting, versioning or transrepresentation. However, conceptual potential of the term ‘localization’ seems to exceed all other variants of naming linguistic, cultural, social, economic, political, legal, etc. aspects of product adaptation and is increasingly favored in industry, related research, academia and even Translation Studies as a generic concept for all types of complex content modifications.

#### **‘Translation on the computer, for the computer’**

The concept of localization has not been stable within the evolving localization industry and digital technology landscape. If we take a ‘purist’ approach and focus on the original meaning of the term, the extension of localization to digital products other than software appears problematic.

Localization emerged as part of business and marketing strategy in software industry in response to the need to “translate software” and initially was confined to “translation on the computer for the computer” (van der Meer, 1995). The term ‘localization’ was derived from the term ‘locale’ used in software engineering as a hypernym for culture- and language-sensitive local market requirements, including character sets, scripts and glyphs, encodings, line and word breaking, calendars, date formats, time formats, number formats, units of measurement, etc. (Dunne, 2015: 551). Originally, the term

‘localization’ referred to ‘adaptation’ of this limited set of data in the context of technical challenges, such as developing software that could display target language writing systems, identifying and isolating translatable elements of user interface. Moreover, localization process required working directly with the source code and post-localization efforts: “The adaptation of software products for other locales did not merely entail a few changes to compiled, tested, and debugged versions of programs that had already been released to the domestic market. Instead, localization of a given program required that a separate set of source code be maintained and that a different executable be compiled, tested and debugged for each target locale” (Dunne, 2015: 551). These initial challenges of localization were largely resolved through the pre-translation phase known as ‘internationalization’, the isolation and storing translatable text and culturally sensitive elements in separate files. As a result, internationalized or ‘delocalized’ code could be reused for multiple target locales, while translators (localizers) worked with isolated locale-sensitive set of data. Internationalization “allows programmers and engineers to focus on code and translators to focus on translation. It means the software with all its complex logic does not have to be touched just because you want to add another language; all you have to do is translate some files” (Uren et al., 1993).

At this point of discussion it is possible to make a distinction between localization in its narrowest sense and translation. As most issues of localization are addressed at the pre-localization stage of developing an internationalized product, localization is indeed restricted to the translation of natural language strings, which “begs the question of how – and perhaps even if – localization differs from translation today” (Dunne, 2015: 558). Technically, the translation of document-based content or textual content

stored in other formats “is not ‘localization’ as the process has been traditionally understood, because it does not entail modification of the properties of objects in a software user interface” (Dunne, 2015: 560). The term localization in its narrow meaning is still in use in current software engineering.

### **Game and Website localization**

Following this strict logic, the extension of the concept of localization to other digital products, such as games or websites, is valid only inasmuch as website or game localization retains the internationalization-localization scenario of software engineering and deals with the replacement of strings in the user interface. Game and website localization goes beyond this approach.

In the 80s the distribution of games across locales was confined to ‘box and docs’ approach, i.e. the translation of packaging and documentation. In the 90s this practice extended to “partial localization”, which included the translation of user interface and, occasionally, subtitling of spoken dialogue, and, further, to “full localization” covering voiceover for each language version.

Current practices are sometimes referred to as ‘deep localization’, “indicating enhancements to (socio)cultural expectations of consumers”, including modification or exclusion of “some game elements that are unfavorable to, or could be misinterpreted by, the target culture”, “addition of masculine and feminine genders as well as ethnicity and profession to players’ avatars”, “changing storylines and locations so as not to alienate consumers in particular locales” (Bernal-Merino, 2015: 174). Localized games, for example, may resort to local brands and celebrities. A football game FIFA’12 “features footballers Wayne Rooney and Jack Wilshere on its UK cover and Gerard Piqué

and Xabi Alonso on the Spanish one” (Bernal-Merino, 2015:168). Internationalization of games is similar to that of software internationalization and concerns the basic code and user interface. However, it is not the primary issue of game localization and “is at odds with the creativity (or even idiosyncrasy) which often characterizes the work of game designers, given how certain cultural peculiarities may turn out to be the very attraction of the product even in international markets” (O’Hagan, Mangiron, 2013: 91). Moreover, in a broader marketing context game localization is associated with the translation of linguistic assets beyond the products (games) themselves, such as official websites, “promotional articles and merchandising in general, which can be distributed in analogue, electronic or paper formats, such as television commercials, interactive banners, and game magazines” (Bernal-Merino, 2015: 108). Modification of products and all types of related materials exceeds both the scope of localization as defined in software engineering and translation, and appeals for broader semiotic models of cross-cultural communication.

