Draft Proposal   September 9, 1997

The Translation of Cultures:

Software Localization, Culture and Politics.

1. Background.

1.1. The last decade has seen the explosive growth of a "telectronic" revolution -- new digital electronic and communication technologies involving computers, Internet, World Wide Web, digital video and audio, cellular and satellite technologies. But this explosive growth has also inspired growing concern over how the telectronic revolution, today almost entirely based on the English language, will affect world cultures. Specifically, many fear that it will contribute further to the creation of a globalized, superficial, commercial, English-speaking culture that will overwhelm ancient cultures and/or exclude the five and a half billion people in the world who do not speak English. To preserve the diversity and richness of the world's cultures -- and to include non-English-speaking peoples in the telectronic age -- requires deliberate and thoughtful efforts to "localize" (i.e., to adapt to local languages and cultures) what is today the predominantly English-language software and culture of the new telectronics. Part of this effort is technical (e.g., language translation), but another part, almost never discussed, is cultural -- that is, shifting from one Weltanschaung to another, becoming adept in what the English anthropologist Evans-Pritchard once called "the translation of cultures". Especially for the developing world, and specifically for multicultural nations like India, the very survival of indigenous cultures may be at stake.

1.2. An important corollary of the telectronic revolution is the creation of myriad "virtual communities", that is, groups of individuals often scattered across several continents, who are united by a common interest but whose only contact with each other is via the keyboard of Internet- and Web- linked computers. These are "imaginary societies" in the special sense that

their members have never met, would not recognize each other on the street, have never conversed, and have no common bond except a computer display.

1.3. Over the past year, I have developed one such "virtual community" of professionals interested in the cultural aspects of software localization -- that is, in the issue of the translation of cultures through the new telectronic media. These are people who have responded via Internet to my work on this topic. Of about ninety Internet correspondents, over a dozen stand out for their critical intelligence, their thoughtful reactions, and their strategic positions. They include the heads of internationalization of several of the world's largest software and localization firms; the director of India's National Center for Software Technology; the "guru" of Argentine computer science; the creator of the lively CostaRicaNet; the director of MIT's Laboratory of Computer Science; the head of India's largest software firm; the American director of a worldwide study of the software industry. These people have not met, but they are now linked through the Internet.

2. Proposal

This is a proposal to make the above-mentioned virtual community real so as to produce a useful collective product. Specifically, I propose that 1) after careful preparation using electronic media, a group of a dozen reflective and influential professionals meet face-to-face to discuss the nontechnical (i.e. social, cultural, economic, political) issues involved in software internationalization and localization, and that 2) this group subsequently produce collectively a Handbook on Cultural Factors in Localization that will be of use to others with the same concerns. The proposal thus has three parts.

2.1. Preparation (9 months). The preparatory phase aims at intensifying and deepening a virtual community (or Working Group) of 10-15 people through the creation of an electronic "listserv" that will enable each member to communicate with each other member. Once established, this electronic network will be used to circulate, over a period of nine months, papers, articles,

comments and bibliographies; and to plan, together, a four-day face-to-face conference. The
principal investigator will act as a coordinator for the group and will be responsible for
circulating relevant materials and planning the subsequent meeting.

2.2. Making the Virtual Community a Face-to-Face Working Group. A four-day meeting on
"The Translation of Cultures" to be held on Lake Como in Italy in May of 1998 will be designed
specifically by and for these individuals. At that meeting, the virtual community will become a
face-to-face community. Discussions will be structured beforehand on topics like the factors that
determine whether major software programs are localized, and into which languages; the hidden
meanings of culture in software; the cultural impact of emerging software technologies; the
special problems in moving from English language and Anglo-Saxon culture to other languages
and cultures, especially in developing societies. The particular problem of vernacular languages
in computer use in India -- the world's largest democracy; culturally and linguistically one of the
oldest, most complex, and richest of societies; a rising "software superpower"; yet a nation with
virtually no localization to any of the languages spoken by more than 900,000,000 Indians -- --
can be taken as a central example. The concrete goal of the meeting will be to outline in detail a
Handbook on Cultural Issues for Localizers, which, when completed during the following
year, will be made available electronically to the thousands of software localizers throughout the
world.

2.3. Completion and Editing of Handbook. After the meeting the actual drafting and editing of
the Handbook will be undertaken by the participants of the conference, using electronic means
through multiple iterations. The principal investigator will be responsible for incorporating the
suggestions of the participants into one seamless text, which will be circulated electronically to
the Working Group members (and to other knowledgeable people) with a request for further
electronic notes, criticisms, and comments. These will then be incorporated, and a further draft
circulated for another iteration, and so on. Individual members of the Working Group will be
encouraged to add, as appendices, their own reflections, comments, or objections to the main
text. The eventual "publication" of the Handbook on the Internet and the World Wide Web will

be announced ("posted") on multiple existing electronic networks, like those of the professional
Localizers Association (LISA), the Information Systems World Network (IS), etc.   The
Handbook will thus be made available without cost to localizers and others throughout the world.

3. Preconditions.

3.1. The success of the face-to-face meeting of the Working Group depends on careful and
thorough preparation to ensure commitment of group members, to exchange readings and
documents, to develop and revise the agenda for the meeting, to circulate relevant materials and
bibliographies, and to elicit commentaries and preliminary proposals. The goal of this
preparatory work is to begin to develop a set of common understandings -- a shared culture --
well before the actual meeting.

3.2. The proposed participants in the Working Group are both prominent and busy (e.g., the
head of internationalization of Digital is responsible for the internationalization of Digital
software in 20 or more languages involving hundreds of professionals). An attractive location, a
suitable time, and an interesting group of colleagues are necessary to draw such people away
from their usual responsibilities. The availability of the Adenauer Foundation's splendid Villa
Collina above Lake Como in May 1998 guarantees many of these preconditions. At this site,
good telecommunication facilities are available (i.e., wide-band electronic Internet-Web access).
 A carefully planned agenda and a small but reflective and experienced group of participants are
equally important. Finally, a concrete outline by the end of the meeting is essential.

3.3. Intensive follow-up, lasting a year, will be required to produce the proposed Handbook. For
both preparatory and follow-up work, administrative support and the assistance of a well-
qualified graduate student are essential. Two advanced graduate students, each with extensive
experience in localization and keen interests in cultural issues, are potential candidates as
research assistants. Their work will include preparation of reading and bibliographies to be
circulated; helping organize the logistics of the Cadenabbia meeting; acting as recording note-

takers at that meeting; coordinating subsequent revisions and communications with members of the Working Group. Half-time administrative/secretarial support will provide typing, scanning of documents, Internet and Web services, and will assist in planning and publishing the final Handbook. The principal investigator will coordinate the preliminary planning process, chair the Working Group meeting, and have primary responsibility for drafting and revising the Handbook.