MANAGING HUMAN-TO-HUMAN APPROACH WITH NO HUMANS PRESENT: A LOOK INTO POLITE FORMS OF ADDRESS IN SOFTWARE LOCALIZATION

Tijana PAREZANOVIĆ
Alfa BK University, Belgrade

Abstract: Using examples extracted from the author's work on software localization in the field of automobile industry (English translated into Serbian-Serbia locale), this presentation centres on the issue of polite forms of address. Since software localization relies on the resources from linguistics, business and marketing, and information technologies, politeness is considered in relation to all three aspects: 1) as an important element of human-to-human approach to marketing, whereby 2) the use of personal pronouns has to be taken into account considering the differences between English and Serbian, and contextualized within 3) the largely impersonal process of localization itself. The analysis of the examples aims at defining certain patterns which could potentially facilitate practical work in this branch of translation studies.

Keywords: software localization, translation, automobile industry, politeness, human touch approach, first and second person.

1. On the conflicting demands of software translation

Probably not many recently developed fields of study – and practice – are as transdisciplinary as localization is. Most of the definitions provided necessitate that the related processes of globalization and internationalization also be explained. What immediately becomes obvious is the market orientation of both processes, with globalization "most easily thought of as your global marketing strategy" and "associated with all marketing concepts (branding, establishing market share, and the like)." (Williams 2004, 5) Globalization is followed by internationalization, "[t]he process of generalizing a product so that it can handle multiple languages and cultural conventions without a need for redesign" (Ludwigsen 2009, 16), and therefore also be sold into different culturally dependent markets. Such integration – adaptation of a global market product to a particular local market (*locale*) is what is termed localization. The complexity of the entire set of these interdependent processes is perhaps only more increased when it comes to software localization. Relying largely on the developments of information technologies and databases with highly depersonalized interface, software localization is somewhat incompatible with the mentioned idea of handling multiple languages and, more particularly, cultural conventions. This incompatibility is perhaps most obvious in the translation segment of software localization, which is the general problem this paper addresses. The problem is, namely, that of how certain cultural conventions can be successfully recognized and rendered in appropriate linguistic terms in the context of software localization, which usually tends to provide only the most basic data, reducing messages to content words or simple commands, questions, or bits of information.

In his seminal 1998 study *A Practical Guide to Localization*, Bert Esselink devotes a chapter to translation, as one segment in the chain of activities which also include

budgeting, scheduling, updating and processing updates of the software, software testing and communication with clients. Esselink's description of software translation is invaluable, since it covers certain technical directions of which translators traditionally need (or could) not have been aware. Esselink, for instance, gives a list of non-translatable words and commands, or an equally useful list of the symbols which must not be used in order to avoid errors in the software operation; there is, however, very little reference in his study to any cultural implications of software translation. What he does mention, and what in turn emphasizes the depersonalized nature of the process, is that imperative mood must always be used and that using the first and second person should be avoided (Esselink 2000, 66). It appears from Esselink's instructions that the requirements of the global market tend to reduce translation merely to the process in which a natural-language string is replaced for another natural-language string. Similar instructions and guidelines are found in other texts too. In one of the practical guides to localization, Jeff Williams insists on a crucial position of translation within localization and on the necessity of understanding the context and meaning of the source language (Ludwigsen 2009, 17), only to offer, in a different publication, the definition of translation as "the process of *converting the written word of a source language into the written word of a target language.*" (Williams 2004, 5; emphasis added) Based on the idea that there are many more issues to localization and that translation can be reduced to a linguistic problem solved by word-for-word replacement, such a definition tends to disregard the fact that translation studies have since the 1980s, with the so-called 'cultural turn' (Snell-Hornby 2006), been moving in quite the opposite direction, promoting and studying translation as a form of cultural mediation.[i] It is precisely Esselink's advice regarding the use of imperative mood and the avoidance of the first and second person that proved to be conflicting with the necessity of adapting the software text to the cultural conventions of the local market and thus providing a suitable platform for the communication between the software and local culture.

