Web-Based Communication of Global Companies: Do Languages and Culture Matter?

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WEB-BASED COMMUNICATION
OF GLOBAL COMPANIES:
DO LANGUAGES AND CULTURE MATTER?

ABSTRACT
This project studies the use of language and cultural adaptation of Web sites of forty-one Global Fortune 500 companies from the developed world and emerging markets. Companies were selected from the Big Five (France, Germany, Japan, UK, US) and BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India, and China). The study investigates the extent to which English is the language of the Web for global companies, and the role that other languages play on the corporate Internet. Although English is recognized as a key language of business, clearly it is not spoken everywhere.

The study also examines the cultural adaptation of Web sites, which relates to the standardization versus localization debate in Web design. For the purposes of this article, localization deals with how companies adapt country-specific Web sites to the local culture.

Major findings of the research show that language plays a major role in Web site communication and that the native language of the country dominates. English is often a second language on the Web. Most companies in the study preferred standardization of global Web sites. However many did have some degree of cultural adaptation of their international sites. This adaptation occurred through customized content, text, photos and video, and design.

INTRODUCTION
Is English enough to do business internationally on the Web, or do other languages play key roles as well? What roles do culture and localization play in the adaptation of corporate Web sites for business in different nations? These questions address the relevance of adapting global Web sites through language and cultural artifacts. Christine Uber Grosse (“Competitive Advantage”) studied the importance of language and culture in the careers of Thunderbird alumni. Would it be as important in corporate Web-based communication? Her other work looked at e-communication strategies of companies (“E-communication”) and global strategy for developing cross-cultural competence through corporate training (“Global Strategy”).

The issue also relates to the long-standing debate in Web-based communication of customization versus standardization (Szymanski, Bharadwaj, Global Business Languages (2007))

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Customization refers to the trend of branding, making global Web sites reflect the overall brand of the firm. Companies such as UPS prefer standardization in order to ensure that all their Web sites internationally reflect the company image and that a customer in Vietnam knows where to find the functions she has used in France or the USA (Grosse, Global E-Commerce).

Like many companies, UPS uses a blend of standardization and localization on its global Web sites. Its standardized sites may make some local concessions by adding an occasional graphic such as a flag, photo of local people, tourist site, or factory.

The Amway company insists that the content of its over seventy global Web sites be multicultural as well as multilingual. The sites also must reflect local laws, customs, and dialects. According to Edward Cove, “localization will be an issue for thousands of companies worldwide, and should become a $1 billion market.” Aberdeen Group analyst Tom Dwyer reported that companies spend from $15,000 to $2 million to customize their Web sites. The price varies according to the number of languages, sites, and depth of adaptation to the local culture. It would seem obvious that Web sites that make the customer feel comfortable and at home would increase profits (Upton).

Customization involves offering special content for specific countries, putting price lists in local currencies, and providing local customer service.

Michael Anobile, director of the Localization Industry Standards Association, reports that the localization and translation services industry generates around $26 billion in revenue globally (Downey). The localization depends on translation, subject matter, colors, and design. Three companies have succeeded in partially automating the translation process through software. These are Trados, based in Sunnyvale, CA, SDL International in London, and ATRIL in Barcelona.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following research questions are addressed in this project.

(1) What languages are used on the Web sites of major companies in the Big Five (France, Germany, Japan, UK, US) and BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China)? Why?

(2) To what extent is English the language of business on the Web? What other languages do major companies use to communicate on the Internet?

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(3) How do companies adapt their country-specific Web sites to the local culture?
(4) What do companies miss out on by not having their Web site materials in other languages?

METHODOLOGY
Initially, nine companies' Web sites were studied for ways that they used language and culture on their home page and international sites. The large companies chosen for the study were based in the Big Five and BRIC nations, and included British Petroleum (UK), Toyota (Japan), AXA (France), Citigroup (USA), Siemens (Germany), Braskem (Brazil), Gazprom (Russia), Reliance Industries LTD (India) and China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation (China). The preliminary review of these companies' Web sites was used to develop a template for the study, to keep track of the languages and cultural influences of the forty-one companies subsequently chosen for the research project.

The forty-one companies were selected from the Global Fortune 500 2005 list (March 2006). Fortune magazine compiled the list of international companies using data filed for the fiscal year that ended on or before March 31, 2005. Many companies have holdings in a number of industries. However, Global Fortune 500 includes them in the industry that represents the largest amount of their revenues. To appear on this list, companies must publish financial data and report it as well to a government agency. Private US companies that fill out a 10-K are included on the list as well. The profits that are shown in the list are after taxes.

