Localization in the Middle East: Getting Started

Hospitality, Friendship, Success — Developing Business Relationships

Localization Issues in the Middle East

Arabic and Its Dialects
Getting Started:
MIDDLE EAST

It’s always in the news — and quite often the news is not good. But the ongoing “non-news” is that there are thriving businesses and markets in the Middle East, and therefore justification for reaching those businesses and entering those markets. We have put together this guide to introduce you to some of the issues involved with doing business with and for residents of the Middle East.

Getting Started: Middle East

Just what is the Middle East? Ilan Bloch addresses that question as well as some beginning localization issues for the region.

How does one establish business in the region? Lisa Verdon and Myriam Siftar describe the importance of building business relationships, perhaps over coffee. Basic localization topics for the region are not so basic if you are not familiar with the requirements. Adi Lev introduces us to the concepts that are a “given” when localizing for the Middle East.

And, finally, a language overview. Yes, there is a Modern Standard Arabic. And people read it. But who speaks it? Nizar Y. Habash describes the various Arabic dialects, their place in the region.

It’s a complex region, and there are no simple answers. But with the advice from our authors — and perhaps the services of our advertisers — you can successfully find your place in the region.

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Unlike other parts of the world, the Middle East is not a clearly defined entity, and its borders vary greatly depending on whom you would ask. It is neither an exactly defined region of the world nor even an agreed-upon set of countries. Sometimes referred to as the Near East, until WWI and the collapse of the Ottoman empire, or Southwest Asia, the region is also known as Western Asia in India, as the term Middle East is somewhat Eurocentric.

As opposed to other areas of the world such as the Americas or Europe, the apparent unity within the Middle East is subjectively related to where the referent is located: region to the east of or to the west of such referent.

Indigenous factors do not seem to help in the definitions of the region. As difficult as defining Europe may seem (Europe: Getting Started Guide in MultiLingual, January/February 2006), the elements used for such definition are always intrinsic, whereas in the case of the Middle East, the very name of the area is not even representative of the region. As a matter of fact, the Middle East has never really known any sort of unity, either geographical nor social. The multiplicity of cultures and ethnicities in the Middle East adds all the more to the confusion. In its widest definition, accepted by the academic community, the Middle East includes a majority of Arab populations and non-Arab Muslims: Persians, Turks, Kurds, and also Jews and Christians.

Incidentally, this definition largely overlaps the common vision which focuses on those countries with a central role in such crucial issues to US foreign policy as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the security of the Persian Gulf. While the traditional Middle East spreads from Egypt to Iran, the G8’s extended definition also encompasses North Africa to the west, Somalia to the south, Pakistan to the east and the Caucasian republics of the former Soviet Union to the north.

This effervescent region — the cradle of civilization and of monotheistic cults — is often depicted as either backwards desert outback or the bloody theater of never-ending wars. As always, reality on the field is not exactly what can be reported by major news networks or press agencies in the dimmest hours of political instability. Yet, for the most part, daily life in this region is quite similar to what it can be in other parts of the world with its share of hope and despair, economic successes and failures, Internet, mass consumption, political scandals and eating disorders — normal people in a normal region of a normal world.

The multiplicity of languages in the Middle East is a daily challenge for anybody with an interest in localization.

Echoing the multiplicity of ethnic groups, the multiplicity of languages in the Middle East is a daily challenge for anybody with an interest in localization. Arabic is, of course and by far, the main language of the region. Yet other local markets would not be accessible without a full localization into Turkish, Hebrew, Pashto or Urdu.

To the notable exception of Turkish, all these languages are written from right to left and present all the intricacies of bidirectionality.

In this exotic setup, the state of Israel presents a unique fusion of European and Middle Eastern traits. The cultural melting pot of its population gives Israel an exclusive blend of Western lifestyle and Oriental atmosphere and certainly shares more similarities with its neighbors than is readily apparent from media coverage.

With a population of about 7 million, 45% of whom are internet users (as of December 2005), Israel is by far the most connected country of the region. It is not only a regional economic and technological power but also a world-class reserve of highly appraised talents and R&D centers of global corporations. To a certain extent, the number of successful startups, the ratio of graduates to population, and the penetration of technology in daily lives let Israel compare with the Silicon Valley at its best.

The Israeli local market presents the interesting specificity of a large Arabic-speaking minority of about 20%. From a localization standpoint, the market requires both Hebrew and Arabic localization in order to maximize sales impact.

On the other hand, this very specificity makes Israel a unique pool of highly educated localization workforce with on-site Hebrew and Arabic resources. In addition, as a country of immigration, Israel also offers native speakers of a large number of languages. When combined with a highly qualified profile, this native fluency becomes a genuine advantage for a localization professional. Furthermore, the average Israeli professional has excellent English skills as a work language. Finally, another important characteristic of the region is the relatively short distances to the major European capitals and reasonable airfares that facilitate traveling and developing business across the Mediterranean. Low costs and good infrastructures are the two prerequisites for a good off-shoring base. Israel offers both. Compared to the French, with about half the average income and half as many households connected to the Internet, the Israelis represent a technology-savvy and still relatively cheap labor force.

When traveling abroad, I am often asked if I own a camel. To many an Orient amateur’s dismay, I must confess that Jerusalem’s streets count far more wifi hotspots than picturesque specimens of the quadruped.

The business culture is quite different from that of other Western countries. Israelis are often compared to the fruit of a local cactus, the sabres: difficult to access and full of spines on the outside but sweet and refreshing on the inside. Likewise, it is
not uncommon to experience a rather abrupt first encounter and discover only later the true good nature of the person who sits in front of you. Israelis come essentially in one flavor: natural. Like it or like it. Far away from political correctness, etiquette and other codes of conduct, people here speak from the heart but seldom take anything to heart. Just don’t feel hurt, be frank and open. Openness is particularly practiced in the decision-making process. One is expected to say everything that is on his or her mind. A discussion can be quite lively. Finally, a consensus may not be found, but everyone will adhere to the decision made. Overall, the hierarchy is respected although it may seem challenged in the eyes of the foreign observer. There is no link between voicing out comments and questioning the authority of hierarchy.

