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FORMS OF ADDRESS IN WEBSITE AND SOFTWARE LOCALIZATION FROM ENGLISH INTO BULGARIAN

Texts pertaining to the digital genres of websites and software share one key characteristic feature – they all address an unknown user behind the screen. In translation for localization from English into Bulgarian, this inevitably leaves the translator at a crossroads when it comes to the choice of form of address, an asymmetric category in these respective languages. The current paper analyses the variants of address found applied in already localized products in Bulgarian, the possible rationale behind adopting those variants, and the linguistic and extralinguistic limitations in translation for localization affecting them, in order to find existing patterns of good or bad practices and show whether there could be one universal solution to the translation problem regarding form of address.

Keywords*: form of address, software localization, website localization, digital genres, translation problems*

Introduction

The main goal of all processes which website and software localization encompasses is to adapt a digital product so as to make it attractive to a certain audience primarily defined by its linguistic affiliation (i.e. locale). As a digital service recipient, the software or website user has to feel inconspicuously "guided" through the product being used. While stemming from not only functional aspects (which are a product of technical efforts), but also graphical (product of UX[1] design efforts) and linguistic ones (product of UX writing in original and of localization in all remaining locales), this intuitiveness has to also align with the tone of voice of the respective product brand. Thus, on part of the translator, a certain multimodal awareness is required in every translation choice. For instance, technological restrictions can result in translation problems such as impossibility for linguistic variability (e.g. use of singular and plural) or simple character limitation due to inflexible design (Todorova 2022). In this article, we will investigate what forms of address are encountered in products localized from English into Bulgarian and what linguistic and extralinguistic factors might affect the translator's choice among the variety of forms that the Bulgarian language offers. In order to understand this variety, we will

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[1] Abbreviation for "user experience" used in the context of digital products.

first outline the interlingual asymmetry between English and Bulgarian as regards form of address, along with the communicative situations in digital products.

Interlingual Asymmetry and Situational Variety

Two forms of singular address are available in Bulgarian: the informal, where the 2nd person singular pronouns and verb forms are used; and the formal, marked by the use of the 2nd person plural pronouns (spelled with a capital "B") and verb forms. The latter is complemented by rules for the use of participles (past active and past passive ones) and adjectives in combination with the address (Kuneva 2017: 106–108) and is invariably used for both singular and plural address. These complementary rules, together with the capitalized pronouns, are the only way to differentiate between the formal address (be it plural or singular) and the plural informal address due to the differences in concord they provide for. While politeness in address in English can be expressed semantically through choice of vocabulary or title of the addressee, in contrast to the Bulgarian paradigm, the anonymous addressee(s) would always be the universal 2nd person "you", referred to with the respective verb forms in the indicative and addressed with the base form in the imperative.

What is more, in localization from English into Bulgarian, further to the interlingual asymmetry observed, there is a variety of communicative situations that allow for intentional variation of address (and addressee), or even for unintentional inconsistency in adhering to one universal solution in regard to the form of address. SaaS (Software-as-a-Service) websites and apps are designed with one primary communicative purpose – the interaction between the digital product provider, represented by the product and its interface, and the provider's clients that leads to the exploitation of a certain technological functionality. As Anthony Pym points out, in such interaction, recipients of website texts are referred to as *users* rather than *readers* as they "determine the rhythm of the communication act" within the non-linear web medium (Pym 2011: 415). Furthermore, different sections of a website serve various sub-purposes in this company-client, or product-user, interaction. For instance, the integral privacy and cookie policies perform a general informative function, as does any FAQ section. The latter, however, might require action on part of the user, who often needs to navigate through various screens or sections in order to find the information needed. On the other hand, functionalities such as the personal account, the very product interface navigation (e.g. a booking flow in a hospitality website), as well as the service emails, rather entail bidirectional communication with the active participation (or navigation) of the client (or even tridirectional, if the product is considered a participant of its own).

Thus, some website texts can be considered to address their general collective audience (e.g., privacy policy, some FAQs, terms of service), while others address the individual user accessing the product through their personal device (e.g. account section, settings, service sections, as well as service emails) and prompt them to take particular action. Combined with the paradigm of forms of address in Bulgarian,

this range of communicative situations leads to a variety of possible solutions to the translation problem of form of address in localization.