2. The problem of imperatives

This conflict forms the basis of the specific problem addressed in this paper. The presented research was carried out during the author's work on the translation of automobile industry software, localized for the Serbian-Serbia locale. The software in question is designed for the iOS and Android operating systems and intended to serve as a personal assistant to Škoda car owners, storing and processing data on dealers and services, reminding users about meetings and schedules, keeping track of maintenance needs and monitoring the functions of the vehicle. It was immediately obvious that the software text contains numerous imperative forms in its language strings – 116 in total which were also translated as imperatives, following Esselink's recommendation.[ii] What was also immediately perceived as problematic was distinguishing whether the natural-language strings represent utterances by the software user, or bits of information provided by the software for the user. The interface of the application software could provide no answer to this problem, the lack of any situational context, given either visually or verbally, was evident, and the utterances were not set in any order that could lead the translator clearly through the conversation between the software and its user. The reason why this was problematic is relevant for the use of imperatives. Namely, imperative mood in English has the same form for 2nd

person both singular and plural. Serbian being an inflected language, singular and plural forms differ, and this is important because the 2nd person plural and the related verb forms are used in Serbian as grammatical markers of politeness. Politeness in address is bound to be culturally-specific, that is, dependent on different norms pertaining to different languages and cultures – different locales. On the other hand, politeness in the context of translating between English and Serbian is a largely linguistic problem, requiring different grammatical forms to be used. While translation in software localization within the described context reveals the illusory nature of the belief that products can be localized by means of word-for-word translation, it also poses questions that, however much grounded in translation studies, are clearly and specifically linked with software localization. The first of these questions is whether the participants in the described communication – the application software and its user – should express politeness? The premise in this case was that the software should express politeness in addressing its user, while the user is not obliged to do so by either culturally-bound or industry-driven requirements. With this premise in mind, the second question followed, namely, how can the translator know, in the decontextualized setting of the software interface, which of the utterances belong to the software and which to the application user?

2.1. Negotiating between the personal and the digital

As regards the first question, the confirmation of the premise was readily offered by the demands of the industry. Recent marketing theories advocate for the human approach to be applied in both face-to-face communication and communication between a digital entity and a human being. The human approach, human touch, or human-to-human (H2H) approach is about building a connection between the actors in the market which is based on trust, loyalty, and respect. Automobile industry is not an exception. Listing some famous examples such as Amazon, Apple, or Toyota, Steven van Belleghem in the 2015 publication *When Digital Becomes Human* calls for an empathetic human touch approach to customers, suggesting that this might be the crucial thing that in the future determines whether a company retains or loses customers. This clearly refers to those situations in which a business company is represented in a digital form, such as in the example of the here analysed material. The following two strings, which were identified as utterances coming from the application software, exemplify the attempt at making a personal connection with the user:

(1) Contact us. / S: *Kontaktiraj**te** nas*.[iii]
(2) Send us feedback or check out the application disclaimer. / S: *Pošalji**te** nam povratne informacije ili pogledaj**te** izjavu o odgovornosti*.

What is interesting to notice is the use of the 1st person plural – *us* – which stresses the idea that the software represents the company in question, thus reinforcing its identity, participating in the processes of creating and maintaining the brand image, and building customers' trust in the brand. In another example, the software as a representative of the company is given even more personalized traits:

(3) Hi I am PAUL! […] PAUL is your Personal Assistant who will notify you about car status if your car is connected via SmartGate/MIB or advise you with your time using your calendar.

Turning again to translation studies and localization as its specific subdiscipline, the use of the 1st person plural in examples (1) and (2) or the proper name in (3) corresponds to what Anthony Pym calls *humanizing discourse*: discourse that puts a human face on texts (2004, 183).[iv] The face that is here put on the text (software) is the face of the company behind it, but what is more important – primarily because it contextualizes software translation more firmly within the field of translation studies – is the discursive nature of this process. Namely, the manner in which the text is formulated is what makes it "human" and what ultimately allows it to express respect and politeness in its interaction with the customer.