Formally, website localization follows the internationalization-localization model. Website internationalization “takes place at the level of software engineering and content development” and “involves the creation of a locale-neutral platform that later can be localized and globally integrated” (Singh, 2012: 123). In practice, internationalization, if done at all, is often an afterthought in website localization because websites are often created without the need for future globalization or localization in mind. Website localization exceeds the traditional set of locale-sensitive data, as regards, for example, localization of search terms (‘keywords’) and other elements that ensure the visibility of websites in search engines. This aspect of localization addresses both search behavior of potential users

and particular features of search engines and is marketed by language service providers as ‘SEO localization’. Another aspect of web localization concerns modification of an extended set of culture-sensitive nonverbal elements, such as color schemes, proximity, images, video, and, for some locales, layout.

What makes website localization essentially distinct from software and game localization is that websites are not ‘independent’ products. They are means of disseminating information, “a medium by which new foreign customers, partners or people in general can be reached” (Sandrini, 2005: 133-134) or a ‘virtual representation’ of a brand, a business or a company, including their identity, image, mission, corporate culture, etc. Preparing a website for a new locale involves, among other things, cultural customization, localization of policies, online branding, transaction processing, etc. (Singh, 2012: 175). All these aspects of delivering a website for a new locale are subsumed under a broader concept of localization. Esselink, for example, occasionally uses the term ‘real localization’ to refer to web pages that require “many adaptations to regional standards and conventions, such as marketing text”, and that “may be rewritten by local authors in each of the target languages”. (Esselink, 2000: 39). Taking a product or a service to a new market concerns primarily the issues of (re)branding and marketing and makes website localization, digital aspects aside, “a function of the international marketing strategy” (Sandrini, 2005: 134). This is another point where the convergence of localization and translation ends and localization takes an alternative direction. For example, rewriting marketing materials by local authors “goes way beyond translation because it is an integral part of company’s global branding initiative” (Esselink, 2000: 39).

### ‘Locale’

The issues mentioned above expanded the initial scope of ‘locale’, initially confined to a narrow set of culture- and language-sensitive data related to user interface, to indicate a wider range of economic, political, ethical, etc. aspects of target markets. Locales are currently referred to as “the combination of a sociocultural region and language in industrial settings” (Jiménez-Crespo, 2013: 12), business-sensitive “language and culture variety” (Bernal-Merino, 2015: 283), “a market segment defined by criteria including language, currency, and perhaps educational level or income bracket, depending on the nature of the communication” (Pym, 2009: 3). As opposed to what is often stated in Translation and Cross-Cultural Studies, locales go far beyond the scope of cultural or linguistic features. Locales are primarily shaped by their “purchasing power” (Pym, 2004: 2) which is essential for initiating localization, choosing the ‘strategy’ and depth of localization. For example, for economic reasons, Japanese games are fully localized for the North American market, including voiceover, while European versions are more commonly only subtitled (O’Hagan, Mangiron, 2013: 235). The versions produced for these ‘pivot locales’ may be used for subsequent localization and “mask the Japanese origin whether or not this is the publisher’s intention” (O’Hagan, Mangiron, 2013: 235). The type of localization or the ‘depth’ of cultural customization, at least in this particular case, cannot be effectively explained in terms of functional models of translation or cross-cultural communication. Overall, locales may be defined as product- and project-related variables shaped by a number of parameters that overlap but are not identical in terms of regional, economic, linguistic, political, legal, ethical, etc. features. The term ‘locale’, depending on particular focus of product adaptation, is often used with restrictive adjectives (‘market locale’, ‘legal

local', 'cultural locale', geographical locale" etc.), thus splitting these multilayered entities into a set or a hierarchy of constrains. On the other hand, the concept of 'locale' depends on practices of localization, and, in fact, we "know the extent of locales" through localization that "actively define the locales" (Pym, 2004: 23).

### **Audiovisual, news and comics translation**

It could be argued that a broader concept of localization comes to comprise generic features of other practices related to cross-locale 'adaptation of products', such as audiovisual translation. Indeed, current practices of audiovisual translation represent a number of features typically associated with localization. Audiovisual content is distributed primarily in digital form (except live theatre performances), all types of language transfer in audiovisual translation, including revoicing and subtitling, are computer assisted and are performed through complex projects with labor division typical for localization projects. Creativity and adaptation strategies related to the constrains of subtitling, including "deleting, condensing and adapting" (Perez-Gonzalez, 2009: 16), are not generically different from similar modifications in localization. According to O'Hagan and Mangiron, localization and audiovisual translation are in the process of conversion and "face a constant erosion of their mutual boundaries due to technological advances" (O'Hagan, Mangiron, 2013: 106). In a broader context of distribution and marketing, game and website localization and audiovisual translation overlap when it comes to promotional content (both TV and web-based), packaging for target markets and the need to comply with locale-related constraints, including legal, political, ethical, economic, etc. issues. In fact, audiovisual products are adopted for locales, not for 'language communities'. Generic meaning of

the term 'localization' reveals itself in academic and industry discourse by such coinages, as 'audiovisual localization', 'DVD localization' and 'film localization', e.g. the title of "The 1st International Conference on the Localization of Film, Television and Video Games" (Fisher, 2012).

