

AVOIDING THE TRAPS OF MULTILINGUAL ONLINE RESEARCH

By Beth Podrovitz and Jiri Stejskal, PhD, CETRA

This is the first installation of a quarterly column, "Globally Thinking," which will focus on international issues in marketing research.

English is one of nearly 7,000 languages currently spoken around the world, and contrary to popular belief, it is not the most widely spoken language. There are twice as many native speakers of Chinese as there are of English. English comes in second, preceding Hindi by only a very thin margin. Hundreds of languages are spoken in the US alone.

English still dominates the Internet, but Internet use among non-native English speakers is growing at a much faster rate than among native English speakers. Understandably, Internet users tend to spend more time on sites in their native language, and resp□ the questions better. This is not trivial – 92% of the world population speaks a language other than English at home!

Table 1 ranks the top 10 languages by the number of native speakers worldwide, the number of native speakers in the US, and the nu□ and by number of Internet users respectively. Note that only five languages are common to all three columns in the table below: C□ first 10 most widely spoken languages. German is strong among Internet users and in the US, but is not in the top 10 worldwide.

Earlier this year MRA Executive Director, Larry Brownell warned against amateurs who “hop on the online research bandwagon □ when addressing culturally and linguistically diverse panels. There are multiple traps the online researcher can fall into; the most common ones are described to the right.

Table 1 - Most Native Speakers

	Worldwide	In the US	Online
1	Chinese	English	English
2	English	Spanish	Chinese
3	Hindi	Chinese	Japanese
4	Spanish	French	Spanish
5	Russian	German	German
6	Arabic	Tagalog	French
7	Bengali	Vietnamese	Korean
8	Portuguese	Italian	Portuguese
9	Malay	Korean	Italian
10	French	Russian	Russian



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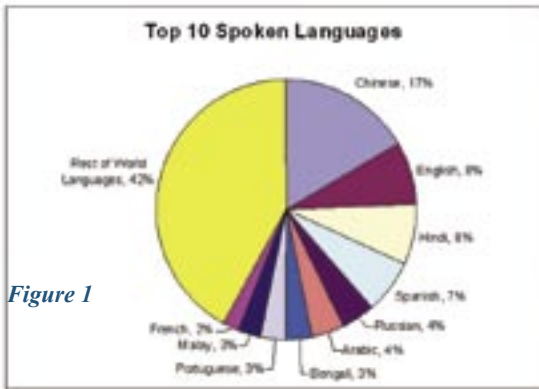


Figure 1

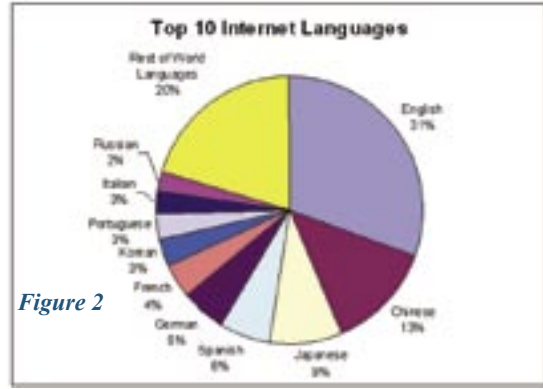


Figure 2

Trap No. 1: Wrong language, dialect, or locale. It is important to know what language to use. While this seems obvious and in most instances there is minimal risk of using an incorrect language, it can happen, particularly if we make assumptions about the language and target audience. Incorrect assumptions can have disastrous results and are easily avoided just by doing a little research. Consider Switzerland with four official languages! We have seen a survey intended for Slovaks written in Czech under the inc□

in Malayalam for the inhabitants of Malaysia under the incorrect assumption that Malay and Malayalam are the same language. As far as dialects go, Chinese has several that are mutually unintelligible, as do some African languages. Canadian French is an example of a locale; Canadians will not appreciate an online survey written in European French.

Trap No. 2: Wrong character set. To display the translated text correctly online, the appropriate character set needs to be used and specified in the html code. In the past, hundreds of encoding systems were used, many of them conflicting, often resulting in corrupted or illegible online text. Unicode has changed that by providing a unique code for every character, no matter what the platform, no matter what the program, no matter what the language. When conducting online research in foreign languages, be sure to use Unicode encoding or work with a programmer familiar with website localization.

Trap No. 3: Wrong script. Using the wrong script is not an encoding issue; it is the application of an incorrect alphabet or script. For example, Chinese uses two scripts: Traditional and Simplified. Mandarin Chinese spoken in mainland China uses the Simplified form, whereas Mandarin Chinese spoken in Taiwan uses the Traditional form. Given the political tensions between the two, using the incorrect script could cause unwanted grief. Similarly, Croatian and Serbian are essentially one and the same language, but while the former is written in Latin script, the latter is written in Cyrillic. Be sure to know who your target audience is.

