BOOKING.COM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY FROM A WEBSITE LOCALIZATION PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the level of localization of two booking.com hotel pages. The study focuses on applying website localization theories from a theoretical perspective. The languages/cultures considered are American English, British English and Romanian.

Keywords: website localization, translation, translation quality, localized web content, online B2C communication.

The pages analyzed refer to a hotel from London, UK:

http://www.booking.com/hotel/gb/oxford-house.en-us.html
http://www.booking.com/hotel/gb/oxford-house.en-gb.html
http://www.booking.com/hotel/gb/oxford-house.ro.html

and a hotel from Iaşi, Romania:

http://www.booking.com/hotel/ro/unirea.en-us.html
http://www.booking.com/hotel/ro/unirea.en-gb.html
http://www.booking.com/hotel/ro/unirea.ro.html

Data was collected in April 2014.

I considered both a UK and a Romanian hotel as, presumably, the main description content is provided on the website by the hotel owners themselves. The analysis consists of two main parts: interface and content. It is based on the website elements listed by Esselink (2000) yet limited to user visible content.

Notation conventions used in the tables below:

- white background for relevant findings
- grey background for interpretation of the findings
- black background for faulty elements

Interface analysis (applies to both hotels)

Element analyzed	American English	British English	Romanian
General design and layout	The same		
Color usage	The same		
Top menu	Numerous similarities		
-Currency	Interchangeable, regardless of the language selected by the user; flag is used to differentiate between currencies with the same name		

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	While some may consider that currency should be set automatically, upon choosing a language, often, there are clients who have savings in several currencies. Thus, a client may opt for a currency over others, based on currency rates or the amount of money in a certain currency.		
-Date format and punctuation (the search box on the left)	month-day-year: Oct-22-2010	day-month-year: 22-Oct-2010	day-month-year: 22-oct-2010
	Month capitalized		No moth capitalization
-Currency format and other digit formatting	Usage of period to delimit decimals		Usage of comma to delimit decimals
	Usage of comma as thousands separator		Usage of period as thousands separator
	No space between currency symbol and amount		Currency placed before amount. RON used instead of Lei.
	Amounts rounded	Amounts with decimals	Amounts rounded
Capitalization	Usage of capital letters for **all words** in headings or buttons	Mixed approach: some sentences capitalize only the initial letter while other sentences capitalize the initials of all the words	Usage of capital letters for the **first word** in headings or buttons
	Inconsistent: *Destination/hotel name*, *Your Top 5 Viewed Properties*	Highly inconsistent: *Destination/hotel name*, *Your top 5 viewed hotels* etc. versus *Room Types, Hotel Policies, Extra Facilities, Two-Bedroom Penthouse Apartment, etc.*	*Destinație/numele hotelului, Top 5 - hoteluri văzute de dumneavoastră* Inconsistency in article usage: indefinite and definite article used (-le, -ului) in the same heading (*Destinație**Ø**/nume**le** hotel**ului***)
Icon usage	Consistent among the three localized version		
Call-to-action	Lock in a great price for your upcoming stay		Securizați-vă un preț excelent pentru sejurul următor!
	The verb *a securiza* in Romanian is used inappropriately. It is used to convey security, *to make secure* or *to secure.* Alternative translation suggested: *Asigurați-vă că beneficiați de cel mai bun preț!* I removed *pentru sejurul următor* as it may imply *for the next stay* and not the current one. The page context already implies that the message refers to the current hotel		
	Book while rooms are still available, or		Rezervați cât timp

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	secure your reservation for these dates.		camerele mai sunt disponibile, sau asigurați-vă că aveți o rezervare pentru aceste date.
	Usage of the verb *to book* instead of *to reserve*		Same verb used *a rezerva* both for the interface button and CTA text
	Prices may go up, so secure your reservation today.		Preţurile pot creşte, mai bine faceți rezervarea chiar astăzi.
			Addition of CTA *mai bine*
Other interface elements	Property Highlights Capitalization	Property highlights	Punctele forte ale proprietăţii
	Save for later		Salvați pentru mai târziu
			Alternative: Puneţi semn de carte
	Back to top		Înapoi la început
			It could be understood as *start over*. An alternative translation could be *Top/Început pagină*
	Guests consistently rate …		Clienţii apreciază în mod constant …
	Reasons to Choose Capitalization	reasons to choose	motive pentru a alege
	Business Twin Room		Cameră twin Business
			Cameră business dublă
	Suite		Suită
			Term not used in Romanian to designate a *home* or an area to host tourists
	Check-in		
	Check-out		
	While not standard terms in Romanian (there are no dictionary entries for these terms), the Romanian hotel industry makes extensive use of these terms instead of the Romanian expressions: *(dată) sosire* and *(dată) plecare* or *Din* and *Până în,* similarly to the French interface (*Du* and *Au*)		