Recent research has stretched the scope of localization to news and comics translation, which implies a further departure from the traditional linkage between localization and technology-based 'adaptation' of digital products. Even though news and comics may be distributed both in digital and physical forms, the form of distribution by no means affects the essential features and procedures of modifying these products for new locales, including various types of manipulating messages in news processing (in particular referred to as gatekeeping and transediting) and reworking verbal and visual content in comics. There are features that link news and comics translation to 'traditional' forms of localization. News translation, in particular, often involves simultaneous production and delivery of versions for a number of locales (Orengo, 2005), a strategy that is comparable with *simship* (simultaneous shipment) in software, game, and website localization. Linguistic aspect of translating comics technically resembles the replacement of natural language strings in software localization or subtitling in game localization, while modifying visual content (e.g. images and captions) is similar to practices of game and website localization, etc. Moreover, translation of news and comics often involves "internationalization plus localization" scenario. Global news agencies deliver 'delocalized' news for international audience that are subsequently 'adapted' for local audiences (Pym, 2010: 126; Schäffner, 2012: 872). According to Zanettin, "an internationalization stage at the source end and a localization stage at the target end can often be

clearly distinguished in the process leading to the production of translated comics” (Zanettin, 2008: 201).

These overlaps, however, are not the primary reason for using ‘localization’ as an umbrella term. First, the concept of localization the production of multilingual news, comics and audiovisual content into economic, political, legal, ethical, etc. contexts of global product distribution, that is, product distribution across various types of locales. In the study of news translation, in particular, “the adoption of a theory of ‘localization’ rather than conventional translation theories accounts more easily for both the commercial nature and the global scale of news distribution” (Orengo, 2005: 168). “Retouching the pictures” in comics is related to commercial considerations and social issues, such as “prevailing conventions for comics in a country or area”, “direct or indirect censorship” and “specific cultural and/or promotional agenda” (Zanettin, 2008a: 21). Second, the concept of localization indicates a shift of focus from texts and ‘text processing’ to the analysis of commercial products. These shifts may well be indicative of increasing transdisciplinarity of Translation Studies (Odacıoğlu & Köktürk, 2015).

### **Beyond digital media**

According to LISA’s (Localization Industry Standards Association) consensual definition, “localization involves 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). This definition fits well with practices of localizing all kinds of non-digital products. This state of affairs allowed to make a tentative step towards an even broader concept of localization that implies “the adaptation of any good or service to a target market” (Sprung, 2000: xviii) and “expands beyond digital media

to include other products as well”, such as cars or fast-food (Mazur, 2009: 155). Such extensions that come from localization-related research, and Translation Studies in particular, are not new for international business and marketing where the term ‘localization’ with a very similar meaning has been in use, to the best of my knowledge, at least since the 1950s or even earlier (e.g. Grether, 1948). The term ‘localization of products’ is currently used in international business and marketing and is defined in ways similar to LISA’s definition. “The localization of products requires the development, manufacturing, and marketing of goods best suited to the needs of the local customer and marketplace. This typically requires the modification of products that have sold well in other geographic regions” (Rugman, et al. 2006: 119). In marketing, “a local adaptation strategy would emphasize localization of products to accommodate local needs and preferences” (Meyer, K., 2009: 494). In localization industry proper and international business, at least in the 1980s and 1990s, ‘localization’ was a homonymic term with a minor overlap of concepts. Currently, the concepts are converging due to the extension of the term ‘locale’ and the scope of modifications that may be effectively regarded as localization. It might be said that localization-related research has expanded the original technical meaning of the concept to include the older economic meaning of ‘product localization’.

In business and marketing internationalization primarily implies moving from domestic to international markets and is synonymic to globalization. However, the distribution of non-digital products internationally may feature processes similar to internationalization in localization ‘proper’, such as developing “a common product platform that is used across the globe, but allows for product adaptations based on regional or country specific requirements” (Gabrielsson et al., 2006: 654). This is, however,

is only one of many strategies of localizing or regionalizing products and it does not constitute a particular paradigm in international business.