All these factors influence favorably Israel as a potential candidate for offshore operations and localization operations in particular. The Israeli localization scene is dynamic and rather homogeneous. Without any major first-tier actor, the major majority of companies are small and medium-sized businesses. Employee turnover is relatively low so that the experience and know-how are all the more significant and growing every day. Typically, Israeli localization companies have the double hat of a single and multilanguage vendor. While servicing the local market in multiple language combinations, they usually deliver to their foreign customers only one or two if they handle both Hebrew and Arabic. It is important to note that the dynamism of the Israeli localization industry is a part of a greater translation tradition. Under the impetus of the very active Israeli Translators Association (www.ita.org.il) and world-renowned specialists and theoreticians of translation studies, a taste for translation has been developed. Israel still lacks a “Localization Research Centre,” but translation studies departments, such as that at Bar-Ilan University or private initiatives, offer introductory localization courses which provide a sound basis on the subject.

When selecting your Hebrew or Arabic localization vendor, it is wise to inquire about its internationalization capabilities. These may be as humble as a simple understanding of the concepts with no real hands-on experience, but it can turn out to be acrobatic to ignore the issue altogether. Both Hebrew and Arabic, but also Urdu or Pashto in a wider Middle East context, are bidirectional languages. The preparation of the product is not limited to the support of a given encoding, specific date or time display or even currencies. As a matter of fact, the encoding issue is no more complex than with any other non-Latin character set, and the traditional Hebrew calendar is generally not used in business contexts. The real first issue to address is bidirectionality. Concretely, not only the text naturally flows from right to left, it sometimes requires coping with islands of left-to-right inserts. Whether these left-to-right elements are made of numbers or non-Hebrew words, such as a product name in English for instance, they create a double change of direction in the text flow. These changes are the main difficulty of bidirectionality on two accounts. Firstly, they are not always correctly handled by the software used to lay out the text. In development environments as well as in DTP suites, some text properties may need to be modified in order to accept the bidirectional flow. Secondly, it requires a native pair of eyes at the QA stage, since it is not obvious at first sight that something went wrong with the text at such a late stage after translation. The project’s scope will necessarily imply an in-country sign-off of the materials.

In principle, bidirectionality support is no longer an issue with software components, since most environments offer decent solutions to the problem. Of course, it means complete mirroring of the user interface and in some cases re-thinking the product’s usability. However, most modern development platforms support bidirectionality and have the appropriate libraries to face most situations. More surprisingly, desktop publishing (DTP) software is far less well equipped to successfully meet the challenges of the changes of direction in the text. Many leading DTP and authoring software do not support natively bidirectional languages, and this feature is not even not scheduled for future releases. In other cases, third-party add-ons are required and offer a more or less accurate answer to the question. As a result, brilliant workarounds are sometimes needed in order to satisfactorily meet the challenges of localization; otherwise, last-minute extensive manual labor can still be the only path to save the project from failure.

Another delicate issue, although not specific to bidirectional languages, is that of concatenation of strings and the use of placeholders in software environments. Hebrew and Arabic present a mildly agglutinative character, and as a result grammatical particles are combined to the root word. In addition, different word order and genders do not necessarily allow for easy manipulation of strings at run-time.

A common example taken from the world of software localization is the use of a placeholder, %d for instance, in the sentence:

“This download will last %d hour(s).”

“%d hour(s)” can take very different forms depending on the value of %d: one, two or more. Indeed, if %d stands for one, Hebrew grammar will require a change of order in the expression in the form of “hour one.” In Hebrew, as well as in Arabic, the existence of a dual form commands to use a special variation of the word hour in case %d stands for two. Lastly, if %d stands for three or more, the English word order is acceptable, and “%d hours” will be translated literally.

These few examples and other even more famous idiosyncrasies of Arabic and Hebrew, such as the absence of block letters, only underline the importance of in-country review as part of standard QA policy. On the other hand, rather than ensuring the quality only through a final pass, all the necessary conditions of professional expertise and relatively low costs are satisfied to let you benefit from comprehensive end-to-end localization project management of your Middle East project directly in the Middle East. It is definitely time to look eastwards, not too far away.
At the crossroads of Europe, Asia and Africa, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a diverse mix of modern and traditional societies, which use advanced sophisticated technology and biblical methods side by side. The region is a cradle of civilization and the birthplace of the world’s great monotheistic religions. However, despite general awareness of the area’s long and rich history, many in the West are unfamiliar with particular customs and methods of conducting business, many of which are intimately tied to past traditions. Yet, while trying to keep their traditions, MENA countries are at last beginning to fully embrace free-market principles.

These evolving regional changes create many opportunities for outside businesses. But capturing these opportunities is challenging and can be frustrating when one does not understand or appreciate the expectations, behaviors and attitudes of potential business partners.

Therefore, in order to develop and sustain effective business relationships, it is important to understand how those free-market principles have been and are being adopted in the local context. A basic understanding of local customs and of the services and guidance of specialist trade organizations with a thorough knowledge of the region can be invaluable.

Economic overview of the Arab world: a time of change and expansion

MENA countries are a mix of modern developed free-market economies, older “command” style systems, and variations in between. There is great demand for imported industrial goods, ranging from small handheld consumer items and household appliances to larger industrial equipment for development projects. The region has more than 320 million consumers, of whom 60% are under the age of 25. To address the social, political and economic pressures that arise from such a young population, countries in the region are embracing the global economy, joining the World Trade Organization, signing international trade agreements, and embarking on ambitious projects to diversify their economies.

