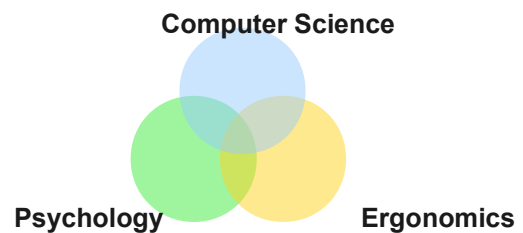


Cultural Dimensions of Web Design

Benjamin Pick, 30/06/2010

Interested in both Web Design and Cultural Studies, I tried to combine both. Imagine the following case: a vendor wants to address not only his country's customers, but as well other countries, other cultures or other languages. The web designer in charge will not only need to translate its content, but also its **cultural conventions** – just look at commercially important sites like Dell or Mercedes, they may look very similar depending on the chosen country, but are not exactly the same. It is far too easy to forget the cultural context we are living in, and thus, forget that some (mostly unconscious) assumptions don't hold in other countries – as we'll see, even “giants” like Google are prone to such errors. The danger is a loss of revenue: if the client doesn't feel at ease, he is less likely to buy in the end.

The research field of **Human-Computer-Interaction** (HCI) sets out to give recommendations based on scientific studies. It is based on previous knowledge of Computer Sciences (how computers work), Psychology (how humans work) and Ergonomics (how to adapt a tool to its user). The main objective is to facilitate the interaction between humans and machines, and as a consequence, increase the user's satisfaction.



In the following, examples of cultural differences that are relevant for websites are given. They are far from exhaustive and meant to be a reminder of topics to be aware of.

It may seem obvious, but the world-wide web is, well, world-wide. Every site may be visited from every country possible. As such, the local context isn't always clear: when stated, “IRC chat meeting at 3”, and the site doesn't give clear evidence if the community is based in London or New York, it loses its informational value except for insiders. Every time should have a **time zone** indicator attached, and even dates may need them (e.g. deadlines). It would be even easier to use if the user can choose his preferential time zone (*Europe/Berlin*, not *GMT+1*, in order to conform with Daylight Saving Time, too).



When **forms** are to be filled in, the format of the inputs need to be stated explicitly, and should correspond to the main audience's preferred way of writing. 01/02/2010 could mean both, 1st of February or 2nd of January, depending on the cultural context. Furthermore, validation rules shouldn't be so strict that they disallow correct inputs: telephone numbers may contain more than 10 digits outside of France, and postal codes may contain letters or less than 5 digits.



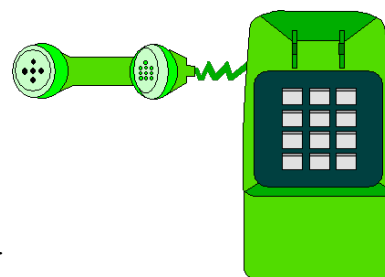
International websites often allow to **adjust the language**. It is important to resist to the temptation to translate the language's name into the currently chosen language: how is a non-chinese-speaker meant to choose his native tongue once the interface is in chinese? Either state the names of the language in its own language (Deutsch – English – Français) or show the countries' flag as an image.



Pluralization rules aren't easy, English being an exception of the rule. German plural forms are rather irregular, but at least there is only plural and singular: in Russian, there are 3 forms of plural plus some more irregularities for 11 to 20 items. And 0 items isn't pluralized in all languages neither. So if an automatic pluralization is needed, e.g. for a message "4 entries deleted", let the translation file decide for each range of numbers which form of it is needed. An alternative would be to reformulate the message to "Number of entries deleted: 4".

Number of pages	Russian word for 'page'
1	страница
2-4	страницы
5-10	страниц
11-20 (irregular)	страниц
21	страница
22-24	страницы
25-30	страниц
> 30	Repeat pattern of endings for 1 to 10.

Another cultural issue to be aware of is that of **colors & metaphors**. Colors always convey a more or less explicit message; for example, the telephone at the right would be detected as a public telephone by every person knowing the Japanese culture. And while white is symbolizing purity in western cultures, Chinese would rather associate it with death. In order to detect such cultural pitfalls, a person of the target audience's country needs to review your website.



To put it in a nutshell: all communication is influenced by the speaker's culture, and websites are essentially communicating, so culture needs to be taken into account when designing websites. As Wenyong Zhao states:

*The tools of the Web can be considered culturally neutral in and of themselves, but the communicators who wield them are not.*¹

That's why translating the content of a website is only one step of many when it is to be prepared for international public. This entire process is called **internationalisation** (or short: i18n) and has got a lot of attention by professionals recently, as shown by the google query.

Résultats 1 à 10 sur un total d'environ 5 590 000 pour i18n

¹ Wenyong ZHAO et al. : *Cultural Dimensions of Website Design and Content*, Carfax Publishing, 2003, http://web.biz.uwa.edu.au/staff/jmurphy/Cultural_Dimensions.pdf