Website translation: issues of cohesion

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Introduction

In this paper I will present some preliminary results from a research project that examines the subject of cohesion on a website. The website as a multi-modal and multi-linear instrument of communication is a unique form of ‘text’ that poses new challenges for the researcher. While much has been and continues to be written on many aspects of the website and the World Wide Web, no theoretical framework exists for the analysis of cohesion on a website. This project aims, therefore, to create a model for the analysis of website cohesion with particular emphasis on those aspects that are pertinent in the translation of a website.

To begin with, I will outline the main features of a website. This will be followed by a brief discussion of cohesion in linguistic and visual media, web-specific cohesion and the significance of cohesion in translation. Based on examples from the official City of Munich website at www.muenchen.de, I will demonstrate some of the key areas and devices that combine to create cohesion on a website. Finally, conclusions will be drawn with regard to the implications of web-specific cohesion in the translation of websites.

The Website

A website can be described as a ‘multimodal instrument of communication’. Multimodality signifies ‘the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event together with the particular way in which these modes are combined – they may for instance reinforce each other … , fulfil complementary roles … or be hierarchically ordered’ (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001: 20). Meaning on a website is created through a combination of text, image, colour and audio content, realized through written and oral language, video, music and graphics.

A website can facilitate interactive communication where the user can book a hotel room, set up an account to order goods or services or subscribe to a newsletter. However, the most significant feature of a website and the one that sets it apart from all other types of ‘text’ is ‘hypertext’. Hypertext consists of items of information that are linked to each other electronically and ‘by multiple paths, chains, or trails in an open-ended web – it is multisequential or multilinear rather than non-linear’ (NUS 2006). The linked items of information can be on the same page, or on different pages of the same website, or on entirely different websites. The links connecting two items of information are referred to as ‘hyperlinks’. ‘Hypertext’ includes ‘hypermedia’ which describes the linking of different media to each other, for example text with video or audio information (Rosenfeld and Morville 2002: 73). Hypertext allows the user a high level of flexibility on a website. However, this is frequently tempered by
the sheer size and complexity of individual websites and the World Wide Web in
general.

2. Cohesion

2.1 Cohesion – textual

Cohesion is traditionally defined in terms of verbal text and refers to the ‘coherency of
a text with respect to itself (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 23). It is ‘the means whereby
elements that are structurally unrelated to one another are linked together, through the
dependence of one on the other for interpretation’ (ibid.: 27). Hallidayan cohesion
involves the grammatical elements reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction in
addition to the semantic feature lexical cohesion.
Reference ‘is a device which allows the reader/hearer to trace participants, entities,
events etc. in a text’ (Baker 1992: 181), and includes for example personal pronouns
and demonstratives. With substitution, an item is replaced by another item, with no
effect on the meaning, while ellipsis involves the omission of an item without
affecting the meaning. Conjunction ‘involves the use of formal markers to relate
sentences, clauses and paragraphs to each other. (It) signals the way the writer wants
the reader to relate what is about to be said to what has been said before’ (ibid.: 190).
Lexical cohesion is the ‘cohesive effect achieved by the selection of vocabulary’
(Halliday and Hasan 1976: 274) and comprises reiteration and collocation. Reiteration
involves the repetition of a lexical item. It differs from reference in that it does not
necessarily have the same referent. Collocation is that element of lexical cohesion
‘that is achieved through the association of lexical items that regularly co-occur’ (ibid.: 284).

2.2 Cohesion – visual

Any examination of cohesion on a website must consider the descriptive framework
developed by Kress and van Leeuwen as a tool for visual analysis. This is based on
text as ‘any instance of communication in any mode or in any combination of modes’
(Kress 2003: 48). All elements of the visual composition, including the linguistic
items are, therefore, considered to be ‘text’. In this case the language element is not
viewed as a linguistic item but as a ‘visual block’.
The model draws heavily on Hallidayan linguistics, proposing the three metafunctions
representational, interactive and compositional which reflect the ideational,
interpersonal and textual metafunctions of Halliday.
Composition refers to ‘the way in which the representational and interactive elements
are made to relate to each other, the way they are integrated into a meaningful whole’
(Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 181). It consists of the three features information value,
salience and framing and is particularly significant in the context of cohesion.
Information value is the actual positioning of the individual elements of the
composition in the overall work, where space is divided horizontally into left/given
and right/new and vertically into top/ideal and bottom/real. The centre space is seen as
holding the ‘marginal’ elements together. They are ‘belonging to it, subservient to it’
(Jewitt and Oyama in van Leeuwen and Jewitt eds. 2001: 149.)
Salience occurs where some elements are made to appear more prominent than others. This is achieved, for example, through varying the size of the images depicted and through the use of different colours and typefaces.