The United States has encouraged and benefited from progressive economic programs in the region by, for example, signing free trade agreements (FTAs) with Bahrain, Jordan and Morocco. The United States is working on FTAs with Egypt, Oman and the United Arab Emirates. Arab countries once viewed by the United States as adversaries, such as Libya, are now normalizing diplomatic relations and are starting to become strong economic partners with the United States. The European Union is engaged in similar efforts in the region.

Collectively, regional purchasing power is strong, especially among the petroleum-exporting nations that obviously benefit from higher oil prices. There is a preference for US brands; in 2005, the United States alone exported $36 billion of goods and services to the region, according to U.S.-Arab Tradeline (September-October 2005). There is also an increase in demand for American educational, medical and language translation services.

Following the events of September 11, 2001, the region’s private sector experienced a significant increase in local investment as money was repatriated from the West, particularly from the United States. The increased availability of funds and the recognition of the need to address development and modernization have resulted in a boom in mega-infrastructure projects, thus increasing demand for construction and engineering products and services.

Aside from the obvious sectors — petrochemicals, oil and gas — the region has other strong sectors such as financial services (Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates). As an example of the diversification and development taking place, Saudi Arabia plans to build a major financial district in Riyadh. Several countries, including Egypt and Jordan, are engaged in privatization programs as another means to boost economic performance and modernization. Concomitant with the move into the global economy, information technology is another booming sector in the Middle East, and opportunities exist to establish the networks and infrastructure necessary to provide internet access and connectivity across the region.

World views and business conduct: contrast and comparison

Generally, in the West, one’s world view is based on the concepts of “guilt” versus “innocence.” These concepts originate at least as far back as ancient Rome, which announced the principle that no one was above the law, not even Caesar. Thus, for Westerners the world is split into those who obey the law — the innocent — and those who break the law — the guilty — regardless of rank or privilege. In the Middle East, the world view is based on ideas of “honor” versus “shame.” For business to flourish, one should recognize that the way we live our lives and the way we interact with others are unconsciously conditioned by our respective world views.

In the West, businesses strive to do the “right” — legal — thing. Companies will often seek counsel’s advice to ensure that business practices conform to corporate, securities, contract, environmental, and other regulations and laws. Notwithstanding some current initiatives, Western business does not expect to look beyond legal parameters for guidance on its activities or relationships.

In the Middle East, business people will often implicitly focus on honor and shame. To be honorable means to gain power and prestige and to be a noble representative of your tribe or family. Consequently, while business in the Middle East meets legal requirements, it is also heavily influenced by and will often conform to the unstated mores of honor and shame.

In the West, entrepreneurs can be motivated by many things, such as dreams of financial success or a passion for some particular product or service. For example, Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop, was initially motivated by her interest in organic products. Regardless of motivation, an entrepreneur who has acted legally is not “shamed” if a business fails.
In the Middle East, entrepreneurs may have similar motivations and passions. Business failure often results in humiliation, however, and thus shame for the individual and his or her family. Consequently, many businesses that would be acceptable risks from a Western view are not started for fear of failure and the resulting humiliation and shame. Therefore, an enterprise will often only be created if there is some degree of certainty that the venture will succeed. Similarly, a transaction may well occur only if the principals can be certain of success. This degree of certainty exists when a businessperson either already has a prestigious position in society or has otherwise established, through tribal or other affiliation, the personal contacts necessary for business success. Thus, personal relationships have an importance in the Middle East beyond which a Westerner may be accustomed.

Public sector influence: the brightest and the best

People in many MENA countries prefer to work in the public sector. Salaries, benefits and vacation schedules are often more attractive than in the private sector, and job security is assured. In addition, many MENA countries are monarchies. Much pride and prestige are attached to public sector positions, as they are viewed as part of the royal household. Thus, working for the government is viewed as honorable, as it is service to the ruling family. Consequently, much effort is expended to secure public sector positions. Hence, what we in the West would regard negatively — as favoritism or nepotism — is viewed as the laudable pursuit of an individual’s and a family’s honor. Therefore, in the Middle East, family ties and family tribal names carry a significance of which it is important to be aware.

Traditionally, a government’s role in the Middle East is to create jobs for its citizens and supporters. Therefore, in many countries foreign workers fill private-sector jobs, while the public sector is the preserve of citizens, regardless of status. However, there is a trend, especially in the Gulf Cooperation Council member countries, to encourage citizens to seek private-sector jobs. The terms Saudization, Kuwaitization and so on are becoming familiar. For example, a new Kuwaiti law requires private companies to hire Kuwaiti workers in order to receive public contracts.

Despite these recent programs encouraging citizens into the private sector, the demand for expatriates remains high in many countries. For example, in Kuwait approximately 86% of Kuwaiti citizens work in the public sector, while only about 8% work in the private sector. Moreover, non-Kuwaitis fill 90% of the private-sector jobs, and foreign workers outnumber Kuwaitis by three to one, according to the Kuwaiti Ministry of Planning (June 30, 2005).

Many countries are engaged in reform aiming to encourage private sector investment and growth. In Jordan, King Abdullah II has launched a very progressive five-year economic plan designed to complement extensive political reforms. The plan includes privatizing state assets, building on free trade agreements with the United States and Europe, promoting liberal investment legislation and drafting a comprehensive socio-economic transformation plan.

Consequently, one should always be mindful that although governments are encouraging more private-sector dynamism, a successful transaction in the Middle East may still require involvement of a ministry, department or official that one may not otherwise anticipate as being necessarily connected to the business at hand.

Patience in relationship building: the key to success

In the West, personal relationships are an important part of business success. In the free market, however, price conveys much information and is often the ultimate determinant of whether or not a transaction goes forward. In the Middle East, the personal relationship between business people generally remains as important as price, and in more traditional environments personal relationships may be significantly more important than price in determining whether or not a deal occurs and with whom it occurs.