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Content analysis (applies to both hotels)

<table>
<tr><th>Element analyzed</th><th colspan="2">American English</th><th>British English</th><th>Romanian</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Hotel address</td><td colspan="3" rowspan="2">English format and wording</td><td>Romanian format</td></tr>
<tr><td>English wording</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Address format is based on the format of the country of origin</td></tr>
<tr><td>Names relevant for feedback</td><td colspan="4">Usage of first names for each of the hotels. Name input may lack diacritics usage (user generated error): Abdulaziz instead of Abdülaziz. Names are also input using a different writing system, in this case Arab, عبد لي , which may be confusing for most non-Arab speakers. It is interesting that within the English or Romanian text, the direction of the Arab text is correctly rendered, from right to left, to maintain the original text characteristic to the source user. This and other names are used on purpose as a foreignization strategy to underline the variety of clients that are hosted at various hotels.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Telephone number of hotels (provided upon reservation)</td><td colspan="4">Format is based on the format of the country of origin</td></tr>
<tr><td>Units of measure</td><td colspan="2">Imperial system</td><td>Metric system
The metric system is the official measurement system, but the popular system is the imperial system</td><td>Metric system</td></tr>
<tr><td>Non-text elements</td><td colspan="4">Mainly pictures in this case, same pictures and same number of pictures. Romanian hotels tend to display somewhat more pictures (to compensate for their default customers' – Romanians – high Uncertainty avoidance index).</td></tr>
<tr><td>Textual content</td><td colspan="4">Localized</td></tr>
<tr><td>-Usage of diacritics</td><td colspan="3">Not applicable</td><td>Complying</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">-User feedback</td><td colspan="4">Text is displayed as entered by users</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">•Prone to linguistic, punctuation or capitalization errors, informal style, but used as such to convey the meaning that feedback is from real users:
-Sleeping matrailes wera cleaned Kitchen was well prepared. Good location;
-I did not like the the way the staffs treated as I was been assured that the towels will be changed everyday but it got never canged and all those missguidance by the staff,
-Great apartment in a good location. 1 block to the Tube and market. Nice kitchen.
-Baia nu e nici p-aproape de patru stele.;
-foarte curat liniste personal calificat cu adevărat restaurantul face toţi banii
-la cam.duble paturi f.inguste sub standar
•No diacritics for Romanian</td></tr>
</table>

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	•When set on Romanian, the Romanian hotel provides almost all feedback in Romanian from Romanian guests. This might imply that the are no foreign guests. When set to English feedback is provided from guests, Romanian or international, who used English •The UK hotel provides only feedback in English from previous guests. If language is set to Romanian, no translation is available

Content linguistic analysis (UK hotel page)

-Main textual content	Similar but localized texts for each of the three targets		
	The differences are of spelling, lexical and syntactic nature		NA
examples	*A 10-minute walk from*	*Situated just 10 minutes' walk from*	*Situat la doar 10 minute de mers pe jos de*
	feature	*offer*	*oferă*
	theaters	*theatres*	*teatre*
	comes equipped with a DVD player	*comes with a DVD player*	*dotat cu DVD player*
	The full kitchen has an oven	*The fully equipped kitchen comes with an oven*	*Bucătăria utilată complet are cuptor*
	subway station	*underground station*	*Stația de metrou*
	a 10-minute walk from the apartments	*a 10-minute walk away from the apartments*	*10 minute de mers pe jos de apartamente*
-Word count	130	134	142

Content linguistic analysis (Romanian hotel page)

-Main textual content	Similar but localized texts for each of the three targets		
	The differences are of spelling, lexical and syntactic nature		NA
examples	*Featuring*	*Offering*	*oferă*
	the Unirea Hotel & Spa	*Unirea Hotel & Spa*	*Unirea Hotel & Spa*
	in the center of Iasi	*located in the centre of Iasi*	*situat în centrul orașului Iași*
	at Unirea Square	*at Union (Unirea) Square*	*în Piața Unirii*
	views of the city	*views over the city*	*vedere unică la oraș*
	specialties	*specialities*	*specialități*
	aerobic classes available on site	*aerobic programmes on site*	*programele de aerobic oferite de hotel*
	just under 1 mile	*1.5 km*	*1.5 km*
	just over half a mile	*1 km*	*1 km*
	local train station	*local railway station*	*gara locală*
-Word count	152	147	149

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Further findings and observations:

-The usage of *reserve* in English for the interface button instead of using the verb *to book*, considering the name of the company (booking.com). The explanation would be that most international non-native users would think of *book* as the noun and not consider it as the imperative/appellative form of the verb. To avoid confusion they use *reserve* even if the language chosen is American or British English.