In order to examine how this variety manifests in localization, we have analysed 31 top-ranking digital products localized from English into Bulgarian. This analysis is part of the author's dissertation project on translation problems in localization from English into Bulgarian.

Data-gathering Process and Criteria

The sampling of the products for analysis was purposive (Saldanha, O'Brien 2013: 34), based on the following criteria:

➢ The products belong to different service categories, with at least 2 websites per category found: general, social, shopping, delivery, financial, air travel, hospitality, music, and tech.

➢ They also belong to the top 500 websites in terms of monthly traffic in Bulgaria (SimilarWeb 2021) or are direct competitors in the respective service category to one of the products found in top 500 (i.e. have significant user reach).

The final products selected were (per category):

➢ General: Google & Microsoft[2]

➢ Social: Badoo, Discord, Facebook, Instagram, Tinder, Twitter, Twitch, Yahoo

➢ Shopping: H&M, IKEA, Jysk, Reserved, Zara

➢ Air travel: Esky, Kiwi, Ryanair, Skyscanner, Wizzair

➢ Hospitality: Airbnb, Booking

➢ Music: Spotify, Tidal

➢ Tech: Huawei, Lenovo, Samsung

➢ Delivery: Takeaway, Glovo

➢ Finance: Binance, Revolut

Proceeding from the observations shared in the previous section, determining the form(s) of address used in the localized Bulgarian versions of the respective websites was done based on several different sections with various pragmatic purposes where potential variation in address is likely to be found. The sections analysed included the homepage, the FAQ section, the log-in or main service functionality and some service emails (if such were available). All Bulgarian websites and products of the respective companies were accessed and analysed in the period of May–June 2022.

Statistics and Observations

While in most instances it was clear that the translator(s) have followed one primary solution for the choice of form of address, there were almost always small deviations from the general pattern (e.g. Facebook's slogan is in the formal address, unlike the rest of the website) and sometimes even more extreme ones where differ-

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[2] Google and Microsoft are in a category of their own since they cover a variety of websites and services all adhering to the respective company style guide.

ent solutions had been adopted seemingly haphazardly within single sections. Respectively, 2 of the 31 websites analysed, where these inconsistencies did not allow for a pattern to be identified, were classified in an "undefined" category of their own and excluded from the statistics.

In all remaining 29 products, 3 strategies adopted as regards form of address were identified (further presented in Fig. 1 below):

(1) Products that use formal address as a primary solution – 7 in total (24.14%).

(2) Products that use informal singular address as a primary solution – 7 in total (24.14%).

(3) Products that use a grammatically undefined form following combination of codifications found in informal plural and formal addresses, which will be referred to as a *hybrid* form of address for the purposes of this research – 15 in total (51.72%).

	TOTAL		GENERAL		SOCIAL		SHOPPING		AIR TRAVEL		TECH		HOSPITALITY		MUSIC		DELIVERY		FINANCE	
FORMAL ВИ	7	24.14%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	3	60.00%	2	40.00%	1	50.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	50.00%	0	0.00%
INFORMAL ТИ	7	24.14%	0	0.00%	4	50.00%	0	0.00%	1	20.00%	1	50.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	50.00%	0	0.00%
HYBRID	15	51.72%	2	100.00%	4	50.00%	2	40.00%	2	40.00%	0	0.00%	2	100.00%	1	100.00%	0	0.00%	2	100.00%
TOTAL	29	100.00%	2	100.00%	8	100.00%	5	100.00%	5	100.00%	2	100.00%	2	100.00%	1	100.00%	2	100.00%	2	100.00%

Fig. 1. *Strategies adopted in the 29 products analysed*

The results, although somewhat fragmentary when it comes to particular domains, still provide grounds for two general observations, considering the high visibility and therefore commercial value of the products analysed. Firstly, there does not seem to be a universal solution to the translation problem concerning form of address across domains, and in most cases neither does one transpire within individual domains. Where it does, however, **the unanimity is always in favour of a hybrid form of address**, which goes beyond the standard formal and informal ones as defined by grammar rules. Secondly, despite the lack of a universal solution, **a predominant one can still be identified – the hybrid form has been adopted in over 50% of all cases analysed**.

