Searching the Web in Languages You Don’t Speak

Sometimes, surfing the world wide web, it’s easy to forget that
some people speak languages you don’t know, considering that
the majority of hits you’ll get on any given search will, most times,
be in English. In fact, of course, there are millions of internet sites
in foreign languages. Researchers in maritime history, or any other
subject, will find accessing these sites useful, but locating them can
be difficult. If English is your native tongue, how do you go about
searching and reading pages in languages? Not surprisingly, the
web offers some extraordinary tools for doing just that.

One first step for finding foreign-language resources, par-
ticularly when you’re familiar with the country and its language,
is to search Google’s ‘local’ version. Start at http://www.google.
fr (France), http://www.google.vn (Vietnam), http://
www.google.lv (Latvia), or any of about 170 locations.
All of the locations are listed towards the bottom of Google’s Language Tools page at http://
www.google.com/language_tools.

Often, the default search will still come back in English. You may see a link that reads:
“Google.de offered in: Deutsch” (or as appropriate; for example, Switzerland’s site, http://
www.google.ch, offers a range of language options).
When you click on that link, you’ll automatically change
the default search language.

Many other top-level domains exist, including .name (for individuals), .pro (for professionals), .travel .aero (for the airline
industry), and .museum. See, for example, http://aimm.museum,
the Arkansas Inland Maritime Museum. In addition, there are sub-
levels based on the type of museum, such as garden.museum or
maritime.museum. Only about a dozen maritime museums have
registered these names (for example, http://wgmother.maritime.
museum) and most actually don’t work properly. Perhaps, over
time, more and more maritime museums will identify themselves
in this manner.

When you do find a potentially interesting piece of foreign
text, the web offers many impressive automatic translation services.
Of course, none will convince anyone you’re a native speaker,
but they are effective at conveying the intent of text in a different
language. Try Babel Fish (http://babelfish.altavista.com), which
offers dozens of language options—and not just translations
into—or from—English. You can also put in a URL and Babel
Fish will translate the results, as well as the results of each link on
that page.

Google, not surprisingly, has an impressive set of tools at the
Language Tools page mentioned above. Like Babel Fish, it can
translate text between languages or do translations on the fly. You
can also search in more than a dozen languages from this page,
defining both the language you speak and the different language in which you want to search. As results are
returned, Google translates them for you.

For more language help, say, some assistance
with a language that you haven’t used in a while—
try http://www.freelang.net/, a site that offers
115 different foreign language dictionaries that
you can download to your computer or use directly
com) offers standard- and translation dictionaries in hundreds
of languages. WorldLingo (http://www.worldlingo.com) offers
free human translations of small bits of text, in addition to many
specialized, industry-specific translation services.

If all of these language- and translation-related sites have
piqued your interest in the the topic of language itself, it is worth
a look to visit Omniglot (http://www.omniglot.com), a fascinat-
ing site that describes writing systems and languages of the world.

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome
at shipindex@yahoo.com. See http://www.shipindex.org for a
compilation of over 100,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of
books and journals.

—Peter McCracken