To get an overview of language and cultural adaptation of global corporate Web sites, the top five companies of the Big Five and BRIC nations were selected. The Big Five countries represented the developed world, while the BRIC nations represented important emerging markets. Presumably, these two groups of companies would give a representative sample of corporate Web practice at the largest companies in the developed world and emerging markets. These companies would have the means, and perhaps the motivation, to launch cutting edge Web sites.

Of the BRIC countries, China and India had five or more companies on the Global Fortune 500 list. Brazil and Russia had three each. Thus the final list of companies in the study consisted of forty-one firms in nine countries (see Table 1).

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Many of the forty-one companies had a global Web site, in addition to country-specific ones. The global Web site was typically the first site examined in the study. From there, the home country Web site was checked. Either the global Web site or home country site had dropdown menus or links to country sites. Only sites for the Big Five and BRIC countries in the project were examined. Only a few companies had Web sites for all nine countries. Some companies, particularly those from the BRIC, had a Web site for just the home country.

To compare language use and cultural adaptation, a standardized template was developed for the evaluation of Web sites (see fig. 1). The template kept track of languages used, as well as design, symbols, photos and other graphics. The Web sites were examined in Winter 2005-2006. Since designs change over time, this study reflects the Web sites of that time.

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Research Question 1: What languages are used on the Web sites of major companies in the Big Five (France, Germany, Japan, UK, US) and BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China)? Why?

The findings of the study show that language plays a major role in Web site communication. The native language dominates, while English often is used as a second language on the international sites. I found that gaining access to international sites is not always easy from the home page in the home country. Some companies especially in the BRIC simply did not have international sites. Many companies had a global site. English was almost always the language of the global site, with a version available in the native language too.

The country-specific Web sites of most companies almost always appeared in the native language of the country. Regional differences were noted. For example, in Asia, companies frequently used both the native language and English in their Web sites. In Europe, the trend is to use the native language only. Companies from the sole Latin American country represented, Brazil, used a mix of native language only, and native language plus English. The US Web sites rarely used Spanish, and even less often, Chinese. The Indian sites always used English, and occasionally had a version available in Hindi. Sometimes the Russian sites appeared only in English. Maybe the Russian versions were simply not accessible through the English-only site.

Research Question 2: To what extent is English the language of business on the Web? What other languages do major companies use to communicate on the Internet?

English is clearly the second language of business on the Web. Its presence on the global Web sites, its use as a second language on Chinese, Japanese, Brazilian, and Russian Web sites, reflects its widespread use. However, the first language of the Web is predominantly the native language of the country. Asian companies’ widespread use of English reflects their willingness to use English as a second language on the international sites. I found that gaining access to international sites is not always easy from the home page in the home country. Some companies especially in the BRIC simply did not have international sites. Many companies had a global site. English was almost always the language of the global site, with a version available in the native language too.

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to speak the language of their customer. Japanese students studying with the author at a Michigan university in the 1980s told her that they learn the language of their client, no matter what it is. The Web sites reflect that same philosophy today.

The Web sites of the French and German companies generally avoid the use of English on their home country sites. France and Germany routinely used their native language only on their Web sites. This possibly reflects a negative attitude toward the English language, or pride in their own language.

**CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF WEB SITES**

**Research Question 3:** How do companies adapt their country-specific Web sites to the local culture?

While most companies preferred standardization of their global sites in order to maintain a brand image and familiar look to each site, many did choose some form of cultural adaptation (Hammerich and Harrison). The main ways that companies customize their sites to the local culture are through (1) customized content; (2) text, photos, and video; and (3) design. Customized content includes products that are available locally, and press releases or articles of local interest. Text, photos, and video appeal to the specific area through depiction of local places, people, and products. The design can also show cultural adaptation through its layout, use of color, and animation. Yunker (Beyond Borders) and Singh and Pereira (Culturally Customized) offer insight into Web customization strategies used by companies. Robins and Stylianou ("Study") have also studied cultural difference in global corporate Web sites.

While companies clearly preferred the unity of standardization of their country-specific Web sites, many still achieved localization through the inclusion of photos of local places, people, events, facilities, buildings, and operations. The Web sites also showed cultural adaptation by the using photos of local people. Naturally, Web site content was adapted to the country with locally available products and services and news releases of interest to the area. Colors of the corporate site also differed occasionally from country to country, reflecting local tastes. Some sites included national symbols such as flags, natural wonders or famous tourist attractions. At other times, the design of the sites showed adaptation to local preferences through placement of links and use of animation.