Framing refers to the level of connectedness or disconnectedness to each other of elements of a composition. Disconnection is achieved through contrasting colours, empty spaces and lines and frames. Connectedness is brought about by harmonizing colours and the absence of frames or empty spaces between elements. It can also be created through vectors. A vector is a real or imaginary line joining two elements. It begins at the most salient object, that which has first drawn the attention of the viewer, and draws our gaze towards the object at the end of the vector. ‘The more the elements of the spatial composition are connected, the more they are presented as one unit of information, as belonging together’ (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 215).

While framing can be said to reflect textual cohesion in a visual medium, information value and salience too play an important role in visual cohesion.

2.3 Cohesion and usability

‘Usability’ refers to how a website and its content and constituent parts are designed in such a way as to maximize efficient and effective human-computer interaction while exploiting the strengths of both the user and the computer (USDHHS 2006). Usability is influenced by overall site design, navigation, layout and content design, which include individual features such as scannable text, colour, navigation bars and clickable cues.

2.4 Web-specific cohesion

Cohesion on a website draws, to an extent, on the concept of usability. A cohesive website will enable the user to move from one content item to another, with ease and speed, enabling him/her to access precisely the information required, while retaining an overall sense of structure and context within the site. The cohesion of a website is not, however, confined to the individual website but includes the information returned in an online search and the manner in which a website is linked to other websites. The features capable of functioning cohesively, thus creating structure and context on a website, include layout, colour, graphic links and text.

2.5 Cohesion and translation

Cohesion is arguably one of the most challenging issues in translation as each language has its own set of cohesive devices and a unique manner in which these devices are used.

While it is imperative that the translator understand the meaning potential of all elements of a website, those parts that are most relevant in translation are the instances of text. Text is present on a website in many forms. It can be continuous text, HTML text or hypertext. Text is also contained in online forms, search boxes and as graphic elements. While a website is essentially a visual instrument, text plays a very significant role in that it not only provides valuable content to the web user but also creates an information and context-creating structure and is fundamental to the navigation system within a website and in the greater context of the World Wide Web.
I suggest that, apart from instances of continuous text on a website, those elements of
text that can function cohesively and that are, therefore, of direct concern to the
translator of the site, can be grouped as follows: HTML (Hypertext Mark-up Language)
tags, Hyperlinks and Page Content. The individual examples shown below are taken
from the official website for the City of Munich at www.muenchen.de.

3. Translating web-specific cohesive devices

3.1 HTML Tags

HTML (Hypertext Mark-Up Language) tags are contained in the source document for
a webpage, which also provides instructions on features such as font size, colour and
layout for that page. The three tags that are significant in the context of online search,
and consequently for the translation of a website, are the title tag, the description
content metatag and the keywords metatag.
The title tag contains the page title, which is not necessarily identical to the ‘page
heading’ as seen by the web user on the web page. The page title appears as the first
line of a search result and in the ‘reverse bar’ of the screen, which is the blue bar
across the top of the screen. The description content metatag is the second element of
a search result and is intended to provide a description of the page content. The
keywords metatag is a list of the key terms for the page which are picked up and
indexed for use by the various search engines. It can also contain related terms,
common misspellings and synonyms. The most important of these keywords are
present in the page content. These three tags can be defined for each page but it is not
a requirement.
The following is a result returned for the search query ‘visit munich’ on the search
engine www.google.ie:

muenchen.de - Munich Tourist Office
Visit Munich’s website for this big event. weiter · Königliches München A Crown for
Bavaria Exhibition celebrating 200 years of Royal Bavaria (from March ...
www.muenchen.de/Rathaus/tourist_office/57799/ - 76k - 17 Mar 2006 - Cached -
Similar pages