The position of texts such as this application software can further be rooted in translation studies by referring to what Katharina Reiss designates as *appeal-focused* or *operative* texts. Their function is to persuade and the language dimension they rely on is dialogue (Reiss 2000, 26). These texts "do not simply convey certain information in a linguistic form; they are distinctive in always presenting information with a particular perspective, an explicit purpose, involving a non-linguistic result" (Reiss 2000, 38). In translating operative texts, what matters most is "a clear appeal to the hearer or reader" (Reiss 2000, 38), who should thus – in both source and target language – be provoked towards a specific action. While the dialogic nature of this particular text is perhaps not immediately discernible due to the fact that the language strings are not placed in the order one would expect to see in a dialogue, it still transpires from examples such as the following:

(4) Choose dealer in a list. / S: *Odaberi prodavca iz spiska*.
(5) Choose dealer. / S: *Odaberi prodavca*.
(6) Choose dealer on map or in a list below. / S: *Izaberite prodavca na mapi ili iz spiska ispod*.

The similarities among these utterances can easily obscure any possibility of recognizing who the *speaker* is. They also illustrate how the lack of context or order in the depersonalized setting of software translation can be deceiving. The analysis, however, establishes that example (5) precedes the other two, conveying a command from the user to the application. The response to that is example (6), whereby the application offers several options to the user. Example (4) is the last in the sequence, providing a selection from the offered choice in yet another command from the user. Acting on these commands, the application fulfils the purpose of keeping its user satisfied, thus showing its reliability (as well as that of its engineers, who work closely with the automobile manufacturers) and also persuading the user to remain loyal to the company. This is the non-linguistic result it achieves, which in the context of business and marketing ultimately leads to increasing sales and making profit.

Following the initial premise that the application software needs to address the user with politeness,[v] the next question in this analysis was the possibility of discerning to whom the utterances belong, with a view to facilitating the translation process by singling out certain markers that indicate whether the words are ascribed to the application or to its user. The de-contextualized nature of the text boxes which contain these language strings is precisely what sometimes necessitates a word-for-word replacement of the source text for the target text. Since this is contrary to both recent developments in translation studies and the goals of the software developers and the expected non-linguistic result the company hopes to achieve, this research focused on distinguishing and extracting certain linguistic elements as possible markers of the

participant in the dialogue and therefore also indicators of the use of politeness or the lack thereof.

2.2. Marking the dialogue with politeness

The examples extracted below show those language strings which feature the words addressed by the application to the user, since these should be marked for politeness. Among the 116 examples in the imperative mood, 39 were identified as such. The use of *please* was an expected marker of politeness, but *please* appeared in only 11 out of 39 strings, some of which are given below:

(7) Please choose. / S: *Odaberite.*
(8) Please take a moment looking at this guide. / S: *Pogledajte uputstvo za aplikaciju.*
(9) Please try again. / S: *Pokušajte ponovo.*
(10) Please contact your dealer as soon as possible. / S: *Kontaktirajte Vašeg prodavca što je pre moguće.*
(11) Please connect to the internet so that I can have the latest info for you. / S: *Uspostavite Internet konekciju tako da Vam mogu poslati najnovije informacije.*

Please proved to be a reliable marker of politeness, though not a consistent one.[vi] This is evident from example (7), which shows that the same command/invitation is used alternately with and without *please*, with no difference in connotation. The imperative in example (9) is, on the other hand, used without *please* in other strings where it was determined that the words belong to the user – it was therefore not translated using the politeness marker.[vii] What is, however, of most interest in the given examples is the use of personal pronouns or possessive adjectives in examples (10) – *yours* – and (11) – *I*. While the introduction of the 1st and 2nd person is directly opposed to the previously mentioned Esselink's advice, it is in fact what creates the needed *humanizing discourse*.

As claimed in the previously referenced study by Anthony Pym, localization should aim at, among other things, humanizing relations (2004, 182). Although in itself not a simple term, humanization is in Pym's view derived from the Renaissance ideology of humanism, which, when it comes to its linguistic manifestations, "placed a high value on the manner of expression, over and above the content of what is expressed" (2004, 182). In line with his idea that a human face should be put on texts, Pym first challenges the need for the anonymity of the translator – the requirement that the translator should be as invisible as possible or, even worse, that she should be *nobody*. While he sees this as a negation of "identity, agency, and importance" of the people working in the field (Pym 2004, 69), he does contend that "the translating translator cannot occupy an 'I', a first-person pronoun." (Pym 2004, 70) This is best seen in dialogue interpreting (which is, broadly speaking, what the analysed examples correspond to), where a cognitive and linguistic difference should be made between the person (*I*) and the words uttered by that person, a difference which implies that the only element of translation process with a just claim on using the first-person pronoun is *the text itself*. Ascribing this personality to the application (text), as seen from example (11), is an attempt to reconstitute the depersonalized process of localization as personal, in line with the human touch approach demanded by the industry.