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IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURES ON CORPORATE WEB SITES

What do companies miss by not having their Web site materials in other languages? They reach a smaller market. Members of the linguistic community may feel excluded and alienated when they visit the corporate Web site that is unavailable in their language. This might crimp internal and external sales. The following section addresses the findings from a review of firms from each of the Big Five and BRIC countries.

US CORPORATE WEB SITES

Wal-Mart (www.walmartstores.com) does not make it easy to access its international sites. One has to go to “International Visitors” and then “International Sites.” Each international site is adapted to the culture of the country by use of human models, design layout, and color schemes. For example, the Japanese Wal-Mart site has a red theme, while the Chinese site uses blue. The UK Wal-Mart favors green and blue. Only China uses animation on its site, reflecting the national trend seen on other Chinese sites in this study. China has a definite preference for using animation on its corporate Web sites. And only the Chinese Wal-Mart has a bilingual site, available in English and Chinese.

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General Motors Worldwide Sites (www.gm.com) are easy to access, just one click off the homepage. The opening page shows a map of the world with different continents highlighted. Alongside the world map is the comment “Please note: not all international sites are available in English. Some sites may ask you to select a language when you enter.” For example, GM China is bilingual, and opens with an elegant slideshow of its cars. The homepage design is the same for Japan and China, with one large slideshow of its auto-motive models. The European sites are similar, with two models on the home

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General Electric (www.ge.com) has a very attractive site. From its homepage one can easily access GE around the world through a button on the lower left side. This leads to a global site that gives an overview of each country. GE’s history, and its businesses there, before one is directed to country sites. The overview page always has a photo of a beautiful local place. Occasionally it has a photo of the local senior manager and a photo related to local business, such as a manufacturing or wind plant.

Attractive local photos adapt each Web site to the area culture. Surprisingly there were no Chinese language links to the Chinese page, and the Indian site had little if any cultural adaptation. The Japanese site was only in Japanese, and was devoid of cultural adaptation. The Japanese and French sites had the same graphic of a paper airplane with an engine logo on it. All country Web sites had a standardized look and feel. The most different one was the Russian, which was also the only bilingual site. Brazil had a similar look with its identifiable statue of Corcovado at top center, but the site was only in Portuguese. In sum, GE had a wide variation of language use in its Web sites, as well as some adaptation to local culture.

JAPANESE COMPANIES’ WEB SITES

Toyota’s Web sites (www.Toyota.co.jp) are highly sophisticated. To get to Toyota Worldwide one has to click on a dropdown menu. The European sites are all in the native language. Only the German and UK sites have some cultural adaptation. The German site plays a high-tech video, while the UK site has a photo of a car and some British models. The India site opens with a page with a button below each one and an invitation to click. Sites differ in design by region. The sites of Europe and Brazil are in their native language only, while the Asian sites of Japan and China are in English as well. No cultural adaptation takes place on these web sites.

Ford Motor (www.ford.com) has a button for global sites at the bottom of its US homepage. There the countries are clearly laid out by region. Six brand sites are linked to the UK and Germany sites. The European sites have the same design, with no cultural adaptation whatsoever. They are monolingual sites—in their native languages. The global site is standardized and in English, and like ExxonMobil, it leads to country-specific brand sites in the language of the country. Only Japan has a bilingual site.

The sites for the Asian countries (China and Japan) have different designs from the European sites, and they incorporate animation. Cars flash and move. China has noticeably different colors. Other than that, there was little cultural adaptation.

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Attractive local photos adapt each Web site to the area culture. Surprisingly there were no Chinese language links to the Chinese page, and the Indian site had little if any cultural adaptation. The Japanese site was only in Japanese, and was devoid of cultural adaptation. The Japanese and French sites had the same graphic of a paper airplane with an engine logo on it. All country Web sites had a standardized look and feel. The most different one was the Russian, which was also the only bilingual site. Brazil had a similar look with its identifiable statue of Corcovado at top center, but the site was only in Portuguese. In sum, GE had a wide variation of language use in its Web sites, as well as some adaptation to local culture.

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Brazilian Companies' Web Sites

One Brazilian petroleum refining company and two banks made the Fortune Global 500 list in 2005. Petrobras (www.petrobras.com.br), Banco Bradesco (www.bradesco.com.br), and Banco do Brasil (www.bancoibrasil.com.br) have national sites only. However, Petrobras and Banco Bradesco offer their sites in English and Spanish translations, in addition to the native Portuguese. The design of each country’s site is different. For example, the Japanese Honda home page has many small components, giving it a busy appearance to the American eye. The US Honda homepage was the only bilingual one, available in English and Spanish.

