

Chapter 5.17

The Role of Rhetoric in Localization and Offshoring

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization is increasingly integrating the world's economies and societies. Now, products created in one nation are often marketed to a range of international consumers. Similarly, the rapid diffusion of online media has facilitated cross-border interactions on social and professional levels. Differing cultural expectations, however, can cause miscommunications within this discourse paradigm. Localization – customizing a communiqué to meet cultural expectations – has thus become an important aspect of today's global economy. This essay examines localization in offshoring practices that could affect database creation and maintenance.

BACKGROUND

To understand localization, one must understand how rhetoric, or the way in which information is

presented, can vary along cultural lines. Each culture has a set of rhetorical expectations, or conditions, for how to convey ideas effectively (Kaplan, 2001; Woolever, 2001). The more closely a message meets the rhetorical expectations of a cultural group, the more likely members of that group will consider that message credible or usable (Bliss, 2001). If one does not meet a culture's rhetorical expectations, then the related group is likely to view a message as non-credible and will be less inclined to consider it. Moreover, if non-credible messages are associated with a particular product, audiences might consider that item as not worth purchasing (Ulijn & Strother, 1995).

Rhetoric and Verbal Communication

Differing rhetorical expectations means information considered credible by one cultural group might be deemed suspect or unusable by another (Woolever, 2001; Ulijn & St.Amant, 2000). Language is perhaps the most obvious factor related

to credibility in cross-cultural exchanges. That is, if one wishes to develop informative materials for another culture, then concepts must be presented in the language used by that group. (If one wishes to target information for an audience in France, one should use the French language when presenting ideas.)

Using the correct language, however, is often not enough, for cultural groups can have different norms for how ideas should be expressed within a language (Ulijn, 1996; Kaplan, 2001; Driskill, 1996). These expectations often reflect deep-seated values or societal rules (Neuliep, 2000; Ferraro, 2002). It is thus often difficult for the members of one culture to anticipate the rhetorical expectations another cultural group associates with credible presentations.

These cultural-rhetorical differences, moreover, can assume a variety of forms. Some cultures tend to prefer more linear/focused presentations in which connections between ideas and conclusions are explicitly stated (Campbell, 1998; Ulijn & St.Amant, 2000). Other cultures, however, might prefer more indirect presentations in which individuals seem to go off on tangents or avoid directly stating facts or conclusions (Woolever, 2001; Ulijn & St.Amant, 2000; Campbell, 1998). These variations can cause misperceptions or confusion when different cultural groups interact. As Ulijn and St.Amant (2000) note, many Western cultures prefer a more direct presentation of information. In contrast, many Eastern cultures use a more indirect approach when sharing ideas. As a result, the indirect style used by Eastern cultures is often viewed as evasive or dishonest by Westerners who expect presenters to “get to the point.” Conversely, many Easterners tend to view the direct presentation style of Western cultures as rude, for by directly stating information (stating the obvious), an individual is patronizing the audience. In such cases, failing to address the rhetorical expectations of the “other” culture can undermine the credibility of persons interacting in cross-cultural exchanges.

Rhetoric and Visual Communication

Interestingly, cultural rhetorical expectations are not restricted to verbal presentations. Rather, they also affect how different groups perceive and respond to visual displays. In some instances, the cultural expectations of what features an item – or visual representations of an item – should possess can differ from country to country. Such differences can affect how audiences perceive the credibility and the acceptability of visual displays (Kamath, 2000; Neuliep, 2000).

For example, the perception of a mailbox being a box that sits atop a post and that has a “red flag” on the side of it is, essentially, a U.S. one (Gillette, 1999). In other cultures, a mailbox might be a small door in a wall or even a cylindrical metal container. These design discrepancies could cause confusion when individuals use images to share information across cultures. Consider the following situation: Persons from different nations come to a web portal and expect to find a “mail” function on that portal. To address this expectation, the portal’s designers have included an “access mail” icon into the portal’s design. The image used for this icon, however, is a U.S.-style mailbox. Unfortunately, this choice of image renders that depiction unrecognizable to persons from different cultures – cultures in which mailboxes have very different characteristics. Those individuals might then consider the associated web portal non-credible, for they perceive it as lacking the key design feature of a mail option. In this way, cultural differences can affect sites that use the “wrong” kind of image.

The presence or absence of a design feature, moreover, can affect the credibility of an image or of an overall website. Cultures, for example, can associate different meanings with the same color (Conway & Morrison, 1999; Ferraro, 2002). These associations could affect how individuals from different cultures perceive the meaning of a particular image. In the United States, for example, a blue ribbon usually indicates first place, while

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