Localization of digital products retains its specificity as a market segment only due to complex project management and technologies that allow handling digital issues. In a broader perspective of international business and marketing, localization of software, games or small devices is not essentially different from localization of non-digital products that involves similar or even larger amount of translation. Localization and internationalization (in the economic sense of the word) of products and services requires translation of a wide range of text types, including technical specifications, business and legal documents, product descriptions, etc. In marketing, in particular, localization as a complex task may involve modification and ‘rewriting’ of a wide range of elements of promotional content beyond digital media, including “product labels, user manuals, and warranty information; point-of-sale... materials, advertising” (Jain, 2016). Moreover, when it comes to digital media, international marketing goes beyond website localization promoting localized products through social networks and blogs. Localization of websites, from this perspective, is a consequence of bringing products or services to new locales that involves a complex of non-digital localization strategies. Localized websites feature most of marketing materials and other text types that are translated in the course of product, service or business localization and internationalization. In localization industry the development and delivery of this type of content, including multilingual social media support, comes under a broad name of ‘localization’. There are studies that take a mixed approach focusing on localization of both digital and non-digital products. In particular Singh addresses “product localization” (such as Oreo cookies), “price localization”, “place

localization”, “localizing translations” as well as website and game localization (Singh, 2012). This really blurs the boundaries between digital and non-digital localization, and brings to the focus A. Pym’s concept of material type of distribution underlying any type of localization.

### **Conclusion**

The concept and industry of localization emerged in response to the need to “translate software” and since the 1980s it “revolves around combining language and technology” (Esselink, 2003). The expansion of industry to games and website localization has diversified functional goals of localization and involved new types of content. As a result, the concept of ‘locale’ has been extended to indicate a range of issues beyond a narrow set of culture- and language-sensitive data. Currently, the concept of localization remains ambiguous and bears a diversity of meanings that have evolved over the last three decades. However, as far as related to localization industry, these meanings overlap in major points, concerning, at least, linguistic part of localization (translation), the ambiguous notion of ‘adaptation’ (primarily its cultural aspects), and digital nature of products that are localized. In particular, a generic definition provided by Dunne focuses on the localization of “digital content and products” that includes “(a) translation of textual content into the language and textual conventions of the target locale; and (b) adaptation of nontextual content (from colors, icons and bitmaps, to packaging, form factors, etc.) as well as input, output and delivery mechanisms to take into account the cultural, technical and regulatory requirements of that locale (Dunne, 2006: 14).

Further extension of the scope of localization comes from related research. Translation Studies, in particular, represents an ambiguous attitude to localization. Within industrial discourse, the term ‘translation’ has been reserved for ‘direct’

language transfer, which raised concerns in Translation Studies: “If we assume that localization is about adapting a text so that it accounts for the local (i.e., target culture’s) linguistic and cultural norms and conventions, then the idea seems to be well established in both translation studies and practice... Adding a new term (i.e., localization) would therefore seem unnecessary, except that we are clearly moving away from the traditional sense of translation within the equivalence paradigm” (Gambier, 2016: 892). On the other hand, the term ‘localization’ is increasingly used in Translation Studies to indicate that rendering audiovisual content, news and comics exceeds the practice of ‘adapting texts’ and is embedded into the context of global product distribution across various types of locales. Occasionally, the term is extended to traditional forms of translation through such coinages as ‘localization of literary genres’, ‘localization of

advertising texts’ or ‘localization of children’s books’.

The last decade or so has revealed a tendency to expand the concept of ‘localization’ to non-digital products and a range of business processes related to cross-cultural management and marketing thus ‘restoring’ the original economic meaning of the term. As Budin points out, although “the term ‘localization’ has been used more recently mainly in the contexts of the computer industry and of Internet- and Web-based trade”, “localization has been successfully practiced for a long time in almost all spheres of trade and industry” (Budin, 2006: 290). This line of argumentation represents a tendency of theoretical consolidation of a highly diversified field of Localization Studies that regards a complex of cross-linguistic, cross-cultural, cross-societal, cross-marketing, cross-legal, etc. issues related to commercial distribution of products.

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## Переосмысляя практику локализации

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*На протяжении трех десятилетий практика локализации расширялась от локализации программного обеспечения к локализации других цифровых продуктов и все чаще ассоциируется с аудиовизуальным переводом, переводом новостей и комиксов. В последнее десятилетие появилась тенденция включать в объем понятия «локализация» нецифровые продукты и целый ряд бизнес-процессов в области кросс-культурного менеджмента и маркетинга. Понятийный потенциал термина «локализация» превосходит другие способы наименования языковых, культурных, социальных, экономических, политических, юридических и других аспектов адаптации продуктов и используется в индустрии, научных исследованиях, образовании и переводоведении в качестве родового понятия, охватывающего все виды комплексной модификации контента. Сказанное свидетельствует о наметившейся тенденции к консолидации разрозненных исследований в области локализации.*

*Ключевые слова: локализация, локаль, перевод, адаптация продуктов, нецифровые продукты.*

*Научная специальность: 10.00.00 – филологические науки.*

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