





BY DR. KEITH KAHN-HARRIS

Careless Localization

A surprising story

The art and science of branding has evolved. It's developed to the point that most products we buy represent the culmination of uncountable hours of design work by dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of people. The same is true for localization; adapting a product so that it can resonate with the needs and desires of consumers around the world is a herculean task.

Although the tiniest details of a product may be obsessively researched and designed, there may be one unavoidable detail that completely subverts the rest: warning messages. When a warning is added on a product — either voluntarily or due to legal requirements — the “Buy me! Consume me!” message is contradicted by a “Keep away!” message.

How do manufacturers resolve that contradiction? In at least

one case, the answer seems to be “through inattention.”

For some years now, I’ve obsessed over one set of warning messages: those found inside Kinder Surprise Eggs, the chocolate eggs with a plastic toy inside manufactured by the Italian multinational corporation Ferrero. The toy is assembled from tiny pieces, and as such, constitutes a choking hazard to small children. Indeed, there have been rare instances where children have died. In some countries, such as the US, edible products containing inedible objects, including Kinder Surprise Eggs, are banned from sale. Elsewhere, in most of the world where the eggs are on sale, there is a legally mandated warning message on the outside foil wrapper, plus another notice tucked inside. In English, the warning message reads as follows:

features all the EU official languages other than Irish and Maltese, as well as tongues as various as Arabic, Farsi, Chinese, Georgian, and Armenian.

In my book *The Babel Message: A Love Letter to Language*, I called the warning message “the Message” and the sheet of paper “the Manuscript.” I sought to honor its extraordinary multilingualism, and in my book I use the Manuscript as the starting point for a celebration of linguistic diversity. I commissioned new translations of the Message into dozens of new languages, including everything from Australasian endangered languages, to constructed languages like Klingon, to ancient tongues such as Sumerian.

My book may have detached the Message from its primary purpose — to warn adults against giving a small toy to small children — but I have never stopped being interested in the Manuscript itself. In fact, before, during, and after writing my book, I have continued to delve into its secrets. And what I have found so far tells us something important about how localization works — and doesn’t work.



Figure 1: Side one of the warning message sheet (the Manuscript).

WARNING, read and keep: Toy not suitable for children under three years. Small parts might be swallowed or inhaled.

One of the articles I wrote about my book was titled by the publication *Kinder Eggs: The Rosetta Stone of our Times*. It’s an understandable assumption to make, given that the multilingual warning messages on the Manuscript are essentially identical, each an equivalent translation of the other. It’s certainly the implication of the regulations

In figures 1 and 2 you may see what the warning message sheet looks like.

What has long fascinated me is the large number of languages that feature on the warning message sheet: 37 of them, all crammed into two sides of a flimsy piece of paper, 12 cm by 5 cm in area. This sheet, found in Kinder Surprise Eggs bought in large swathes of the world,



Figure 2: Side two of the warning message sheet (the Manuscript)



“One of the articles I wrote about my book was titled by the publication *Kinder Eggs: The Rosetta Stone of our Times*. It’s an understandable assumption to make.”

that the Kinder Surprise Egg is intended to conform to. The Manuscript displays the “CE” logo indicating conformity to the European Committee for Standardization’s (CEN) regulation *EN71 – Safety of Toys*. An additional document *National translations of warnings and instructions for use in the EN71 series* compiles translations of warnings for products in European languages. The implication is that standardization is not just for products and their warnings, but also for the languages in which warnings are written.

My social science training and knowledge of the “linguistic turn” in western philosophy led me to be skeptical of the possibility that standardized translations are ever possible. There is always a “slippage” between languages, meaning that a message in one can rarely be exactly equivalent in meaning and implication to another. Even the Rosetta Stone might not be a Rosetta Stone. Yet you don’t need to buy into or even be aware of philosophies or studies of translation to recognize that the Messages on the Manuscript are not identical. You only need to look closely at the sheet of paper.