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WEB-BASED COMMUNICATION

CHINA’S CORPORATE WEB SITES

China has sixteen Fortune Global 500 companies, the largest representation of any BRIC nation (see Table 2). The top five Chinese companies on the list are related to the Chinese government and therefore have limited presence.

## Table 2
### FORTUNE GLOBAL 500 COMPANIES IN CHINA

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The five companies represent four industries that appear often in this study of Fortune Global 500 companies. Sinopec Corporation and China National Petroleum Corporation do petroleum refining, State Grid Corporation of China is part of the utilities industry, China Life Insurance conducts business in the Life and Health insurance category, and China Mobile Communications falls into the telecommunications industry.

Several sites are markedly sophisticated in design. China National Petroleum Corporation has a very attractive Web site, with entry through a globe. The appealing slogan “Energize-Harmonize-Realize” appears at the portal. The site uses animation, photos of technology, people, and modern buildings, portraying a highly technical and sophisticated company. It lists an impressive array of international partners.

China Life Insurance opens with very beautiful red and yellow floral Chinese paintings on both sides of the screen. It has a video of Chinese people of all ages. One woman sits in a wicker wheelchair with a young child. Although the site is exclusively in Chinese, it has some headings in English below the Chinese, such as “News Center” and “Welcome to Chinese Life.”

The colors and design used by China Mobile Telecommunications are also attractive. The site uses animation that features Chinese Olympic athletes. Some English words appear on an otherwise all Chinese-language site, for example, “China 2008,” “GoTone,” and “VIP.”

INDIAN COMPANIES’ WEB SITES
Four out of India’s five companies in the Global 500 belong to the petroleum refining industry. These are Indian Oil (www.iocl.com), Reliance Industries (www.ril.com), Bharat Petroleum (www.bharatpetroleum.com), and Hindustan Petroleum (www.hindustanpetroleum.com). The fifth company, Oil & Natural Gas (www.ongcindia.com), does business in the mining and crude oil production sector. None of the companies is on the New York Stock Exchange.

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The three Russian companies in the Global 500 are OAO Gazprom (www.gazprom.ru), Lukoil (www.lukoil.com), and RAO UES of Russia (www.rao-ees.ru). Gazprom is an energy company, Lukoil’s business is petroleum refining, while RAO UES (Unified Energy System) of Russia is in utilities. Lukoil and RAO UES of Russia are represented on the New York Stock Exchange. Nevertheless, the three companies have very basic Web sites. Each comes in two languages only—Russian and English. None has an international site.

Clicking on the corporate logo brings out a popup explanation of the photos and corporate emphasis on “appreciative enquiry.” The company explains that appreciative enquiry has been very important. The quote at the top of the page says, “It is because we dream we discover, because we discover we design and because we design we deliver. At BPCL, it’s all about dreaming and delivering.” The company defines appreciative enquiry as “a methodology for discovering, understanding and fostering innovation through the gathering of positive stories and images and the construction of positive interactions—seeking out the very best of what is to ignite the imagination for what could be.”

RUSSIAN COMPANIES’ WEB SITES

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WEB-BASED COMMUNICATION

All five sites focus on India and have no other international sites. The primary language of the sites is English. Bharat Petroleum and Hindustan Petroleum also offer content in Hindi. Indian Oil, Reliance Industries, Hindustan Petroleum, and Oil & Natural Gas have fairly basic sites. Indian Oil’s site is distinguished by scrolling lists and a horizontal moving ticker tape. The others have a minimal degree of moving graphics. Indian Oil displays a graphic of the Fortune 500 in the upper right hand corner of the homepage announcing its IOC rank of 170. Bharat Petroleum also proudly announces its membership in the Global Fortune 500 on its corporate page.

Bharat Petroleum, however, takes a very creative approach in its Web site. Its slogan is “Energising lives.” Its design immediately catches one’s attention with two alternating black and white photos of children with captions. One has a young boy smiling and the words “dream . . . envision what might be.” Another has a group of young girls in a team huddle with the caption “dialogue what should be . . . design.” Then, the right side features the caption “Energising” over a menu that includes “wheels, homes, business, skies and the environment.”