Hospitality: the first cup

Hospitality is a hallmark of Muslim and Middle Eastern tradition, so be prepared to share meals and social time with business partners from the Middle East. It is said that if you want to develop a relationship with an Arab, be prepared to drink lots of coffee and tea. Although this is a generalization and oversimplification, in the Middle East it is honorable to be hospitable. It is best not to refuse anything offered, as refusal may deeply offend a Middle Eastern host. For example, when drinking coffee, it is wise to accept two cups in anticipation of being offered the third. Traditionally, the first cup of coffee represents
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an offer of peace, or salam. The second cup represents friendship, or sadiq. The third represents loyalty and protection, or saif, meaning the sword. With the third cup, your host shows acceptance of your honor and loyalty to him.

Getting to friendship, trust and yes: the second cup

In Middle Eastern business practice, friendship is most important, as it generally forms the basis for trust. Friendship is also important for business in the West. However, Westerners often try to keep friendship separate from business as our affiliations can be viewed as fraternization or as being part of the “good ol’ boy network.” In the MENA region, friendship is a crucial element in building a business relationship. A Middle Easterner will take a long time to develop a friendship, and when this is done in the region, offers of coffee, tea and food are important expressions of generosity during meetings or personal interactions.

Potential business partners may spend considerable time discussing family and other “personal” matters during meetings, which a Westerner may find disconcerting.

Arabs enjoy talking about family because they are very proud of their spouses and children. While we in the West are equally proud, we are unlikely to focus on these personal matters during business meetings. Similarly, Westerners are accustomed to try to keep to a schedule and an agenda. A conversation in the Middle East may be more informational and personal, with substantive business discussed at the end while wrapping up a meeting.

In the West, often we engage in business luncheons and dinners in order to gauge the trustworthiness and reliability of our partners. We expect promises to be executed in a timely manner. We can become impatient or “pushy” if action is not taken within the agreed time frame or if it is not at all. We judge people based upon how hard they work or on their work ethic. Often we will value work ethic over status. In contrast, in the Middle East, a friend will ask many favors, but will not blame you if nothing is done. The friend wants to know that one has at least tried. Thus, in the Middle East, custom remains that one never says, “I cannot do it.” Instead one states, “I will try, insha’Allah.” To openly refuse to do something for a friend, or acknowledge that one cannot do it, or even worse, that one does not have the time to do it, this is most dishonorable.

Note: The Arabic expression, insha’Allah, which means if God willing. This is often said after someone, especially a Muslim, makes a commitment whose outcome he or she believes rests not within oneself, but with God. This is often used to pardon one from an unanticipated or undesirable outcome.

Sustained success: the third cup

Once the friendship is built and trust established, barriers to commitment and active business transactions might remain. How do you get the commitment you need to do the deal? Patience, perseverance and time are essential.

Modern Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, have adopted many of the business methods and styles of the West. However, significant differences remain. It is important that both sides understand each other in order to avoid potential pitfalls and misunderstandings. Considerable time may be spent exchanging courtesies, and several visits may be needed to secure business.

In the United States, risk taking is highly valued. Appointments are often scheduled...
well ahead of time, meeting deadlines is crucial, and following through on written and spoken agreements is expected. Lengthy formal agreements and contracts are often required to formalize a transaction, and legal counsel can become an integral part of the negotiation process. Similarly, the head of an organization does not necessarily do budgeting. In contrast, meetings in the Middle East are often not scheduled ahead of time. A Western visitor may have to arrive in country before a meeting is set. On average, Middle Easterners are risk averse — failure is dishonorable — and what is “committed to” verbally may not always be what is actually done. Statements may be made to maintain honor and may not be reliable from a Western perspective. In order to get a solid commitment, one that will lead to a deal, it is vital to understand the hierarchy of the organization one is dealing with and where and how your contact fits into that structure.

Legal systems

Islamic law, as set forth in the Shari’a, is used as the basis for the regulatory, legal and juridical structure in many MENA countries. Shari’a will apply to a greater or lesser extent depending on the specific country. For example, Saudi Arabian business and banking practices are heavily influenced by Shari’a, while Jordan is codifying its commercial laws along more clearly Western lines. Therefore, once one has an agreement for transaction, one will need special advice to both reducing the business agreement to a written format and understanding how and when the document may be enforced and exactly what enforcement means.

Building and rebuilding relationships and the region

The “War on Terrorism,” the invasion of Iraq, and American domestic politics have intensified friction between the Middle East and the United States. The effect on business relationships is most clearly seen in the recent Dubai World Ports controversy, sanctions on aid flows to the Palestinian Authority, and provisions in the Patriot Act that leave Middle Easterners visiting the United States feeling they are automatically suspect. Despite these and similar actions, the Arab world remains one of America’s best customers. The estimated sale of US goods to MENA countries is expected to reach US$26.7 billion by the end of 2006, an increase of 38% from 2005.

The mission of specialist trade organizations such as the Joint Middle East American Trade Center and others is to maintain existing relationships, as well as develop new relationships, between Americans and Middle Easterners at a time when, paradoxically, we are seeing a great decline in people-to-people connections — and when Middle Eastern governments are making determined efforts to embrace both free-market principles and the global economy.

The less we understand each other’s cultures, the greater the chance for minor acts or omissions to be interpreted as conscious insults or slights. In 1981, there were more than 10,000 Saudis studying in US colleges and universities. By 2005, that number had dropped to 3,035. Over 60% of the Arab population is aged 25 years or younger, and many young Arabs are looking to Europe and Asia for higher education. The long-term effects of this can be devastating. Overall, the Middle East and United States, as do Islam and democracy, share much in common. The Arabs want to do business with their American counterparts, but are frustrated by the lack of interest from the United States, especially from American small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In contrast, US SMEs view the MENA region as enigmatic, if not impossible, or as a dangerous place in which to do business.

