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Elements of reflection on cultural and linguistic adaptability of products and standards in the field of Information and Communication Technologies

This contribution, which is neither fixed or closed, is intended to cast light on the reflection on what can be expected from product adaptability and on the possible paths for the associated implementation. The authors see in it the following possibilities :

- development of the productivity of Information and Communication Technologies users;
- suppression of the brakes acting upon their development;
- encouraging the globalisation of electronic trade.

1. What are the cultures and languages that should be taken into consideration ?

- 1.1. The needs of a person as far as communication is concerned depend on his belonging to a civilisation, a nation, a region of the world, a profession, a particular human group (scientists, linguists, musicians, sportsmen/women, visually or physically handicapped persons, ...).
- 1.2. The mother tongue of the person, the other languages and writing systems that he may be led to use during his personal and professional activities, the customs he has to observe to communicate efficiently with his numerous interlocutors are part of what it may be proper to call "his cultural background".
- 1.3. The information that reaches a person should be intelligible to him, i. e. expressed preferably in his mother tongue (especially in the case of warning messages), and in accordance with conventions and using symbols that he is acquainted with.
- 1.4. **Products and national or international standards that are designed to meet linguistic and cultural needs of nationals of such and such a country or group of countries do not make it possible to address the potential diversity of the needs of persons.**
- 1.5. Permanent or temporary residents of a given nation do not necessarily have the same mother tongue, may use a minority language, wish to be able to deliver a message in any world language, using any identified character in the universal character set (UCS), on any keyboard or man-system interface.
- 1.6. It is important for scientists, engineers, linguists, historians that UCS characters be accessible, remain open to new symbols likely to be created by the professions, and include characters of ancient languages and former characters of current modern languages.
- 1.7. Having at one's disposal universal products, i. e. that meet all the needs likely to be listed, is technologically and economically speaking unrealistic. However, **the adaptability of products to the specific needs of the large diversity of users is, on the contrary, to be encouraged.**

2. How to make a product adaptable ?

2.1. An adaptable product is an open product, likely to meet the linguistic and cultural needs of a vast number of users.

2.2. A product originally designed for a category of users can be considered as adaptable if new options can be integrated into it or if new versions can be derived from it.

2.3. A new product can also have been designed from the outset to be adaptable.

2.3.1. Experience shows that a product whose development was conducted in parallel in several languages and several writing systems can be more easily adapted to other backgrounds.

2.3.2. The additional cost induced by the preliminary analysis of the potential needs of the different cultures and languages, followed by the generic analysis of the problems to be solved, independently of any language (and of any predetermined format or of any defined legal framework), taking into account all the possible scenari, may be considered as a possible source of a significant return on investment, namely for companies aiming at a worldwide development.

2.4. According to the nature of the products to be designed, two different approaches can be considered :

- either the direct realisation of a family of products linguistically and culturally differentiated,
- or the realisation of one single product within which the user will be able to make selections, taking into account his own linguistic and cultural needs (with the provision that this type of product can turn out to be complex).

3. How can the standardisation action encourage adaptability ?

3.1. The development methods described under item 2 above can be considered as complex, long and costly. **By producing technical documentation and methodological guides**, standardisation can reduce development costs and, therefore, remedy the distortions of competition finding their origins in the differences in both size and geographical location of the companies.

3.2. Standardisation can also encourage product adaptability by improving the understandability of tenders and calls for tenders, namely **by recommending that the product descriptions specify clearly the languages and cultures** which they intend to satisfy, in their basic version or as options, free of charge or not.

3.3. Product adaptability can also be promoted, by **prescribing to authors of new standardisation work items to list the cultures and languages that those in charge of the preparation of the draft standard will have to take into account**, whether on a mandatory or optional basis, even those which are not *a priori* to be dealt with.

End of contribution.