

**Contribution
to the
ITU and UNESCO Global Symposium on Promoting the
Multilingual Internet**

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Comments for the
UNESCO/ITU Global Symposium on Promoting the Multilingual Internet

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It is often said that the future is in our hands. And all the more so in the case of shaping and using a new and rapidly evolving set of technologies: computing and the internet. So the hopes for a meeting like the Global Symposium on Promoting the Multilingual Internet are high. There is of course an ongoing need for vision and insight by experts at high levels, to complement the work and energy of activists, ICT for development workers, and people involved in localization in the field.

I would like to bring up a several things in this context, but the gist of it is that in the nexus of connections between the global view of the issues of multilingual information and communication technology (ICT) of your Symposium, and the local realities of multilingualism and ICT for development (ICT4D) that many of the participants are involved in, there are a number of external factors that condition the environment for multilingual ICT. And just as important, the uses to which we do – and don't – put these new technologies will impact these same external factors.

None of this should be news to the participants in the Symposium, but in the rapidly changing technical, information and communications environment, it is possible to become absorbed in consideration of technical minutiae – however critical – and miss some larger implications.

As part of my work on the PanAfrican Localisation project (PanAfriL10N), which seeks to support African localizers with information resources and the framework of a vision for localization, I have been working on a systems model dubbed “localization ecology.” Drawing on the concept of ecology as the interrelationship and indeed interdependence of elements of a natural environmental

system, localisation ecology attempts to account for major factors affecting localization. While technology, language, and the sociocultural setting are of primary importance, it is clear that other factors like education, policies, and economics are also essential for the success, utility, and sustainability of localization initiatives. And indeed localization has an effect in these diverse areas.

When we talk about a topic like IDN, this is in effect a small but important piece of a larger nexus of issues. Factors such as international agreements, technical standards, national standardization of orthographies, and domain governance are involved. Among these, standardizing orthographies is related to language policies and larger issues of education and literacy. These in turn are related to the social production in the languages concerned. In this way, any discussion in, say Geneva or Tunis, on a facilitating environment for multilingual ICT very quickly begins to implicate issues that go all the way down to boardrooms, classrooms and telecenters over wide parts of the world.

Put another way, all of the discussions in conferences are for naught if (1) people do not have the training – from basic literacy in their main languages to computer literacy – to access the technology, and (2) the technology – from user interface to content – is not localized to facilitate their access. How will decisions from your symposium be actualized on the local levels?

From a technical point of view one of the key relationships is between localizing software and localizing content. Discussions of multilingual internet, in brief, need to support multilingual software development (and vice-versa). These are in effect complementary factors in the localization ecology. It is encouraging therefore to note objective #2 in the Symposium's program.

The particular topic of multilingual IDNs (objective #1) and the approach to take towards them similarly needs to be considered in the larger context. In localization for instance one of the basic tools is locale data and this in turn is defined by language codes within ISO-639. This standard of course is not a neat package – anything dealing with defining languages rarely is – and as it stands is incomplete. Without going into too much detail, parts one and two were originally conceived with other purposes than defining languages on the internet and in software – and in any event cover only some languages. Part 3 aspires to be complete but defines as separate languages what some might define as dialects of the same language. Parts 4 and 5 may help clarify all this, but there are a number of issues that may not prove so easy to settle (which go back to the different ways “language” may be defined). If the standards for software localization run into such problems, certainly discussion of IDN cannot avoid them either (or if it does it could complicate work in other areas).

How then will the solution(s) proposed for IDN relate to the issue of defining languages? What exactly might they mean on the local levels when implemented? How might they in the longer term contribute to defining the field for multilingual content and software development?

In the beginning I mentioned the saying that the future is in our hands. This both calls to mind exciting possibilities and suggests an enormous responsibility. The good news is that focusing on particular problems such as IDN can help us see other parts of the larger picture in new and productive ways. But it does require keeping an eye on the larger system and related elements in it.