The challenges of creating functioning, free-market economies in a traditional society should not be underestimated. Middle Eastern governments and societies are changing, but at a cautious pace. Leaders and governments want to allow a natural balance between long-standing tribal values and modern ideas to emerge. Middle Eastern countries want to modernize without necessarily westernizing. Understanding and respecting this, as well as learning a little Arabic, will certainly help you reach that third cup of coffee.
Let’s face it — if it weren’t for the Middle Eastern folks who decided to start the ambitious tower of Babel, we would have had a perfect understanding of each other with no use for the localization industry whatsoever, speaking one language, of a certain Semitic flavor. This notion naturally leads to a conclusion that our industry was created by divine intervention — at least according to the Old Testament. While I am not an expert to rule about the divine origins of the localization industry, I can certainly assert that we are contributing, on a daily basis, to the achievement of better understanding among people around the world — and, we can hope, in the Middle East.

For the last ten years, in which I have had the opportunity to contribute to localization efforts to Arabic and Hebrew, we have seen a tremendous shift in the localization industry and in the localization efforts targeting the Middle Eastern region — moving from a feeble start in various software releases, via sporadic documentation efforts, to full-scale “simship” efforts to introduce Arabic and Hebrew versions along with leading European and Asian versions of software, documentation, hardware and marketing collateral.

There are the days in which Middle Eastern languages were “Tier 3” or “Tier 4” for many software vendors, and I am certain that there is not one leading company that is not introducing 100% localized software or hardware products in the blooming Middle Eastern markets.

Thus, we are safely beyond the “Should we do it?” phase, and by now most vendors are busy making sure that they have a good answer to “How soon the Arabic can be shipped?” from the various product groups and the anxious people from sales and marketing.

Yet, localization into Middle Eastern languages still imposes a great challenge both to the vendors and to the localization professionals. While I am not diminishing the challenge of translating into Japanese or Urdu, the Semitic languages form a truly unique group of technical, cultural and design issues which need to be addressed on the earliest stages of the localization cycle.

During the years, we have seen different approaches to tackling the Middle Eastern challenge by both software and hardware vendors. By now, I am comfortable enough to share the do’s and don’ts when initiating localization of products aimed towards the Middle East.

Localization is an investment and not spending

I may be stating the obvious here, but it must be asserted again — the market is moving toward the user experience and toward the user’s relationship with the product. This is especially true in the IT market since the overall impact of careless localization is immediately translated into a negative impact marketwide and worldwide. When the software or hardware vendor changes his or her perception and decides to implement localization at the earliest design cycles, while involving marketing and sales, the bottom line eventually looks much better. The yield of investment in localization consideration is saved time and resources on repetitive in-country reviews, intensive testing, and in some cases recalls of builds and remakes.

Localization scope

Nothing is left behind. The Middle Eastern markets have matured up to a point at which they are accommodating a large variety of audiences with different levels of skills and experience using software and hardware products. While the early adopters feel comfortable enough with English interfaces and web-based English documentation (which is a different issue altogether), the larger bulk of the potential users and customers will require extensive local interfaces. I will not go as far as recommending localizing the inline remarks and code documentation, but the growing developing community of native Arabic and Hebrew speakers will likely hold a different view on this matter.

When referring to localization scope, we must look beyond the traditional sectors that were focused in providing localization-rich products such as software producers, and hardware producers such as printers, PCs, digital cameras and PC accessories.

Traditionally, these were the main players in the localization field, but there are yet fast growing segments that are currently demanding localization attention. 

Games. The game industry is the fastest growing segment in the software industry, and it sprawls to role playing, feature-rich and interface-rich applications. Although the most popular games are still based on the shooting skills of the players, large and growing segments of role playing and strategy-based games require a higher level of interaction, richer interfaces and a larger amount of information that needs to be conveyed and, naturally, localized. The next generation of games is already with us, and it is web-based, which again is laden with textual pages, websites and web-based applications. These applications impose a larger challenge on the localizers since the actual pages may be accessed across different platforms, using different operating systems and with different locales on the browsers used — not an easy task.

Mobile electronics. Mobile device penetration is huge around the world and the Middle East does not differ. Mobile devices such as phones, PDAs, MDAs, UMPCs and the vast plethora of accessories are invading the streets and offices of Cairo, Teheran, Amman, Jerusalem and the Emirates. Since most of these devices are in sync with their respective offices and networks, compatibility is a key factor. You may want to imagine a businesswoman traveling from Abu Dhabi to Cairo and later to Vienna, while checking e-mail and SMSing her colleagues from these different locations.

Home entertainment, gadgets, mobile entertainment devices, PC accessories. Printers, VCRs and fax machines traditionally have led the pack in localization efforts, but recently a growing number
of DVD players, MP3 mobile devices and electronic gadgets have followed suit. The vastly growing consumer electronics markets are readily accepting the vendors who choose to provide the local flavor of their products — including hardware, software and user assistance localization.

Automotive industry. While regulations in most of the Middle Eastern states require an automaker to provide localized documentation, the car itself becomes invaded by interface-rich devices, which in turn require precise localization since they become safety related. Translating the list of parts is not enough these days, and a proper localization effort is needed — as always, a great opportunity combined with an even greater localization challenge.

Content is king
As we are deeply immersed in the information world, we are on a constant move from feature-rich towards the content-rich applications and services. This trend is strengthened by the newly emerging web services and the WEB 2.0 applications, which by definition rely on content and global terminology since they involve worldwide platforms, services and underlying coding structures. Added to this is the tendency of the vendors to provide online documentation and help, harnessing user forums and user-induced feedback. The content-centric approach brings to the center stage the quality of localized content as presented to local audiences. Thus, the localization effort is dual since it requires special considerations not only in providing the best possible localized content by the localization vendors but also by the underlying structures and platforms (such as the OWL [www.w3.org/2004/02/owl] and SKOS [www.w3.org/2004/02/skos] initiatives) to ensure compatibility to the right-to-left based locales, internationalization issues and adaptation of the content management platforms to accommodate the unique Arabic and Hebrew features.