The second person in this context, which is "a macrostructural position, functioning as a property of the entire text" (Pym 2004, 74) and an implied subjectivity "that can be deduced from discursive features of the text itself" (Pym 2004, 75), is profiled as the

automobile owner whom the company wishes to retain. The ownership is indeed stressed in many examples, such as the above listed example (3), where the possessive *your* appears four times in a single sentence. More examples follow:

(12) Make sure *you* know where *you* leave *your* car. / S: *Zapamtite gde ste ostavili Vaše vozilo.*

(13) Keep *your* car in good condition. / S: *Održavajte Vaše vozilo u dobrom stanju.*

(14) Choose and read *your* media system's onboard literature. / S: *Odaberite i pročitajte ugrađenu literaturu o Vašem medijskom sistemu.*

(15) Scan or fill *your* car's VIN code located on left bottom side on *your* windshield. / S: *Skenirajte ili unesite vaš VIN-kod. Možete ga naći na levoj donjoj strani vetrobranskog stakla.*

The ownership extends from the automobile to the media system in example (14) and even the windshield in example (15). The total of 16 strings using *you* or *your* were identified, each marked with politeness. It could be claimed that the use of possessives as determiners is required by the syntactic rules of the English language, and is therefore not a discursive element but rather grammatical necessity; however, in at least some of the given examples *your* could have been replaced by the impersonal *the*.[viii] While the application software refers to itself using the 1st person pronoun, singular or plural, in only four language strings featuring imperatives – examples (1), (2) and the below given (19) being among them – the 2nd person pronoun or possessive adjective is never used with reference to the software. On the other hand, the 1st person pronouns and possessives are commonly applied to the user as well as to the software:

(16) Notify *me* about news. / S: *Obavesti me o novostima.*

(17) Connect with *my* car. / S: *Poveži se sa mojim automobilom.*

(18) Wake *me* earlier. / S: *Probudi me ranije.*

This implies that the second person, when it is expressed, functions as a reliable marker of politeness, because it appears only in those strings which can be attributed to the application software, and not the user. This, however, also implies that the implementation of humanizing discourse to a digital entity is still a tentative process, which oscillates between the need to put a face on a participant in the dialogue and the inability to recognize the abstract digital form as a person in its own right. The latter can also be read from the 11 strings in which the single indicator of the software as the speaker – hence also politeness in address – was the semantic dimension of the verb in the imperative form. Namely, while the software performs (and is given orders to perform) most activities in this dialogue (e.g. it selects, updates, cancels, changes, finds, connects, etc.), there are still some activities that can only be performed by humans. These refer to either cognitive abilities or physical movements:

Learn all about our smart solutions. / S: *Saznajte sve o našim pametnim rešenjima.*

(19) Swipe to the left to start browsing. / S: *Prevucite prstom ulevo da biste započeli pretraživanje.*

(20) Rate Application. / S: *Ocenite aplikaciju.*

Such activities evidence the limitations of humanizing discourse, which seems to be, while featuring as a necessary technologically informed element of contemporary business strategies, with bright prospects for its future implementation, still a cause of some anxiety in human users. To this effect, a discourse analysis of the 77 examples of the user's address to the application software would be of interest. While such an analysis was not included in this small-scale research, there were still some aspects of the user's utterances that could be immediately recognized as distinctive. Apart from

the absence of *please* as politeness marker and the resistance towards using the 2nd person pronouns and possessives in addressing the software, these include extremely reduced redundancy, manifested through either very short sentences or the syntactic ellipsis which disregards even the common use of function words such as articles – in examples (22) and (23) below. Functionality seems to pertain exclusively to the software, and example (24) conveys the user's strong sense of control and authority, expressed not merely by the command in imperative form, but also graphically, with the final exclamation mark:

 Add note. / S: *Dodaj belešku*.
(21) Make appointment. / S: *Zakaži termin*.
(22) Skip all steps! / S: *Preskoči sve korake*!