Before delving further into the potential factors affecting the translators' choice of form of address and the reasons why the predominant solution identified is an ungrammatical one, we will first outline this hybrid form and its characteristic features as observed in the products analysed.

Hybrid Form of Address

In regard to the variety of communicative situations discussed earlier, in the products analysed the hybrid form has been used universally across separate sections. In other words, it is adopted for both a presumed individual recipient as well as for a collective one (or simply for an anonymous individual/collective recipient).

Furthermore, considering the individual recipient, the form could be said to follow the codification and rules relevant for the formal address with two exceptions:

Exception 1. The decapitalization of "В" in the personal and possessive pronouns "Вие", "Ваш/а/и", "Ви", "Вас". E.g.

(1) *Manage your Google Account – Управление на профила **ви** в Google* (Google 2022)

(2) *[Facebook friend name] likes **your** response to [event name]. – [Facebook friend name] харесва **вашия** отговор на [event name].*
(Facebook 2022)

At first glance, the solution could be regarded as an unintentional error based on unawareness of grammar rules. This observation is all the more valid if we take into account the fact that Facebook's translation and translation quality evaluation have been crowdsourced (Jimenez-Crespo 2021). In the case of Google, however, a whole system of vendors and quality assurance specialists are behind linguistic processes. What is more, the frequency of this solution in our analysis makes the possibility of it being a matter of unawareness or of an uninformed decision highly unlikely.

Exception 2. The pluralisation of parts of speech which would otherwise require gender-marking, such as adjectives and past passive participles. E.g.:

(1) ***You** won't be **charged** yet – Засега няма да бъдете **таксувани***
(AirBnB 2022)

(2) ***[name]**, are you **ready** to print your photo book? – **[name]**, **готови** ли сте да отпечатате албума си?*
(Google 2022)

The first sentence is encountered when an account user is about to make a reservation they will be charged for. Despite the fact that an account belongs to an individual, the plural "таксувани" has been used. It can be argued here that a whole family or group of friends might be behind the booking, hence, the plural could be considered purposefully used. Nevertheless, when setting up an account with the platform, you are treated as an individual – information such as date of birth and gender is requested, and it will still be grammatically incongruous to be referred to in the plural. In the second example, the potential collective addressee is impossible for the communicative situation – an email to an individual user, where even their name is used. Hence, we have a deviation from the rule concerning the formal form of address which states that past passive participles and adjectives should stay singular (Kuneva 2017: 106).

As observed, the hybrid form of address cannot be considered grammatical by standard norms. Yet, it is still a predominant solution adopted across various platforms and by various professionals. In order to understand why translators might opt for such a form, we would try to consider it through the lens of three salient factors in digital product localization: brand guidelines, user perception, and relevant translation problems that the use of such a form might solve.

Guidelines

Issues due to language asymmetries in localization are often handled by the use of style guides (Esselink 2000: 169) and this is one of the salient factors to consider in our analysis. While in the end of the 20th century it was mainly big global tech companies who would devote resource to drafting such style guides (or need localization at all), with the acceleration of globalization and the technological revolution, nowadays, it is much more common for any global company to not only have its own English style guide to begin with, but also adapt it for the locales its product would be localised in. The tech giants in our current "general" domain are pioneers in this practice.

Both Microsoft and Google, being umbrella categories of digital products of their own, are ruled by definitive style guides. In Microsoft's style guide, although no explicit mention is made of rules of address, the hybrid form is exclusively used (Microsoft 2022). And, despite the lack of open access to Google's guidelines, some conclusions can be drawn by analysing its products localised in Bulgarian. Our findings show that, in spite of striving for ultimate grammaticalness and authenticity of the target language, both companies use the hybrid form of address as observed in our analysis above. Microsoft even lists several "normative references" in the very first pages of its style guide (Microsoft 2022, 5) such as recent versions of Bulgarian dictionaries and grammar books, yet it goes against norms when it comes to form of address.