Terminology
While I certainly agree with Kara Warburton from LISA that terminology is the DNA of knowledge (www.lisa.org/globalizationinsider/2005/07/terminology.get.html), some vendors are tempted by the notion that given the right terminology and glossary, localization of content can become a merely automated memory translation-based task. While this can be true to a certain extent for the software industry, given the fact that each release is usually an iteration of additional features, the same approach cannot be applied to localization of content, especially when the content is generated by various sources and different contributors — and is targeting different communities of users. Again, I must state the centrality of the user experience which forces the localizers to alter the content so it will suit the tech-oriented crowd, home users, first-time users and a broad majority of consumers. Otherwise, and specifically in our region, vendors are to create a certain alienated approach

If we are still sticking with the user-centric approach, then it is crucial to perform an in-country review at the target market itself.

If we are still sticking with the user-centric approach, then it is crucial to perform an in-country review at the target market itself. The reason for localizing the packaging from users who are used to a personalized approach and to a much closer “verbal” contact with its counterpart. While a neutral, detached address may be in place in the Nordic countries or in the United States, it will seem out of place in Israel or in Egypt.

In-country review
Globalization moves funds and people around the globe. It creates vast opportunities and swift changes. It also allows a greater accessibility to a native Arabic, Farsi or Hebrew speaker to provide services on vendor’s site. It is certainly easier to employ a UK or US student and or local resident as an in-country reviewer or as a lead terminologist. Usually, they will provide their money’s worth, and in many cases it will be quite adequate for the needs of the vendors in terms of spending on these resources.

This solution is not good enough as far as the local markets are involved, and the reason for this is, again, local user experience. When the in-country reviewer is actually detached from the local target market, he or she can only assume the ongoing linguistic trends and the most current content spaces in which this terminology shall be applied. Terms change frequently.

If we are still sticking with the user-centric approach, then it is crucial to perform an in-country review at the target market itself. My advice at this stage is to apply this approach through all the stages of the localization cycle — starting from the basic terminology compilation through initial translation samples, editing cycles and the final testing and reviewing stages. First and foremost, you will get much better real-life localization and terminology to start with. In the later stages, you will definitely save resources on testing and QA, and finally, you will be much better off avoiding pruning the translation memory from the “weeds” introduced on the various stages of translation, QA and review. If time-to-market means anything to any of the vendors in question, in-country review (when applied properly) will reduce it as well.

Right tools for right-to-left localization
When I Googled “localization” tools, I had a result of 21,400,000 hits. Now, I am not going to recommend any specific localization suite or any specific TM software, but I would recommend making sure that it supports the following:

• Correct right-to-left representation of the translated strings
• Typing order (mixed RTL and LTR typing)
• Middle East typefaces
• On-the-fly testing of dialog boxes, web pages, script-induced strings, error messages and dynamic alerts
• Middle East time, date and currency formats

Hardware and graphic design
Hardware, packaging and graphic design are certainly to be included in the localization scope, as I have mentioned. The reason for localizing the packaging...
is clear enough, especially from a sales and marketing point of view, and localization of hardware interfaces is even more evident when you are considering to penetrate the mass consumer market and to address audiences who lack any knowledge of any language other than the local one. This will certainly be true in the rural areas, in older-generation users and in the pre-school market segments. As a rule of thumb, localization boosts sales of hardware. Any government-financed tender will force the participants to assure that all of the interfaces are localized into the local language — in addition to the user assistance documentation.

Certain issues must be attended to when addressing hardware, graphics and packaging localization.

- Make sure that the images are gender neutral or at least adhere to a certain dress code. I would suggest consulting your localization vendor before introducing a bikini-wearing model to Saudi Arabia or Iran.
- Make sure that images are layered so that they can be mirrored and the text can be separated from the actual visual.
- There are coloring schemes that different local markets may feel either uncomfortable or have specific religious or cultural meaning.
- Does the image/visual contain male/female interaction?
- Consider picking local media pools and image banks to provide better market/cultural compatibility.

Culture, religion, tradition, language

Last but not least — and actually, the most important of all.

- Calendars are different since regional calendars are lunar-based and religion-based.
- There are many flavors to the same language. There is the high official Arabic, and there is a common spoken Arabic.
- The spoken Arabic language differs from one country to another, particularly in terms of dialect and slang.
- Religion and tradition play a significant role in the way people talk, act and behave.
- There are diacritics for both Arabic and Hebrew languages. Consider the Hebrew word katav (writing), katan (wrote), katan (reporter), slightly different when romanized but all the same word and meaningless in Hebrew unless placed in a context.
- And finally, in the Middle East we are doing it right . . . to left.

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Page 11
Arabic and Its Dialects  
NIZAR Y. HABASH

Language exists in a natural continuum, both historically and geographically. The word language as opposed to dialect is only an expression of power and dominance of one group/ideology over another. In the Arab world, politics (Arab nationalism) and religion (Islam) are what shapes the view of what is the Arabic language and what is an Arabic dialect. This power relationship is similar to others that exist between languages and their dialects. However, the high degree of difference between MSA and its dialects and the fact that standard Arabic is not any Arab’s native language sets this linguistic situation apart.

Modern standard Arabic (MSA), the official language of the Arab world, is the primary language of the media and culture. MSA is syntactically, morphologically and phonologically based on classical Arabic, the language of the Qur’an (Islam’s Holy Book). Lexically, however, it is much more modern. It is not a native language of any Arabs but is the language of education across the Arab world. MSA is primarily written, not spoken.

