



Translation firm has keys to understanding

Projects include voting directions

By Gary Ruderman
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With a network of language experts and proprietary translation software, Global Languages and Cultures Inc. has become a source of multilingual understanding when Chicagoans go to the polls.

Whether translating election information into Kiribati or translating rap lyrics into Chinese for a soft-drink company, the small Chicago company is working to help people to understand each other.

Sedef Olcer, a Turkish native with degrees in economics and computer science, founded Global Languages in 1993 with an idea to link her language skills with her experience in computer science.

Working at home and backed by her own savings, Olcer started the firm with a lucky break translating management training documents from English into Turkish for a Chicago fast-food company. Her next assignment translated technology documents into kana, the letter-by-letter version of Japanese (compared to kanji, the Japanese language based on symbol characters).

Yet the firm's biggest undertaking was the 98-language translation of the voting instructions for Chicago's elections, including Tuesday's vote. For the 2000 elections, the city's election commissioners wanted voting instructions in all those languages as a gesture of internationalism to celebrate the millennium and for practical reasons. Because of federal voting laws, Chicago has had multilingual instructions and ballots for almost 30 years, starting with Spanish in 1974 and Chinese in 2000, said Tom Leach,

Chicago's top languages

The top 16 languages spoken in Chicago based on languages spoken in the home of Chicago Public School students.

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|-------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| 1. English | 6. Bosnian | 11. Assyrian |
| 2. Spanish | 7. Urdu | 12. Russian |
| 3. Polish | 8. Cantonese | 13. Romanian |
| 4. Serbian | 9. Arabic | 14. Tagalog (Philippines) |
| 5. Croatian | 10. Vietnamese | 15. Gujarati |

Source: Chicago Board of Election Commissioners

spokesman for Chicago's Board of Election Commissioners.

But in March, Chicago changed its balloting procedures. Instead of putting the punched ballot in a box to be counted offsite, voters feed the ballot through a scanner that picks up mistakes like incomplete votes or hanging chads. Voters can fix their mistakes or leave the vote as it is.

Making a fresh set of 98 translations for the new procedures would have produced a multilingual guide as large as a telephone book for "the two people in the metro area who speak some of those languages," said Leach. So the city pared down the instruction books to just 16 languages this year based on the top languages spoken by families with children in public schools.

Olcer's translation service uses a combination of brains and technical brawn. Through several international organizations, she has cobbled together a network of 500 translators from around the world who work for her. The in-country experts allow Olcer's company to do more than translate.

"Language is a living thing and it needs to be keyed to local usage," Olcer said. "A lot of English words and concepts — like 'amortization' or 'a drop in mortgage rates' — don't exist in countries like China. Yet with globalization and China's involvement in

world trade, they're coming up with their own terms."

In-country translators are more adept at staying abreast of such terms, she said.

Recently Olcer's company was able to halt a consumer product introduction in Japan. The furniture cleaning product's name was similar to an existing product that did the opposite thing — it coated furniture.

In-country experts also parse Web site or product names for Global clients, eliminating potential names closely related to politics, religion, obscenity or sex when translated into another language.

Having in-country support could have helped General Motors avoid one of the more infamous linguistic faux pas: introducing the Chevrolet Nova to Latin America. "Nova" in Spanish translates into "doesn't go."

Olcer uses technology to make translation faster and more accurate. The company uses humans for translations and the results are run through a database matching English phrases to foreign language phrases. The translated language is cataloged, allowing the firm to reuse text. That comes in handy when translating complex documents like chemical safety data sheets into 25 languages in just two days.

To shift information between translators and clients, the company wrote a translation

program that becomes part of standard Microsoft Excel spreadsheet program. The program removes just the cells needing translation within the spreadsheet. Those cells are then sent to language experts around the world, where translations are completed and the cells returned. The program reinserts the cells in the right place and adds the new information to a database.

The translation software also conducts "fuzzy matches" that allow the use of words that are widely used in place of another word. The software will allow using the phrase "Turn this equipment off" in place of "Turn this machinery off."

Humans are still needed to catch things translation software won't. If a U.S. chemical safety sheet talks about measurements like gallons and pounds, documents should reflect that the rest of the world operates on the metric system of liters and kilos.

Humans also add a conversational voice, said Josef Haas, communications specialist at the College of American Pathologists in Northfield.

Global Languages put together the College's Spanish language Web site, including an outreach site (MyHeathTestReminder.com) that sends free e-mail reminders to schedule cancer screenings.

"We're a medical society but (Global) was able to make a comfortable Hispanic-American translation without sounding lofty or technical," Haas said. "If you really want to help people, you've got to speak their language."

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