The above listed example (6) is the only which represented an instance of polite address, although it did not contain any of the three listed indicators – *please*, 2nd person, or the imperative of a verb with a specific meaning which relates it to human agency. What served as a distinguishing feature in this example was precisely the lack of ellipsis – and this need to stress the manner in which an utterance is expressed is perhaps yet another effort on the part of the digital towards becoming more humanized (cf. Pym 2004, 182).

3. A small step towards humanizing the digital

Interestingly, nearly all language strings in the analysed software are phrased in such a way that the brand in question is rarely or never mentioned. They are generalized (or globalized) to the point that they can be used for any other similar product, and this generalization in part accounts for the fact that humanizing discourse, however much needed within the scope of the industry, is still not achieved with full success. Referring, in place of a conclusion, to the questions posed at the beginning of this paper, we might here point out that the expression of politeness, as part of the process which makes the digital more human-like, is something with a strong potential to be further developed. Analysing the manner in which politeness is phrased, *please* as the standard marker appeared to be reliable, though not indispensable, and the semantic criteria contained in specific verbs proved to be, while showing the limitations of humanizing the digital, a discursive replacement for *please* in marking the need for polite address. The greatest potential, however, remains in further insistence on the use of persons. While unveiling the subjectivity implied by the 2nd person reference to the application user is not that difficult – because there is, after all, a real person behind this discursively constructed subject – the software only tentatively posits itself as the 1st person entity. The very use of personal pronouns and the related possessive adjectives is, however, a feature of software localization (and translation) that is rendered suitable for development and analysis, as this personalization process is probably the first step, however small, towards a more complete humanization.

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[i] To provide an example, we might refer to the approach applied by Michael Cronin in his 2003 *Translation and Globalization*. The author here describes translation as being in such a position as to "understand both the transnational movement that is globalization and the transnational movement which is anti-globalization." (Cronin 2003, 1) In the context of today's global market and the consequent process of localization, translation is given, in approaches such as Cronin's, a central position in the negotiations between local demands and global supply.

[ii] Several of the strings in the imperative mood were not translated using imperative, in line with Anthony Pym's suggestion that a third-person subject (as an abstract concept more of which is explained in the second section of the paper) should be introduced when possible in order to make the translated text and translation process as impersonal as possible, as well as to avoid the confusion of different persons participating in the communication. The example given by Pym is the translation of "I am frightened" as "The situation is frightening." Similarly, in order to avoid the possible confusion between the addresser and the addressee in the present research, some imperatives were translated into Serbian as nouns/gerunds, although their number is insignificant.

[iii] The grammatical marker for plural, used as the polite form of address in Serbian, is italicized in all examples. The Serbian translation is given only for those examples which contain imperatives.

[iv] The concept of *face* features significantly in politeness theory and strategy. Brown and Levinson's concept of face as "the public self-image that everyone lays claim to" (1987, 61) was applied in an influential study of politeness in screen translating (Hatim and Mason, 2004), which, depending on the available tools, can sometimes be as depersonalized as localization. Anthony Pym, however, uses a somewhat more abstract concept of *person* to describe his humanizing discourse, which will be explained at a later point in the paper.

[v] It was not presumed that the users should also show politeness in the dialogue with the application, which is, after all, there to meet all their demands and manage their time successfully.

[vi] Recent studies (e.g. Woods 2016) show indeed the numerous other discursive functions of *please* apart from politeness marking. This implies that it should not be relied upon for distinguishing polite address, but also complementarily, that it need not appear each time that politeness is expressed.

[vii] It should, incidentally, be noted that the use of the Serbian equivalent of *please* (e.g. *molim Vas*) is not required in translation, because politeness already has a grammatical marker in Serbian.

[viii] Or else completely left out, which corresponds to the extremely reduced redundancy characterizing those strings ascribed to the user.