The perils of translating words blindly without verifying them in context

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My fancy new office phone has an option to change the language of its user interface, so naturally I chose Swedish. Once I did that, I saw some obvious translation errors.

- The *Edit* command was called *Bearb…* instead of *Redig….* Apparently, the Swedish translation was created by starting with the German version, and they missed a spot and left a word in German (*Bearbeiten*). This also illustrates the perils of not leaving enough room for expansion. The English word *Edit* is just four letters long, but the German word is ten letters long (and the Swedish one eight letters), and the longer German and Swedish words get truncated.

- The label *First name* was translated as *Första namn*. *Första namn* does mean *first name*, but in a literal sense, as in the sentence "There are ten names. The first name is Wilson." The correct translation is *förnamn*, which means *given name* (in contrast to *efternamn*, or *family name*). Similarly, the button *Forward* was translated as *Vidare* (opposite of *backward*) instead of *Vidarekoppla* (*to forward a phone call*).

The first example above is just sloppiness, but the second one illustrates how a simple LocalizeString("some text") algorithm doesn't work. As Lance Fisher's teacher put it, "Russian is not a translation of English." You can't just take words and phrases in one language and put them through a simple mapping table and expect the result to be accurate.

Back in the Windows 95 days, the German translation team needed some beta testers, and I volunteered. The most interesting translation bug I reported was one in which an English menu item *Sort* was translated as *Art* (which means *class, kind*) instead of *Anordnen* (which means *to arrange*). The one English word has two different meanings, and a blind dictionary translation won't know which one is intended.

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