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GERMAN COMPANIES’ WEB SITES
The five German companies are Daimler Chrysler (www.daimlerchrysler.com), Allianz (www.allianz.com), Volkswagen (www.volkswagen.com), Siemens (www.siemens.com), and Deutsche Telekom (www.telekom.de). The industries represented are motor vehicles and parts, insurance, electronics, electrical equipment, and telecommunications. All are traded on the New York Stock Exchange. Deutsche Telekom has only one basic site in English and German. It is the same in both languages and follows the practice seen previously.

Allianz, Volkswagen, and Siemens follow the practice seen previously of using the native language only for the American, British, French, and German sites and English for Indian sites. These companies also have two languages for the Asian sites: English and the native language for Japan and China. Siemens has a Portuguese and English version of its Brazilian site, while Daimler Chrysler and Allianz each has a monolingual Portuguese site for Brazil. Daimler Chrysler uses English and German on both its US and German sites, reflecting its roots in both countries.

Allianz and Siemens use photos of local people or current events to localize some of their sites. Daimler Chrysler does not localize its sites and keeps the look standard.

UK CORPORATE WEB SITES

Of these companies, only BP is on the New York Stock Exchange.

Although an international company, Tesco’s site pertains strictly to the UK and its operations there. BP’s global homepage, written in English, gives an overview of operations in each country around the world. It often has multiple brands for one country. However, most of the sites examined are monolingual in the native language, for example, those of France, Germany, Japan, UK, Brazil, and the US. India’s site was in English. The company uses English and the native language only for the American, British, French, and German sites and English for Indian sites. These companies also have two languages for the Asian sites: English and the native language for Japan and China. Siemens has a Portuguese and English version of its Brazilian site, while Daimler Chrysler and Allianz each has a monolingual Portuguese site for Brazil. Daimler Chrysler uses English and German on both its US and German sites, reflecting its roots in both countries.

Aviva also favors monolingual sites for the US, UK, France, Germany, China, and India. Japan’s site is just English, but a browser problem may not have shown the Japanese language version. This monolingualism may be explained by a disclaimer that pops up every time a user tries to venture into a country’s Web site. Without accepting the disclaimer, the user cannot access the site. The disclaimer warns users that the country-specific sites are
intended for residents of that country (see fig. 2). No other company in the study has such a disclaimer.

"Disclaimer
You are now leaving the Aviva plc group website.
Please remember that any product information you read on the websites you now enter is intended for residents of that country, such websites are operated locally and the contents and use may be governed by our group companies’ terms of use and/or privacy policy and by the laws and regulation of countries other than the United Kingdom. Aviva plc accepts no responsibility for any use of reliance placed by you or any person on the information contained on it. Please read the above warning and disclaimer before going any further. By using this link you will be deemed to have accepted the terms.

The Aviva site for China blends two cultures with a photo of a British man in a bowler hat interacting with a Chinese model.

HSBC has an unusual bilingual approach to its French and German sites, which appear in English and the native languages. The Japanese and Chinese sites are similarly bilingual, while the Russian and Indian sites are available in English only. The tagline for HSBC is “The world’s local bank.” Its US site comes in three languages: English, Spanish, and Chinese.

The global site for Vodafone is available in eight languages, a first for this study. These languages include German, English, Spanish, Greek, Italian, Swedish, Dutch, and Chinese. It has two languages for the US site: (English and Spanish) as well as for the Japanese and Chinese sites (either Japanese or Chinese and English).

FRENCH CORPORATE WEB SITES

Total tends toward monolingual sites using the native language for its French, German, and Japanese sites. AXA also favors monolingual sites for the US, France, Japan, and the UK. In contrast, its Chinese site appears in English only. The tagline for HSBC is “The world’s local bank.” Its US site comes in three languages: English, Spanish, and Chinese.

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and Chinese. Carrefour’s sites in France, Japan, and Brazil are monolingual in the native languages, clearly intended for citizens of those countries.

Peugeot’s site in France appears in English, French, and Spanish. The Chinese site is in both English and Chinese. The most bilingual of the French corporate sites is BNP Paribas Bank. It uses monolingual sites in the native language for the US, France, Brazil, Russia, India and the UK. It has bilingual sites in English and the native language for Germany, China, and Japan.

CONCLUSIONS

The research findings presented here provide a strong argument for global business to incorporate languages other than English and cultural adaptation in their Internet-based communication. The study investigated trends in language use and cultural adaptation in Web-based communication. The results show that English plays an important role, but not the dominant role, in Internet business communication. It provides evidence that languages other than English, and non-American cultures, have a major presence in Web-based global commerce. One can conclude that American and other global companies need to increase the use of languages other than English and cultural adaptation of Web-based communication in order to be more competitive in the global market.

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