The Arabic dialects, in contrast, are the true native language forms. They are generally restricted in use for informal daily communication. They are not taught in schools or even standardized, although there is a rich, popular dialect culture of folktales, songs, movies and television shows. Dialects are primarily spoken, not written. This is changing, however, since more Arabs are gaining access to the electronic media of communication such as e-mail and newsgroups.

Arabic dialects are loosely related to classical Arabic. They are the result of the interaction between different ancient dialects of classical Arabic and other languages that existed in, neighbored and/or colonized what is today the Arab world. For example, Algerian Arabic has a lot of influences from Berber as well as French.

Arabic dialects vary in many dimensions—primarily geography and social class. Geolinguistically, the Arab world can be divided in many different ways. The following is only one of many:

- Levantine Arabic includes the dialects of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Israel.
- Gulf Arabic includes the dialects of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar. Iraqi and Omani Arabic are sometimes included.
- Egyptian Arabic covers the dialects of the Nile valley: Egypt and Sudan.
- North African Arabic covers the dialects of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania. Libya is sometimes included.
- Yemenite Arabic is often considered its own class.
- Maltese Arabic is not always considered an Arabic dialect. It is the only Arabic variant that is considered a separate language and is written with Latin script.

Socially, it is common to distinguish three sub-dialects within each dialect region: city dwellers, peasants/farmers and Bedouins. The three degrees are often associated with a class hierarchy in which rich, settled city dwellers are on top and Bedouins are on the bottom. Different social associations exist, as is common in many other languages around the world. For example, the city dialect is considered less marked, better and smarter, whereas the Bedouin dialect is considered lower class, rough, yet pure to the origin of the language.

Diglossia

The relationship between MSA and the dialect in a specific region is rather complex. Arabs do not think of these two as separate languages. This particular perception leads to a special kind of coexistence between two forms of language that serve different purposes. This kind of situation is what linguists term diglossia. Although the two variants have clear domains of prevalence—formal written (MSA) versus informal spoken (dialect)—a large gray area lies in between, and it is often filled with mixing of the two forms.

The Egyptian linguist, Said Badawi, explains the diglossic continuum in Egyptian Arabic in terms of three conflicting influences: classical, colloquial and foreign (see Figure 1).

These influences create five levels of Egyptian Arabic: traditional, modern, educated colloquial, literate colloquial and illiterate colloquial. Each level has a different ratio of classical, colloquial and foreign influence. Educated Arabic, the biggest mixing variant, is spoken in educated circles in the big cities. Traditional Arabic, the purest form of classical Arabic, survives in limited religious contexts. MSA is closer to traditional Arabic but has accepted more influences from colloquial Arabic and foreign languages. Illiterate colloquial, the variant that is the closest to the full colloquial influence, is used in remote villages among the illiterate. Those who come from such backgrounds and get some education end up mixing and including more classical Arabic and foreign influence in their speech (literate colloquial).
Phonological variation

The MSA phonological profile includes 28 consonants, three short vowels and three long vowels. Arabic dialects vary phonologically from MSA and each other. Some of the common variations include the following:

(1) Change in short vowels: MSA /jiktib/ or Levantine Arabic /joktob/.
(2) The MSA consonant θ /θ/ is pronounced as either /s/ or /t/, for example, MSA /θalāba/ three versus Egyptian Arabic /talāta/ or MSA /θawra/ versus Egyptian Arabic /sawra/.
(3) The MSA consonant ð /ð/ is pronounced as either /d/ or /z/; for example, the MSA word /ðin/ /ðāba/ versus Levantine Arabic /θin/ /θāba/ or MSA /ðilt/ /ðamb/ versus Levantine Arabic /zamb/.
(4) The MSA consonant ꟤ /q/ appears in different inventories in five different dialects in at least five different variants, for example, MSA /ṭaqir/ /ṭarih/ /ṭarīq/ in addition to the MSA-like /ṭarīq/.
(5) In some dialects, a loss of the emphatic feature of some MSA consonants can be found, for example, MSA /suruf/ /上年同期/ versus the Lebane sub-dialect of Levantine Arabic /latif/.

Orthographic variation

MSA is written in Arabic script according to standardized spelling rules. The Arabic script is also used to write many languages around the world which are not related to Arabic such as Persian, Kurdish, Urdu and Pashto. Except for Maltese, which is written in Latin script, Arabic dialects are by default written in Arabic script although there are no standardized spelling systems. There have been calls at different times during the last century to exchange the Arabic script with Latin script for MSA or at least its dialects. These calls parallel Ataturk’s successful romanization program in Turkey, where Arabic script was used to write Turkish under Ottoman rule. Political and religious opposition to such calls have preserved the use of Arabic script in the Arabic world. Even calls for spelling standardization in the dialects in Arabic script are perceived as a challenge to MSA hegemony.

Arabic script is a rich orthography. For example, the words for cat in MSA, Moroccan Arabic and Egyptian Arabic have slight variations among them, but all are written using the same word form. The lexical variants are the result of phonological variation or borrowing from other languages. The word for table in Egyptian Arabic comes from Greek, whereas the word for table in Iraqi Arabic comes from Persian. See Figure 3 for more examples of lexical variations.

Morphological variation

Arabic has a rich morphology. It uses a combination of templatic morphemes (interleaving roots and patterns) in addition to affixational morphemes such as prefixes and suffixes. Moreover, Arabic has three classes of clitics that attach to the word: conjunctions, prepositions and pronominal clitics (objects of verbs and possessives of nouns). There are many differences between MSA and its dialects. Some of these differences are the result of a simplification of complex MSA paradigms. Others are the opposite — more complex structures arising in the dialects where there are none in MSA.
are gone. It is interesting to note that some morphological moods have syntactic consequences. A similar phenomena in verb morphology meant that MSA complex morphological moods are gone. It is interesting to note that some remnants of the indicative mood form still survive as the default form in some dialects, whereas the subjunctive/jussive mood form is used in others. Other simplification phenomena include the loss of dual form in verb conjugation in the dialects and the consolidation of feminine and masculine in the plural form.

