

Universal access to public services across language barriers

The real borders in the Digital Europe

Exactly two years ago, at the European Day of Languages which takes place every year on 26 of September, a report published by the Multilingual Europe Technology Alliance (META)¹ dominated the headlines² and made for alarming reading: The White Paper Series “Europe’s Languages in the Digital Age”³ warned that most European languages would be unlikely to survive in the Digital Age. Admittedly, the Digital Single Market (DSM), a key goal of the European Commission for 2020, is fundamentally multilingual. However, until now, most European languages have not enjoyed adequate language technology support to enable work, life and trade without borders. In fact, Europe’s cherished linguistic diversity can turn into an obstacle when it hinders the free exchange of information or prevents unbiased access to public services, business opportunities, job opportunities, and support.

Especially in the emerging Digital Single Market, language barriers thus create invisible borders: While 99% of all European businesses are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), only 7% of them sell cross-border⁴ and cross-language. Similarly, 90% of all European customers prefer to browse websites in their own language⁵. Hence, providing instant language support and enabling day-to-day multilinguality can have significant benefits for both economy and society: It is estimated that a Digital Single Market can actually create up to €340 billion in additional growth, hundreds of thousands of new jobs, and a vibrant knowledge-based society⁶.

Benefit from the new opportunities

At this year’s European Day of Languages (26. September 2015), the European Commission has taken a decisive step towards supporting the truly multilingual Digital Single Market by enabling public services for Europe’s citizens and businesses to operate freely across language barriers: The Automated Translation platform of Connecting Europe Facility (CEF.AT) will facilitate multilingual communication and exchange of documents and other linguistic content in Europe between national public administrations and between these administrations and EU citizens and businesses. The CEF.AT platform will address various public administration scenarios in the areas of consumer rights, health, public procurement, social security, culture and others. It will power Europe’s public online services such as Europeana, the Open Data Portal, and the Online Dispute Resolution platform. With the help of the CEF.AT, public administrations across Europe will be one step closer towards operating without language barriers.

Technology as the basis for public services without borders

The technology behind CEF.AT is a statistical machine translation system, MT@EC, which learns how to translate from existing translations. MT@EC in its current state, is available free of charge to public services in Europe within the framework of the CEF programme. However, since it has mainly been trained on translations of EU legislation and texts produced by the EU institutions, it may not be so well suited for all day-to-day needs and demands of European national public services. In order to adjust the system according to the requirements of public services across Europe, corresponding language and translation data

¹ www.meta-net.eu

² <http://www.meta-net.eu/whitepapers/press-coverage>

³ <http://www.meta-net.eu/whitepapers/overview>

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/digital-single-market/docs/dsm-factsheet_en.pdf

⁵ Flash Eurobarometer 313 Analytical report on user language preferences online (2011): http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_313_en.pdf

⁶ <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/news/factsheet-why-we-need-digital-single-market>

(mono- and bi-lingual data) relevant to the daily needs of European national administrations are needed.

Through the European Language Resource Coordination (ELRC) (www.lr-coordination.eu), the European Commission is embarking an unprecedented language data collection effort in a first step to support the adaptation of CEF.AT to the needs of public services across all EU Member States, Iceland and Norway, thus supporting the provision of multilingual services for Europe's citizens, administrations and businesses. In doing so, ELRC will not only to close the gap between the capabilities of the current MT systems offered by the European Commission to the national administrations and the actual, day-to-day requirements of national public services across Europe, but it will also directly support Europe's national languages at the grass-roots level.

Meet ELRC live in your country

On behalf of the European Commission, the ELRC consortium is organising local workshops in each of the 30 participating countries to raise awareness about the importance of language data held by public administrations for public administrations. In order to involve all relevant stakeholders in making CEF.AT fit for their needs, ELRC invites all representatives from Europe's public service administrations to participate in their local workshop. Within each national workshop, invited speakers from the European Commission, national public administrations and government bodies, language service providers, and language technologists will work together to understand the needs of national public sector administrations with regard to automated translation, jointly identify relevant sources of multi-lingual language resources, and discuss any technical and legal issues involved in the use of data for automated translation. Information on the date and venue of each workshop as well as the registration system are available at www.lr-coordination.eu/events. We look forward to your engagement.