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Are long-tail languages the future of localization strategy?

White Paper

In 2021, why are the world's biggest brands such as Google, Microsoft and PayPal localizing into languages that would have been considered minority or non-essential just ten years ago?

Long-tail languages are considered by many industry experts as the next logical step in 21st-century localization strategy. But what exactly are they and why are they worth investing in?

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What does “long-tail” mean?

In retail, long-tail refers to a large number of products that sell in small quantities. So you might be forgiven for presuming that “long-tail languages” refers to a large number of languages that have a small number of speakers.

In many cases that might be true, but it is certainly not guaranteed.

Long-tail languages are actually languages that are localized less frequently, regardless of how many people speak those languages. Jeff Beatty at Mozilla [describes](#) them as languages “for which revenue acquisition represents a long-term investment strategy. They are more risky and complex than your typical EFIGS (English, French, Italian, German, Spanish) line-up, but they play a key role in speaking to the hearts and minds of people in specific regions.”

So Bengali, which is the seventh most spoken language in the world with [210 million native speakers](#), is considered a long-tail language because it is often not prioritized for first-round localization. However, [Blackfoot](#) is also a long-tail language, an indigenous North American language which is spoken by under two thousand people.

Long-tail languages can therefore refer both to languages that are spoken by large numbers of people (potentially even hundreds of millions) or so-called “minority languages”, such as Basque which is spoken by only 800,000 people.

The reason these languages have not traditionally been localized is that they have been viewed as economically unimportant in comparison to other key language markets. Put simply, the investment in localizing in such languages has not been seen as providing adequate returns.

However, priorities are changing. Many brands are realizing that localizing into long-tail languages – both those with large numbers of speakers and those with relatively few – offers new commercial opportunities.

A truly worldwide web

That’s because the demographics of the web are changing, and rapidly too.

According to a [Google blog written in 2018](#), the next billion internet users are going to shape the future of the online world.

And those users are not coming from the West, where a high proportion of the population is already connected (87% in Europe, 89% in North America according to [World Internet Stats](#)). They are coming from the growing numbers of people accessing smartphones in countries like Brazil, India, Indonesia, China and Nigeria.

As internet access becomes even more widespread, languages that are widely spoken, but perhaps not so widely localized, will come to the fore. Hindi is the fourth most widely spoken language worldwide, and yet is not even in the top 30 languages for web content, [according to Google](#).

Digital penetration is growing rapidly in emerging markets across Africa and Asia. With a presence in more than 700 cities worldwide, it makes sense for Uber to invest in localizing in languages traditionally seen as long-tail (such as Swahili and Bengali) to reach customers looking to book a ride-share in Kampala or Dhaka.

As digital services become ever more embedded in a greater number of local economies, brands may start to shift their localization budgets towards markets with larger populations rather than simply those which were early adopters of the e-commerce infrastructure.

Take the Nordic countries, for instance. It is quite common for websites to be localized into Swedish, Danish, Norwegian and Finnish. Yet the populations of these four countries combined is far less than the number of people who speak Hausa in West Africa: approximately 47 million native speakers, with another 25 million people having it as a second language.

While it still lies a significant way behind Europe, America and Asia in terms of internet access, Africa is experiencing its own digital revolution which is encouraging many brands to incorporate African languages into their localization strategies.

[A report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development \(UNCTAD\)](#) stated that the number of online shoppers in Africa has grown 18% annually since 2014. Fuelled by mobile technology and access to smartphones, the total value of e-commerce in Africa is predicted to reach US\$29 billion in 2022. With Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya accounting for half of online shoppers in Africa in 2017, the question for many global brands may not be “can I afford to localize into African long-tail languages?” but rather “can I afford not to?”.

It's not just a question of the people or communities that are starting to come online, either.

Digitalist Magazine predicts that [changing trade patterns will have an impact on the languages and language pairs required within certain industries](#). They point to China's desire to build a new Silk Road with its Belt and Road initiative, which aims to connect some 70 countries across Asia. In this context, localization into English would be irrelevant.

Why localizing minority languages makes business sense

While the benefits of localizing into Vietnamese – spoken by 75 million people – may be numerically apparent, it is perhaps less immediately clear why a growing number of brands are investing in localizing in minority long-tail languages such as Welsh, which is spoken by around [860,000 people](#).

The lack of online language diversity is often blamed for accelerating the death of minority languages around the world. Although there are around 7,100 languages currently used around the world, [a report by Wired estimates](#) that one of these is becoming extinct every two weeks.

However, there are a growing number of businesses and organizations that are turning the use of minority languages into a unique selling proposition.

One example is Nemeton TV, a company that specializes in the production of Irish language programmes. Founded by Irial Mac Murchú in 1993, Nemeton has grown to become Ireland's largest independent television production company with 30 full-time staff and around 100 freelancers on its books.

In [an interview with The Guardian](#), Irial Mac Murchú said: "Differentiation is key in marketing and using the Irish language can be a powerful way of standing out from the crowd, especially for small businesses.

"Irish firms can emphasise their origin and brand values through the use of Irish, aiming at either the home market or internationally, and the potential marketing benefits can extend to attracting new customers, increasing customer loyalty, harnessing goodwill at relatively low cost or enhancing their public relations efforts."

He adds: "When you see brands like Tayto Crisps, which is huge in Ireland, Aer Lingus, our biggest airline, RTÉ, our biggest broadcaster, and even the likes of Toyota doing TV ads in Irish to stand out from the herd, the case speaks for itself."

Global brands, local experience

An increasing number of global brands are realizing that the user experience is hugely enriched by enabling customers to interact with products and services in their own language.

And, even for languages with relatively low numbers of speakers, they are willing to invest in this experience. For instance, games developer EA Mobile has localized its hugely popular FIFA Mobile app into 120 languages including, for example, languages such as Albanian and Moldovan.

The giants of the tech world are also taking an increasingly proactive stance in supporting what have traditionally been considered obscure or minority languages.

Google, for example, invested in and launched the [Endangered Languages Project](#), which aims to preserve at-risk languages by cataloguing them on a web platform. Meanwhile [Microsoft's Local Language Program](#) enables more than 1.7 billion people worldwide to access technology in their own language via localized software and language interface packs for nearly 100 languages.

Redesigning the wheel

The Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote in the only book he published in his lifetime that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world”. It’s a statement that seems to mirror the growing realization that linguistic diversity offers competitive advantage through the most human of connections: the words we use in our daily lives.

But what does this mean for you and your localization strategy?

It may mean rethinking your [target audience](#), and whether both it and your strategy might change over the next decade.

Because, amidst ever-growing global connectivity, there are huge opportunities for brands to connect with audiences large and small via an effective long-tail language localization strategy.

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