Trap No. 4: Machine translation. Philadelphia Mayor John Street becomes Mayor “Rue” in French, “Straße” in German, and “Calle” in Spanish, and the heading “Lead Story” becomes “Story of Lead” (i.e. the chemical element) in the machine-translated, official Philadelphia government website. See for yourself at <http://www.phila.gov> – just click on any of the flags at the bottom of the page.

(Continued on p. 21)

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AVOIDING THE TRAPS OF MULTILINGUAL ONLINE (Cont'd. from p.19)

While machine translation certainly has its merits, translation of websites – and of online surveys – is not one of them.

Trap No. 5: Culture-specific symbols, visuals, and metaphors. It is always a good idea to check whether the symbols and visuals used in online research are appropriate in other cultures. A piggy bank is recognized in most Western cultures as a symbol for savings, but in some cultures a pig is considered a filthy animal. An image of a bikini-clad lady surfer used for your California panel will not be appropriate in Saudi Arabia. Promising to “hit a home run” in your survey can cause some puzzlement outside of the US where sports metaphors are rarely used and baseball is considered an exotic pastime.

Trap No. 6: Placeable text. Placeables, or words or phrases “piped into” the online text as needed, are a software programmer’s joy and a translator’s nightmare. The main issue with placeables is that English sentence structure or syntax is unique in that it can be manipulated and modified in a way that has little effect on the rest of the sentence. Consider this: “You indicated that [IF Q3 IS YES, (INSERT CONTACT NAME)’s] OR [IF Q3 IS NO (INSERT ANSWER TO Q3b)’s] title is incorrect. Is this due to...?” In the preceding piped segment, the English sentence construction depends on the use of the Saxon genitive (apostrophe plus “s”) to show possession. This type of structure is unique to English. A savvy translator will understand this sentence structure and will modify the translation accordingly, but it would be best to modify the English to reduce the potential margin of error. Here is a possible solution: “You indicated that the title of [IF Q3 IS YES, (INSERT CONTACT NAME)] OR [IF Q3 IS NO (INSERT ANSWER TO Q3b)] is incorrect. Is this due to...?”

The last and most serious trap is the failure to use a professional language service provider when conducting online research in other languages. There are simply too many considerations and variables in play that can be overlooked by online researchers engaged in multilingual research. Just as it is essential that online research is conducted by professionals, it is crucial that the adaptation of the research into other languages is done in cooperation with a professional language service provider. □

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*<http://www.internetworldstats.com> and <http://www.ethnologue.com>
<http://www.mra-net.org/article.cfm?aID=137>*

A dialect is a variety of a language used by people from a particular geographic area.

A locale is the language and the geographic region of a given target audience for a translation. Localization refers to the adaptation of language and content to reflect local cultural sensitivities.

Getting to Know Online Researchers

PROFILE



Name: Justine Owen
Company: Carbonview Research
Title: Senior Account Executive
Location: Chicago, IL

Background/Personal Info:

Hometown: Hamden, CT

One Place You’ve Always Wanted to Visit: New Zealand (wineries)

Favorite Movie: Office Space

Something You Can’t Go Without in the Morning: Breakfast

Your Daily Source for News: The Web

Professional Info:

1. How did you first become introduced/involved in online research?

I was a market research consultant in the late 90’s and had the opportunity to work on a couple of online studies. Online research technology was fairly new and a lot of the kinks were still being worked out. Then in 2003, I began working exclusively for an online research supplier and realized I had barely scratched the surface in terms of what the internet had to offer as a research vehicle. By this time, the technology had been drastically improved and I became happily entrenched in it. Today, I still am!

2. What does online research bring to the table that no other form of research can compete with?

Traditionally, online research has provided a degree of interactivity that is far-reaching and highly informative yet more efficient and cost-effective than other data collection methods. Today, it’s more about ‘convenience’ and ‘convergence of technology’; convenience for the clients regarding timing, for the consumer to participate where and when they desire, and for the administrator to present the study in a format that is paralleled only by face-to-face interviews. The convergence of technology allows researchers, by way of the internet, the ability to obtain data in many different formats.

3. What do you think is next for online research?

I believe online will continue to converge with other data collection technologies, improving the ability to collect data from virtually anyone, anywhere, at any time. This will help researchers measure, not only opinions, but ‘actions’ taken by the respondent while they are being monitored. This opens the door to many opportunities to understand true respondent behaviors, not just stated ones and will essentially provide greater overall insight into the consumer experience.

4. If someone told you at the start of your career that you would be an online researcher, doing what you are doing now, would you believe them? Why or why not?

Not at all! I started my career in market research fresh out of college back in 1993. I didn’t have a computer nor had I used the internet before so I really couldn’t have imagined the online research technology that would be available today. It is truly remarkable.