Although this result links directly to English content on the Munich site, the page title
and the description contain text in both German and English. The description content
metatag has not been defined for this page and, as a result, the search engine has taken
snippets of text from the page content that contains the search terms ‘visit’ and
‘munich’ and has used them to create a description.
There are two issues at stake here: the provision of text in two languages and the lack
of a useful description of the content of the page or website, which results in a lack of
cohesion between the search query, the search result and the actual content of the web
page or site. The consequence is that the web user will be unaware of the true content
of the web page and will more than likely pass on to another search result in the list.

3.2 Hyperlinks
A Hyperlink is the clickable link that connects two documents or webpages. It can be graphic or textual and includes navigation tabs, image links and anchor links. Descriptive, accurate and unambiguous hyperlinks are vital for easy movement around a website, thus providing for a cohesive text. In particular, on a website with foreign-language content, it is important that the user be directed to content in the same language.

The following is an information box with information on the weather, taken from the English pages of the website www.muenchen.de.

MÜNCHEN
Forecast
25.03.2006

Rain
Temp.: 5/13°C
Precip.?: 70%

Detailed forecast»

Last-Minute und Meer!
more weather?wetter.com

(Available at: http://www.muenchen.de/home/60093/Homepage.html)

The two links ‘wetter.com’, indicated by ‘more weather?’ and ‘Detailed forecast’ are of interest here. The expectation on clicking either of these links is that one will access content in English. However, the links lead to a website that is available only in German.

Accessing web content in a language other than that which was expected is a confusing and frustrating experience. It diminishes the credibility of a website and could discourage the web user from accessing other information on the same site and from returning to the site in the future.

3.3 Page Content

Page content includes elements such as page headings, category headings, teaser text and widgets. I will look in particular at widgets, which are ‘…interactive screen-based controls or data-entry forms’ (USDHHS 2006). One example is an online order form consisting of drop-down menus and category labels. Online booking forms are a very convenient means of ordering products or services. They provide the basis for a solid, long-term relationship between client and company.

A case in point is the English-language online hotel reservation form on the Munich website, accessible at: http://www.muenchen.de/Tourismus/Accommodation_Hotels/hotel_reservation/76390/index.html

Some of the category labels have been translated into English while others have not, leaving text such as ‘DZ zur Alleinben’ in the list of ‘room types’. A number of the
terms are translated incorrectly, for example ‘Hotel Garni’, (B&B) and ‘Pension’ (guesthouse).

Content that is not translated fully and correctly, therefore failing to provide a cohesive and user-friendly environment, could result in the web user being unable to place an order or even placing and paying for an incorrect order due to misunderstanding. In addition, the client is less likely to return to a site that s/he has been unable to negotiate successfully.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined the main features of a website, discussed the concept of cohesion and its significance in translation. By outlining and providing examples of the individual elements that are capable of functioning cohesively on a website, I have shown how website cohesion is not simply a combination of those cohesive devices common to traditional ‘textual’ and ‘visual’ texts. Finally, I have discussed the implications of web-specific cohesion in the translation of websites.

The aim of the website translator must be to provide a text that has been translated in its entirety into the target language, thus providing a cohesive and coherent text. Website cohesion begins with the online search and concerns not only each website in isolation but also the means by which the web user is then directed to external content. The provision of links to content in a different language is questionable. The failure to provide a cohesive text in translation will undoubtedly affect the user experience. The consequences are many: the user will simply leave the website and not return to it; s/he will be unable to fully exploit the many features offered by a website today; it could happen that the user will place and pay for an incorrect order. In addition, intrusions resulting from text in a language other than the one used for the particular content, will have a negative influence on the sense of context and structure so vital on a website. The long-term implications for a website are that potential traffic to the site will decrease, thus denying both the client and the website company/organisation the opportunity to build up a fruitful, long-term business relationship.

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Hotel reservation on www.muenchen.de: http://www.muenchen.de/Tourismus/Accommodation_Hotels/hotel_reservation/76390/index.html [01/07/06]

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