

Ciao! Bonjour! Hello! Kon’nichiwa!

Crafting global content that travels with you

Case Study, Perspectives — Salvatore Giammarresi

This article is part of a new series in which our Accessibility, Anti-Discrimination, Localization, and Trust teams will share how we define inclusive design practices at Airbnb, our ongoing work to design solutions for global communities, and lessons we’re learning along the way.

I’ve been a “translator” for as long as I can remember. I grew up in a first-generation Italian family in the United States, then lived in Italy as a teen and adult—bilingual and bicultural, constantly bridging and switching between languages and cultures.

I was a cultural bridge living between two worlds. This gave me the unique perspective of belonging to two cultures, and the ability to study them from the outside in. As I grew up and met people from other cultures, I developed a natural empathy for cultural and linguistic similarities and differences. In hindsight, it’s almost too easy to trace the roots of my career.

My passion for languages and technology led me to a PhD in Applied Linguistics and eventually a career in Globalization, helping companies develop global products that scale. I’ve had the honor of translating Italian and English, teaching Localization at the University of Palermo, advising companies of all stages, and leading globalization strategy, technology, operations, and teams at global companies.

It Takes a Village

So, what is globalization? Globalization broadly encompasses two things: internationalization and localization.

Internationalization is a set of best practices (mostly in engineering, design, and operations) that make it easier, faster, and cheaper to localize a product or service at scale. By removing all locale-specific elements from a product’s design and code, it becomes world-ready.

Localization is the art of adapting an internationalized product for a set of people who share the same language, culture, laws, and standards. Knowing what country someone lives in gives enough information on the legal and cultural setup, but it doesn’t tell us what language they’re expecting. For example, just knowing that someone lives in Canada doesn’t tell us whether they’re expecting content in English or French.

Localization tailors international products to a specific region to create relevant experiences for people. It involves everything from translation—finding the right meaning, tone, and style—to all the details from how people pay and the terms of services they read, and the images, colors, icons, fonts, and cultural references they see.

The best globalization experts are operational wizards who figure out how to concurrently globalize products across multiple platforms—in 100+ countries and locales—every single day. At Airbnb we define localization as deliberately creating products and services that are culturally appropriate, locally relevant, and globally consistent at scale.

“Globalization sits at the intersection of communication, culture, technology, and operational excellence. It truly takes a village.”

New hires are introduced to basic localization concepts during their onboarding and, in that session, we discuss how each function plays a critical role in building truly localized experiences at Airbnb. Achieving globalization at scale isn’t easy, particularly in a fast-growing company.

Localization in the Wild

Examples of localization as a business practice are all around us, both on and offline. Just take a look at the McDonald’s menu items in [Vietnam](#) and [India](#). McDonald’s—which many consider the epitome of standard fast food—realized they had to adapt their menu items based on location to appeal to their global audience.

At Airbnb, proper localization is a key ingredient in championing our mission of belonging anywhere. To fulfill this mission, our product must be available in the languages of our hosts and guests, it should respect their cultural, legal, and local expectations, and it should provide consistent experiences for people using it in their native countries and wherever their travels take them.

Many of us are learning best practices from one another as localization becomes increasingly important. At Airbnb, we’re solving for another layer of complexity—our community’s platform experience must travel with them. This requires both a highly localized product experience, and a high level of global consistency. So for example, if I’m using Airbnb in America to [book a trip](#) to Japan, my experience using Airbnb must feel the same once I’m in Japan while providing [localized content](#) for people who live in Japan.

Getting globalization right is essential for Airbnb’s success, but it also makes business sense for companies whose missions don’t involve global inclusion. The majority of global companies earn (or have the potential to earn) more revenue outside of the US, and this is especially true for companies that do business online.

Taking Care of Business

Only 51% of the world population is online, and this population increasingly reflects the multiculturalism and multilingualism we take for granted offline. The American English language is no longer the “lingua franca” online. In 2018, only 21% of online content is in English—down from 90% in 1995. And this trend isn’t stopping.

“The online population continues to grow at a rate of nearly 1M per day, and only 9 out of 100 newcomers use, speak, or write in English.”

Any company doing business online has to pay attention to this growing audience, and find scalable, high-quality, efficient, and cost-effective ways to interact with the people they serve. By not properly localizing products, companies see a drop in conversion and purchase rates, more abandoned carts, and a lack of engagement and trust from their audience. And by not localizing at all, companies find themselves in competition with local copycat products. On the flip side, pre-IPO companies with globalized products receive higher valuations.

The Good, the Bad, and the Haywire

Localization gone wrong can be found all over the web. Just think about how many times you’ve visited a website only to find your native language rife with grammatical and spelling errors. Was the site easy to navigate? Probably not. But studies have shown there’s a direct correlation between typos, ease of use, and trust. For example, scam emails are easier to spot because they’re oftentimes riddled with typos.