The first thing to note is that the English Message is something of an outlier. It is one of only six Messages that mention the three-year minimum age, along with German, Spanish, Swedish, Arabic, and Chinese. Even amongst these six, the Messages are not identical. Arabic and German include two sentences, and the rest have three. The German Message, in fact, is unique amongst all the Messages:

**Lesen und aufbewahren: WARNHINWEIS!
Nicht für Kinder unter 3 Jahren geeignet,
da Spielzeug oder Kleinteile verschluckt
oder eingeatmet werden können.**

WARNHINWEIS means “warning message” rather than “warning,” and its positioning after a colon and followed by an exclamation mark is unique in the Manuscript.

What do German, English, Spanish, Swedish, Arabic,

and Chinese all have in common? Linguistically, not much. Politically, in terms of the countries where those languages are common, nothing. One might at least expect that Messages in Spanish, Swedish, and German — languages of EU countries — would be the same as other Messages in official EU languages. One might even expect Swedish to be the same as Danish and Norwegian (these closely related languages are often combined, with alternates given for particular words). Yet it seems neither linguistic nor political alignments explain their divergence from the other Messages.

In fact, the closer you look at the Manuscript, the more you find variation. Some of these inconsistencies are in word choice. For example, not all of the Messages begin with equivalents to the word “warning.” The Romance language Messages all begin with versions of “attention,” as do other languages as various as Estonian and Albanian. While one might assume that this choice might be dictated by what sounds most fitting in a particular language, it doesn’t account for choices made for languages where both “attention” and “warning” are reasonable alternatives. It isn’t clear to me, for instance, why the Dutch choice *Opgelet* is used rather than *Waarschuwing*, particularly since other Germanic languages all use versions of “warning.”

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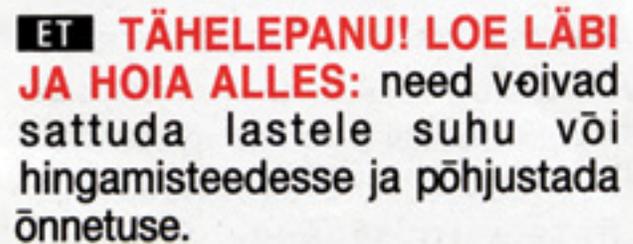
kiwa kiwa GALA WIN TRANSLATORS WITHOUT BORDERS

“It’s hard to tell which decisions have been made *deliberatively* and which have been made *carelessly*.”

Other variations in the Manuscript are typographical. In languages for which there is a choice between upper and lower case, why are 11 Messages presented all in capitals, three in sentence case, and 15 in sentence case with one or a few words capitalized? There are, in fact, 12 variations in how the Message is presented. It is, again, difficult to see the logic here.

Does the choice to present the Romanian Message entirely capitalized and the Portuguese one in sentence case with the first word capitalized reveal something essentially different about these languages, the Romance group’s furthest west and east examples?

It’s hard to tell which decisions have been made deliberately and which have been made carelessly. There are certainly mistakes on the Manuscript. One is in the Estonian Message which reads as follows:



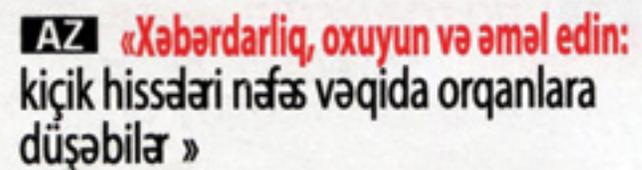
ET TÄHELEPANU! LOE LÄBI
JA HOIA ALLES: need võivad
sattuda lastele suhu või
hingamisteedesse ja põhjustada
õnnetuse.