Some examples of the simplifying direction are the disappearance of the nominal case marking system altogether in Arabic dialects. This is an important change that has syntactic consequences. A similar phenomena in verb morphology meant that MSA complex morphological moods are gone. It is interesting to note that some remnants of the indicative mood form still survive as the default form in some dialects, whereas the subjunctive/jussive mood form is used in others. Other simplification phenomena include the loss of dual form in verb conjugation in the dialects and the consolidation of feminine and masculine in the plural form.

Figure 3: Lexical variation among different Arabic dialects.

Figure 4: MSA versus Egyptian Arabic example (and you did not write it for him).

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Figure 4: MSA versus Egyptian Arabic example (and you did not write it for him).

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Syntactic variation

Ignoring the morphological variations that interact with syntax such as loss of nominal case markers, the difference between MSA and different Arabic dialects is mainly an issue of statistical distribution of phenomena. For example, in MSA, verb-subject-object (VSO) order is more common than subject-verb-object (SVO) order. This is not the case, however, in Arabic dialects where the subject initial order (SVO) is more prevalent. A major morphosyntactic difference between the two cases is that for MSA the verb agrees with the subject fully (gender, number, person) in SVO order, but it only agrees with the subject in terms of gender and person in VSO order. In the dialects, the agreement is full in both cases (there are some limited exceptions to this generalization). Figure 6 is an example illustrating these different constructions.

In terms of the syntax of noun phrases, an interesting difference is the emergence of a possessive particle in almost all Arabic dialects to indicate the relationship of Nouns of Nounz. Such a possessive relationship is expressed in MSA using a syntactic construction called idafa where the first noun is morphologically indefinite and the second noun is morphologically definite. The following is an example comparing the two constructions:

MSA: /flimufāli/ the-house

Egyptian Arabic: /ilmufāli/ the-house

Levantine Arabic: /ilmufāli/ the-house

One example of the added complexity in Arabic dialects is the extensions to verb morphology. Egyptian Arabic has a negation circumfix (لا is n+/ma+ f) that doesn't exist at all in MSA. In addition, an indirect object pronoun is added to the verb morphology. The indirect object has the form of preposition+object, for example, لَهُ لَهُ hum to/for them. This preposition and object pair appears in MSA as a separate word. In the dialects where this pronoun is found, however, it interacts heavily with word phonology (causing stress movement) which clearly suggests it is part of the word utterance. Figure 4 shows an example of the same phrase meaning and you did not write it for him which appears as a single word in Egyptian Arabic but can only be expressed using three words in MSA. The indirect object pronoun is marked in blue, and the negation element is marked in red.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Cat</th>
<th>of</th>
<th>I want</th>
<th>There_is</th>
<th>There_isn't</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>táwila</td>
<td>qiṭṭa</td>
<td>idafa</td>
<td>Ø</td>
<td>jūjūd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moroccan</td>
<td>mida</td>
<td>qetṭa</td>
<td>djāl</td>
<td>byīt</td>
<td>kāīn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egyptian</td>
<td>tārabēţa</td>
<td>ṭotṭa</td>
<td>bitāfi</td>
<td>tāwez</td>
<td>fī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syrian</td>
<td>tāwele</td>
<td>bisse</td>
<td>tābař</td>
<td>biddi</td>
<td>fī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>mēz</td>
<td>bazzūna</td>
<td>māl</td>
<td>?arid</td>
<td>aku</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English (MSA)</th>
<th>Arabic (Egyptian)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>valam taktubūhā lahu</td>
<td>ملك الدمنورة</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wa+lam taktubū+hā la+hu</td>
<td>wi+ma+katab+tu+ha+hu+ʃ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and+not_past write_you+it for him</td>
<td>and+not+write+you+it+for_him+not</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The new possessive particle is different in different dialects (see Figure 3 column 4). It is used in the dialects side-by-side with idafa.

**Code switching**

Since MSA is not the native language of any modern-day Arabs and since it is quite different from the native spoken dialects, many speakers find it very hard to carry on spontaneous continuous speech in MSA. Instead, depending on their level of education and political orientation, speakers switch back and forth between their dialectal variant and MSA. Figure 5 is a portion of an Aljazeera transcript that is color-coded as follows: black text is MSA, and red text is Levantine Arabic. The speaker, who is a Lebanese politician, switches back and forth. The switching sometimes was only phonological, but at other times included lexical and morphological choices. The transcript is not always true to the actual speech, mainly because of the problem of lack of orthography standards. For example, the word marked in black boxes (Figure 5, line 11) is the MSA word كأي /kay/ so that. However, the actual audio is the Levantine word كأي /ta/ so that. The transcriber chose to transcribe using the meaning of the word instead of its form.

**Conclusion**

The Arabic language is, in fact, a collection of several variants among which MSA has a special status as the formal written standard language of the media, culture and education across the Arab world. The other variants are informal spoken dialects that are the mediums of communication for daily life. Arabic dialects substantially differ from MSA and each other in terms of phonology, morphology, lexical choice and syntax. Professional translators and machine translation systems need to be aware of these dialects and their diglossic relationship with MSA in order to guarantee a high degree of translation accuracy in situations where more than one variant is used.

---

**Figure 5:** A transcript of an Aljazeera television show interview (The Opposite Direction, July 23, 2004).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>MSA</strong></td>
<td>كتب الأبناء الإلهام</td>
<td>the-boys the-poems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>wrote</td>
<td>mascPlural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>partial agreement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LEV</strong></td>
<td>كتب الإلهام</td>
<td>the-boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>wrote</td>
<td>mascPlural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>full agreement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6:** A variety of sentence orders in Arabic.
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