Web climbs the Tower of Babel



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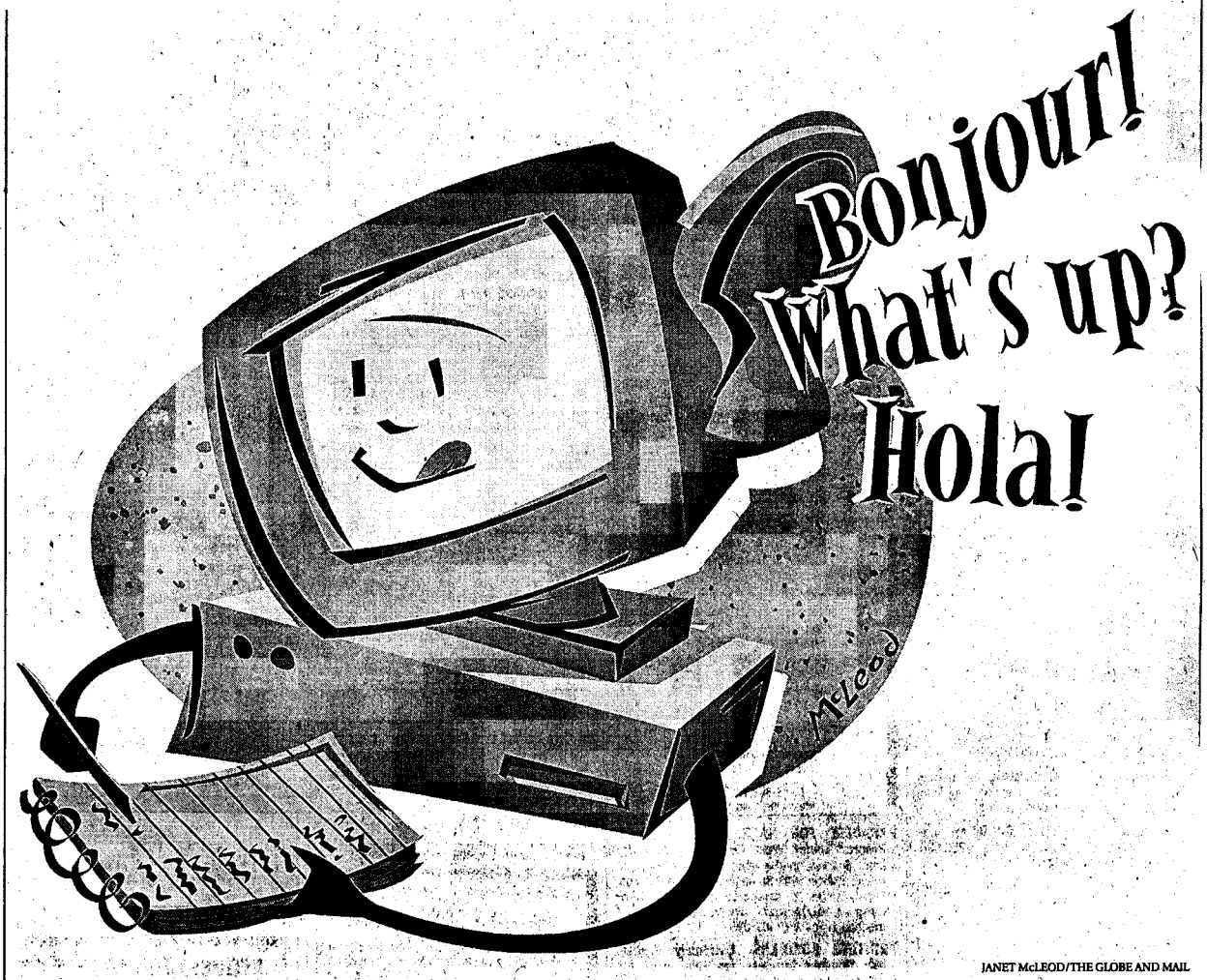

JANET McLEOD/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Like many English Canadians, I took French lessons for more than 10 years in school. Sadly, I can barely speak or write a word of the language.

In the new reality of the Internet, being unilingual can be frustrating. Certainly the Internet is global and English predominates, just as it does in the business world. But in this global village, you must learn to deal with multiple languages.

There are many ways of doing that on-line.

One of the most useful tools is Babelfish, currently part of the Altavista search engine system (www.babelfish.altavista.com). You can find similar services at the search engine Go.com (http://translator.go.com/) or at Lernout & Hauspie, a company specializing in worldwide document and translation services (www.lhsl.com/itranslator/demo/).

These services are extremely easy to use, offering a variety of instant, on-the-fly translations.

Let's say you receive an e-mail message in French, and need a quick translation. Simply copy it from your e-mail message, choose the translation type, and you'll get a quick English version.

What if you come across a Web site in another language that looks intriguing? Visit Babelfish, type in the Web address, and you'll get a version that you can understand.

Of course, the translation is often marginal at best, and anyone familiar with both languages will cringe at the quality. No doubt, language purists will attack such on-line efforts, since the result may be worse than what might even be imagined. But if you need to get a quick sense of a foreign language Web page or e-mail, these sites will do the trick.

There's another area where the Internet excels in helping companies and individuals deal with multiple languages: You can use it to find a large number of professional translation services.

Visit the Translation category in Yahoo (http://dir.yahoo.com/business/ and search under Business to Business and then Translation Services), where you'll discover an extensive list of companies and individuals offering services in different languages.

The Internet is a natural place for professional translators to offer their services, since it is easy to send someone in a faraway location an electronic copy of the document or information that you need translated.

Another extremely important point on the language issue: Even though English is dominant on-line, we live in a multilingual world. Corporations and governments are increasingly discovering that customers and citizens are demanding services in the language of their choice.

That's why last week the Bank of Montreal launched a Chinese-language version of its Web site (www.bmo.com/chinese/), a response to the growing importance of this market in Canada. It isn't the first; Toronto-Dominion Bank has been offering a similar version of its Web site for years to support Chinese users in the Canadian market.

Yet the Internet is supposed to allow companies to expand their markets around the world. If your company hopes to do so, you might find that offering an all-English Web site simply won't cut it.

Indeed over time, corporations that plan to do business worldwide will find they need multiple versions of their Web site. For an example of what major companies are doing, look at Microsoft, which has done a tremendous job at providing "localized" Web sites. (Visit Belgium and its neighbours at www.microsoft.com/benelux/ for an example.)

If you consider the issue of multiple languages, you will probably begin to wonder how your browser can deal with Chinese or other language characters. No problem. Microsoft has built various "language packs" into the Internet Explorer Web browser architecture.

The issue of how to install support for different language character sets is a bit beyond the scope of this column. Suffice to say it can be fairly easy. Just click on "View," then "Encoding," and you'll be led through a process by which you can install what is needed.

If you wrap all of these issues together and consider the potential for the Internet to develop a world marketplace, you'll soon realize that the business of on-line translation will probably be one of the fastest growing aspects of the Internet well into the future.

Jim Carroll is co-author of Light Bulbs to Yottabits: How to Profit by Understanding the Internet of the Future.

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