The line bisecting the left hand of the “o” in *võivad* is not a recognized diacritic in any language I am aware of. Other “o”s have been headed by a macron — which is not found in Estonian — rather than a tilde. Here is what the Estonian Message should look like:

TÄHELEPANU! LOE LÄBI JA HOIA
ALLES: need võivad sattuda lastele suhu või
hingamisteedesse ja põhjustada õnnetuse.

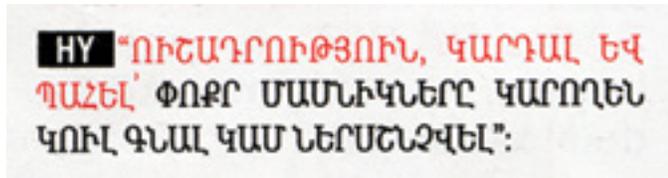
This error also suggests that the Manuscript is assembled through cutting and pasting rather than typesetting from scratch — how else would it even be possible to include a diacritic that doesn’t exist?

The Azerbaijani Message also proves a puzzle:



AZ «Xəbərdarlıq, oxuyun və əməl edin:
kiçik hissələri nəfəs vəqida orqanlara
düşə bilər.»

The letter “ə” is repeated, although inconsistently, combined with the following letter to form a ligature. Azerbaijani does not use these ligatures and, indeed, earlier versions of the Azerbaijani Message are correctly typeset. In addition, the enclosure of the Message inside a “guillemot,” forming a kind of quotation, is extremely odd. Even stranger is the similar use of inverted commas in the Armenian Message:



That two countries who have fought each other should share such gnomic typesetting is ironic indeed. It is hard to account for the use of quotation marks by linguistic necessity, particularly given the fact that they are in unrelated languages and no other Message includes them.

It is no longer clear to me whether the Manuscript really does conform to all relevant regulations. Mistakes aside, the Messages often deviate from the suggested wording in the CEN regulations. Certainly, they are not identical to each other. And some Manuscript languages are not warning messages at all. Ukrainian, Kyrgyz, Russian, and Kazakh are used for product information only (not included for any language used for a Message, other than Armenian). Kinder Surprise Eggs bought in these former Soviet Union countries to include warning messages on the outer foil, but not on the sheet of paper within. This aspect of the Manuscript's linguistic plurality is hard to explain.

At one stage, I searched for someone in Ferrero who could explain the choices made in assembling the Manuscript. Both official and unofficial channels yielded nothing. But the more I researched it, the more I am convinced that the process of assembly is haphazard. It seems likely that branches of Ferrero provide the translations, or for countries where there is

no branch office, a translation agency is used. There does not seem to be a tight process of centralized control promoting a greater degree of uniformity. Of course, that process would be difficult and time-consuming — and that's what is so revealing. I can only surmise that the Manuscript is not constructed with the same degree of attention as the rest of the product. This suggests the potential of the warning message to subvert the overall brand message. If multilingual warning messages are necessary, better that they be consigned to a linguistic dumping ground, rather than a lovingly curated document.

The Manuscript is therefore an example of a chaotic form of linguistic localization. It's a striking contrast with the outer foil of the Kinder Surprise Egg, which appears to have been put together more carefully. There is a profusion of outer foils tailored to particular markets. They are often localized to multiple countries simultaneously, but not as many as in the inner Manuscript (Romanian Kinder Surprise Eggs also include Bulgarian, for example). Their outer warning messages avoids the careless inconsistencies of the inner Messages. There may be a lesson here: While I find the Manuscript a thrilling piece of tiny linguistic art, in terms of its use value, too many languages make for an incoherent warning. 

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The author or co-author of eight books, editor of several collections and many articles and reviews, his career bridges academia and multiple other worlds.

His work has appeared in publications including The Guardian, New Humanist, Prospect, Haaretz, The Forward, New Statesman, and more. His most recent books are The Babel Message: A Love Letter to Language (Icon) and What Does A Jew Look Like? (in collaboration with Rob Stothard). His website is kahn-harris.org, and he is KeithKahnHarris on Twitter

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