Localization done right, on the other hand, builds trust with and transforms experiences for a global audience. Take [Nivea](#), for example. Their websites are an excellent example of quality localization, especially when it comes to image selection. They understand that to appeal to their target audience and sell products, they need to use relevant photos of the people they’re serving. They’ve created a strong brand by connecting with their customers.

Apple’s global website design is another strong example of maintaining global design consistency, while allowing certain sections of their site to be [locale-specific](#).

Coming Online

There’s no silver bullet or universal playbook for achieving globalization at scale, and one mistake many companies make is investing too late. It’s a major risk because companies then have to re-engineer products and waste time and money doing so. On the other hand, starting before establishing product-market fit is a waste too.

The best way forward is to gradually approach globalization. For example, it’s never too soon to add basic components to your core product’s architecture. Writing basic internationalized code shouldn’t take more time than writing US-only code.

Localization and more advanced internationalization can wait till there are clearer business requirements.

Airbnb is committed to trust and belonging around the world, so globalization is a top priority. We have a growing team that’s dedicated to striking the right balance between global consistency and local relevancy. Right now, we’re focusing on creating our own Globalization Playbook as we expand the breadth and depth of our products. The Playbook will enable us to re-use shared services, and provide every Airbnb function with guidelines to best globalize our product.

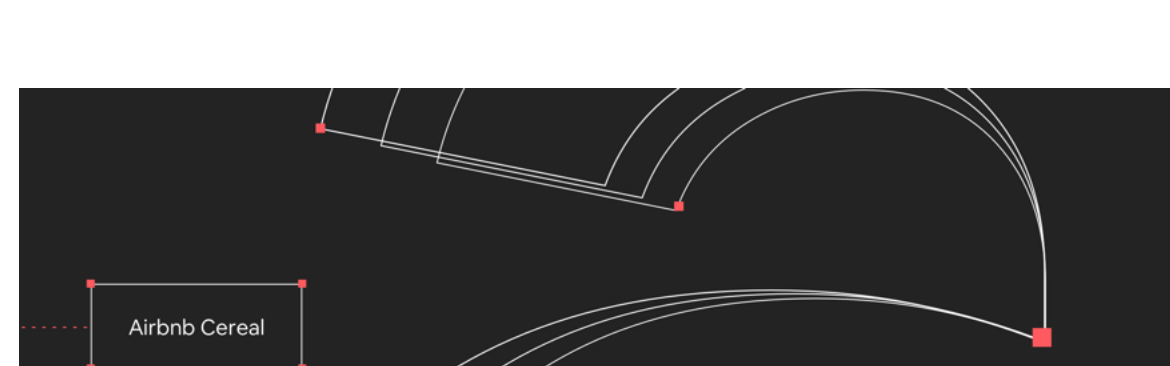
We’re at the beginning of a long journey, and have a long way to go before our product is completely localized for our entire global community. It’ll be a lot of work, and I feel honored to lead the Globalization team in this effort. The rest of the world will be online before we know it. We’re working hard now so we can welcome them when they get here.

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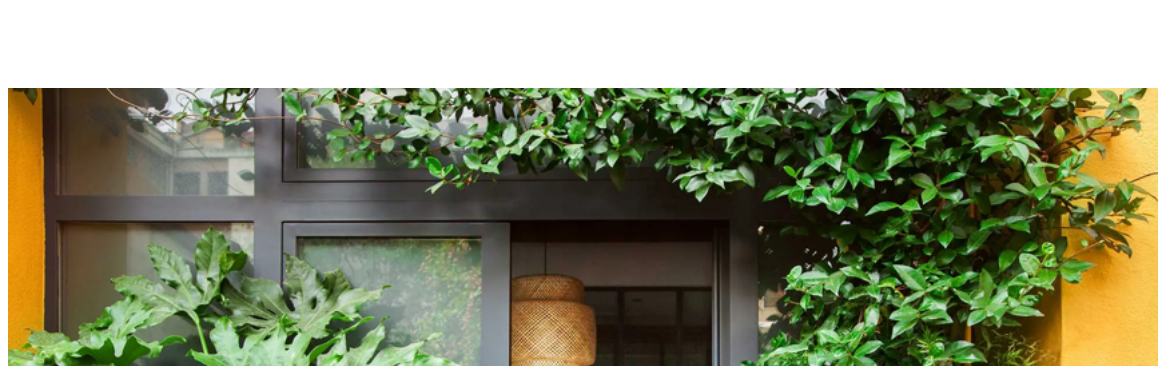
Salvo Giammarresi is the Head of Localization at Airbnb and a Board Member on Translators Without Borders. He helps make the world a happier place by building bridges, and immerses himself in new cultures and languages through travel and food.

UP NEXT



Working Type How we introduced Airbnb Cereal to our UI

Case Study, Projects



Plus Personality New interior design standards celebrate curation and personalization

Case Study



Unlocking Extraordinary Hospitality Helping hosts shine through the product

Case Study

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