-The translation of the *Reserve* button in Romanian is rendered on the site as *Rezervați acum* (reserve now). The usage of the CTA adverb *acum* may be used in Romanian as compared to English as a compensation for Romanians' high Power distance score,

-Paper size for printing is no longer an issue as it is a technical problem that can be solved by coding. Booking.com replaced the usage of paper with a smart phone application that can be used instead of the printed voucher

-Regarding pronoun proxemics for Romanian, the polite addressing forms are predominant, however, there are 2nd person informal imperative forms as well: *Schimbă căutarea* (Change search)

-For the UK hotel distance is expressed through time expressions as time necessary to reach various landmarks (*A 10-minute walk from*…), whereas for the Romanian hotel distance is expressed in kilometers. Using time to express distance is an appropriate strategy to avoid using either the metric or imperial measurement system, especially for customers from the UK. On the other hand, for the Romanian hotels, the metric system is converted to imperial through approximation. *just under 1 mile* in American English is displayed on the Romanian and British English pages as 1.5 km. Also, *just over half a mile* is converted to 1 km.

-*Apartment* is correctly used in the user interface indiscriminately on both the UK and the US pages as in British English it refers to "A flat, typically one that is well appointed or used for holidays"[oxforddictionaries.com]

-Amounts are rounded for most currencies and properties. This may be unnatural for markets using powerful currencies, such as the $US or the Euro. For instance, German websites would display prices using a comma regardless of the price, with decimal or not: EUR 1.299,00. On the other hand, Romanians may feel comfortable with rounded amounts, especially older generations, that were used to the old weak Leu currency.

-Usage of "limited offer" strategy:

- *Last chance! We have 1 apartment left!* VS. *Ultima șansă! Mai avem 1 cameră!*
- *Most recent booking for this property was 27 minutes ago from Belgium.* VS. *Cea mai recentă rezervare pentru această proprietate a fost făcută acum 27 minute din Belgia*
- *There are 26 people looking at these apartments.i* VS. *26 persoane se uită la aceste apartamente.*

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Interface contradictory message: The heading says that the language of the visitor is spoken, but actually only English is listed.

Generally speaking, localization aspects of the pages under observance are appropriately attended to. While numerous websites do not differentiate between the various English speaking countries, Booking.com does seem to handle cultural differences properly. The two variants show spelling, lexical and syntactic variances. Regarding punctuation and style, while the culture specific elements are predominant for each variants (U.S. or U.K.), there are some minor inconsistencies, namely capitalization. As for the metric system used for the U.K., it is interesting that they opt for the official metric system versus the popular imperial system. As for the text in Romanian, it contains untranslated English text elements in the address, which may be involuntary, or interface text, *check-in* and *check-out*, used as such on purpose. In general, Romanian texts convey the same message as in English. However, as highlighted in the tables above, there are some awkward sounding Romanian expressions such as *Suită* for *Suite*, *vedere unică la oraş* for *views of the city/views over the city* and *Securizați-vă un preț excellent*…for *Lock in a great price*…

To sum up, in general, the website fulfils its purpose in all three localized versions. The errors or the inconsistencies do not obstruct the communication process and the general context of each of the pages is determinant in achieving an appropriate communication. For instance, the translation of …*your upcoming stay* as …*pentru sejurul următor* (which can be interpreted as the *next stay* and not as the current offer on the page) is clear due to the context within the page. Also, the English *stay* is translated as *sejur*. The English term may refer to any period of time, from a few hours to a few days, whereas the Romanian one is rather used for a period of time that covers several days. These communication errors have a small impact on the customers as there is a highly controlled step-by-step guidance interface that clearly reinforces the information about a certain hotel, before actually accomplishing the booking process. Furthermore, a confirmation email is sent. However, one major communication error is acknowledging the user through the header interface text that their language is spoken at the hotel while in the description the language of choice from the interface is different. Considering that most users scan content – they read only bolded characters, and do not read the text in full, many will be misled into believing that the personnel speaks French or even Romanian.

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This case study corroborates Jiménez-Crespo's findings with regard to quality in website localization (2013:131-132). Regular improvements to the website, in terms of interface and content updates, show that the localization process is a continuous maintenance process. (Pym 2014:126) As for keyword usage, the texts are optimized to be displayed in search engines for general keywords such as *london hotel*, *hotel iași* or as long-tail keywords such as the following format: country name - city name - hotel name.

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