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Abstract



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Multilingualism in Cyberspace: a Practical Reality?

It is commonplace in intellectual conversations to bemoan that the internet does not have sufficient linguistic diversity: English and Mandarin Chinese dominate. A common argument is that large and powerful entities such as governments and corporations ought to speak the language of their stakeholders: monolingualism is derided as hegemonistic, old-fashioned, inconsiderate and, if the language is English, then colonialist(Tusuda). But what of the practicalities of multilingual systems? Why are they not more popular?

In this paper I demonstrate that multilingualism brings very substantial ongoing costs. Not only can these costs make it unsustainable, but it also carries grave dangers of actually worsening the power relations between the impoverished and the powerful. The root cause of the difficulty is translation. All multilingual efforts require translation and, until recently, this meant human translators with all of their associated human failings.

I will make the case for automatic translation which, unlike human translators is accurate, politically neutral and, most importantly, can be put under the control of the user rather than the corporation. Although automatic translation has historically been quite poor there is emerging evidence that it is, and certainly will be, superior to humans. And if sensitively deployed (eg(Glauert, Elliott and Cox)) then it has potential to redress the power balance at an affordable cost.

Bibliography

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Brief Bio :

Richard Harvey is a full Professor of Computer Science at the University of East Anglia where is also the Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Admissions for the University. He is also an appointed Professor at Gresham College London – the oldest public education body in the world. His research specialises on problems in signal processing and artificial intelligence where he has worked on problems in lip-reading and machine understanding of humans.