Multilingual websites with local focus
Michal Boleslav Měchura

The websites discussed in literature on multilingual websites usually have an international or global target audience. In my talk, however, I want to discuss multilingual websites that have a national and even sub-national scope: websites that target multilingual communities within the same country or region. This includes countries with widespread personal bilingualism (Luxembourg), states that contain several language communities (Belgium, Switzerland), regions where a local language is co-official with a larger national language (Catalonia, the Basque Country), and countries where a minority language is spoken by a fraction of the population in addition to a majority language (Ireland, Wales). When building a multilingual website for such a target community, issues arise which, in my opinion, have not been dealt with sufficiently in current literature on the multilingual web and for which no established best practices exist. These issues include:

1. Default language for first-time visitors and the prominence of language choice widgets
2. Which content in which language? What happens if content is not available in language X?

Re 1: When a visitor arrives whose language preferences are not yet known, it is common for some form of language detection to take place, taking into account the user's estimated geographical location and the browser's Accept-Language setting. This works reasonably well for international websites but not so well for national or local ones: not only is geographical location useless for obvious reasons, but the Accept-Language setting is likely to be less reliable too because the existence of this feature is not well-known by users. The result is that, for example, a Welsh speaker in Wales may end up surfing the web with English as their default Accept-Language even though they would actually prefer to be served content in Welsh. The only way to avoid making an inappropriate choice is to display a splash screen and ask the user to make an explicit language choice at the start of the first visit. I want to suggest in my talk that the splash-screen approach should be the recommended approach for websites that target communities with complex linguistic configurations. It is an approach compatible with the sociolinguistic notions of *active offer* (making a language choice available spontaneously – as opposed to on request) and *language normalization* (creating an atmosphere in which using language X is not viewed as exceptional).

Re 2: In a global website that serves multiple communities in multiple locations, it is not always necessary (and sometimes not even desirable) for all content to be available in all languages, and language-specific content is not unusual. In contrast to that, locally focussed websites serving a single (but multilingual) community are often built on the assumption that all content always will, or at least should, be available in each of the languages involved. However, it is not uncommon for the site's publisher to find later on that that ambition is proving hard to live up to. A well-designed website should therefore contain well-planned mechanisms for dealing with missing content. I will argue in my talk that when a specific piece of content is not available in the user's preferred language, simply not displaying that content as if it did not exist at all is not an option. No user should be denied content because of his or her language choice. After all, it is not unreasonable to assume that the user, being a member of a multilingual community, may be able to consume the content in another language. So, content from other languages should be offered to the user – but this needs to be done in a smart way so that the user's linguistic sensibilities and loyalties are not violated. Mixing languages on the screen without warning or explanation is probably not a good strategy, and neither is redirection to another language without first explaining to the user (in his or her preferred language) why this is necessary.

In summary, I want to highlight the fact that locally-focussed multilingual websites are a little different from globally-focussed ones. As it becomes more common for people to live and work in places where multiple languages intermix, this type of website will become more common, and it is on this type of website that web standardization efforts will want to focus.