User Reception

Due to digital products' commercial nature, any such stylistic choice has its respective intended marketing effect and elicited reaction. An exhaustive answer to the question of whether and how the form of address might affect the user perception of a product and a brand would require a comprehensive study with potential use of A/B testing[3]. Such an inquiry would be able to investigate the cultural and linguistic awareness of product users, as well as their attitudes, and draw conclusions about the cognitive links between language and brand; or even further – to recognize any influence, or lack of such, of these products over a low-resourced and commercially minor language such as Bulgarian.

What we can observe ahead of such research, however, is the fact that all products that have opted for the ungrammatical hybrid solution still enjoy great popularity among users and there has not been public pressure for a change. What is more, Berendt and Kralisch's (as cited in Taanonen 2014: 91) divide users into a "linguistic upper class" and a "linguistic lower class" with the latter lacking English competence and therefore appreciating translated content and being less critical to translations. With the high visibility and usability of digital products, if proper qual-

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[3] A basic type of randomized controlled testing where two variables are compared with the aim of identifying which one leads to better results (Gallo 2017).

ity and consistency standards are not established in the localization process, users with lower unawareness of linguistic matters might eventually adopt ungrammatical solutions such as the hybrid form observed in our analysis.

Translation Problems

Apart from the objectively commercial factors of marketing-related guidelines and user reception discussed so far, a third one can be found in the deviations observed in the hybrid form of address. For instance, it could be considered that the hybrid form is used in conformity with obsolete rules regarding form of address – namely, the rule stating that the capital B should be kept in communication in strictly official register only, and the lowercase should be applied elsewhere (Paskalev 2016). Such a solution could indicate a desire to shorten the distance between the SaaS (provider) and the recipient (user) without opting for the rather casual and personal second person singular informal address, which might be considered rude or intrusive.

As for the pluralization of adjectives and past passive participles against norms of concord, a different factor can be found. In Bulgarian, adjectives and past passive participles should be in concord with the nouns they refer to or modify syntactically not only in terms of number, but also of gender. Despite the pluralization of verbs and pronouns in the formal address in Bulgarian, this rule still applies to adjectives and past passive participles which keep their singular form (Kuneva 2017: 106). Hence, if we preserve the syntactical structure, instead of the ungrammatical examples above, we would have to differentiate between "няма да бъдете таксуван" and "няма да бъдете таксувана", or use a unified "няма да бъдете таксуван/a". The former would require the product to assign a gender to each user and for the software to recognize and apply it in choosing between the potential linguistic variables. Such a solution would, however, not only require technical adaptation of the product (in order for it to provide for variability of units), but will also exclude the possibility of anonymity or non-binariness of users. The latter solution, on the other hand, bypasses any technical adaptations. Yet, it can be considered unfitting in a domain where design and visual aspects play such a crucial role and it also does not respond to matters of non-binarity.

Conclusions

The fragmented results of our analysis illustrate the difficulty of finding a universal solution when it comes to the choice of form of address in localization from English to Bulgarian. What is more, the predominant hybrid form observed indicates a tendency to consider extralinguistic factors such as brand style, user reception, or technical restrictions for gender variation, as ones of higher significance than linguistic norms. Due to the high applicability and visibility of digital products, such a trend has the potential to affect established standards and weaken norms. Regardless of whether we believe that stricter regulations should be in place in order to

preserve existent norms, or that such trends could be part of a natural evolution of Bulgarian in a digital era, this asymmetry should be highlighted in Bulgarian localization guidelines with special attention to the relevant interlingual asymmetries that play part at least with the aim of avoiding inconsistencies on various levels.

These preliminary observations provide insight and incentive for further research not only into the translation problem regarding forms of address in localization from English into Bulgarian, but also into other translation problems in localization in this language pair and into localization-specific factors affecting the solutions to such problems. As regards form of address, a contrastive study of two monolingual comparable corpora – one of texts localized from English and one of originally drafted Bulgarian texts – will allow for more comprehensive understanding as to the origins of the observed hybrid form of address, as well as to its frequency of use in Bulgarian texts.

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