www.language

Untangling
the Web

St. Martin's Guide
to Language and Culture on the Internet
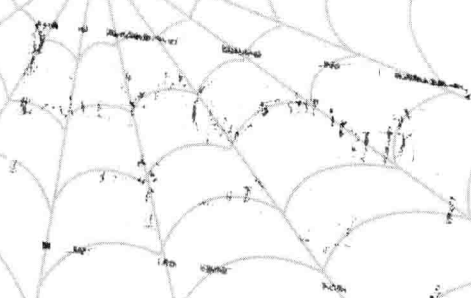
CARL S. BLYTH

UNTANGLING THE WEB

ST. MARTIN'S GUIDE TO LANGUAGE & CULTURE ON THE INTERNET

Carl S. Blyth
University of Texas at Austin

St. Martin's Press
New York

Manufactured in the United States of America.

3   2   1   0   9   8
f   e   d   c   b   a

UNTANGLING THE WEB

ST. MARTIN'S GUIDE
TO LANGUAGE
& CULTURE
ON THE INTERNET

To Sarah, Katie, and Claire

Preface

The Internet is a new and rapidly growing context for cross-cultural communication, and its potential impact on the study and teaching of foreign languages is mind-boggling. For many American students, it is already more common to encounter a foreign language on the Internet than anywhere else. So it makes sense then to study a language in the context in which it is used, including the context of cyberspace. As a general introduction to language and culture on the Internet, *Untangling the Web* can be used profitably with any foreign language textbook, regardless of language or level. *Untangling the Web* was written to provide students with a specialized guide to the Internet as a sophisticated tool to learn a new language and culture.

When we began to explore computer technology as a means to enhance the teaching of foreign languages at the University of Texas at Austin, we quickly discovered that while many students were relatively computer literate and had surfed the Internet before on their own, most of them were unclear about how to use the Internet as a tool to foster their own language learning. *Untangling the Web* was created to bridge this gap. It has three main goals: (1) to introduce students to the incredible foreign language learning resources that are currently available online; (2) to show students ways to use these resources in their own language learning; and (3) to help students learn how to search the Internet for even more foreign language resources.

When integrated into the foreign language curriculum, the Internet can help students grasp the social context of language use. More important, the Internet has the potential to enable my students to communicate in the target language with native speakers in ways unimaginable only a few years ago.

This book was written for everyone who wants to know more about the Internet's applications to foreign language learning. It shows you how to access a plethora of online language learning aids such as bilingual dictionaries, grammars, and test banks. Besides descriptions of pertinent language-oriented material on the Internet, tutorials have been included to give you essential hands-on experience. Chapter 1 includes answers to your most frequently asked questions (FAQs) about the Internet. Chapter 2 explores the hows and whys of surfing the foreign language Web in a step-by-step tutorial. Chapter 3 shows you how to search for and find the riches of the foreign language Internet. In Chapter 4, you will learn about the various online forums for communicating with speakers of other languages. And Chapter 5 gives you an overview of foreign language resources currently available online. Whether you are a foreign language student or teacher, my hope is that this book will help you realize what an amazing tool for language learning the Internet can be in the hands of a savvy user. I look forward to seeing you in cyberspace.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Contents

1 Understanding Internet Basics

Introduction

If you are like most people, you probably find all the hype surrounding the Internet a little bewildering, perhaps even a little intimidating. What's so great about the Internet anyhow? What does the Internet have to offer foreign language learners? And for that matter, what exactly is the Internet?

This book is a friendly guide written for the foreign language learner (and teacher) who wants to know more about the Internet: its concepts, its terminology, its services, and especially its applications to foreign language learning. The main goal of the book is to show you how to exploit the riches of the Internet for your own foreign language learning. Not only will you learn how to access culturally authentic documents in the foreign language that interests you, but you will also discover a plethora of online language learning aids such as bilingual dictionaries, grammars, and test banks. Besides copious explanations and descriptions of pertinent language-oriented material on the Internet, you will also find tutorials that will give you essential hands-on experience.

Beginners are always full of questions but are often afraid to ask them for fear of looking like what they are—beginners! Well, have no fear. In this chapter you will find many of the "frequently asked questions" (FAQs in computer parlance) about the Internet. These questions and answers should help prepare you to start surfing the Internet in no time. Remember though that this chapter covers only the necessary preliminaries, the so-called basics. If you already have some experience with the Internet and feel comfortable striking out on your own, then skip ahead to the other chapters where you can begin surfing!

Can the Internet really help me learn a new language or culture?

Absolutely! Because of its global reach, the Internet is a wonderful tool with which to study modern languages and cultures. Most students who want to improve their knowledge of a language and culture are looking for as much contact with the target language as possible, preferably contact with the native speakers of that language. The Internet allows you to immerse yourself in a language and culture via

online authentic, up-to-the-minute documents. It also lets you communicate directly with native speakers of another language. They are usually as interested in learning about your country as you are in learning about theirs. Most foreign language learners and teachers are amazed when they discover the foreign language resources that are currently available online.

What can I do as a foreign language learner with Internet access?

Well, you name it! How you use the Internet to learn more about a foreign language and culture will depend on you—your needs, your interests, and your schedule. You could find a summer job overseas through an international online employment agency, read your favorite foreign fashion, news, or sports magazine, take a virtual tour of a famous art museum such as the Louvre in Paris or the Prado in Madrid. You could read about current events from a foreign news service or peruse the course offerings at a foreign university. Perhaps you would like to talk with native speakers? You could join a foreign language discussion group about something that interests you: World Cup soccer, Tour de France cycling, Italian opera, Japanese stock exchange reports, the German alternative music scene. Whatever it is that interests you, you are likely to find a foreign language discussion group devoted to it. Or, if you would prefer a one-on-one conversation to a group discussion, you could meet a new foreign friend in a cyber café or a chat room, informal places on the Internet where people go to socialize.

If you are more interested in using explicitly pedagogical materials, then the Internet is a good place to go as well. There are many different online language learning resources for you to use: grammar tutorials, fill-in-the-blank vocabulary tests, verb conjugators, pronunciation aids, foreign language dictionaries. You can use these resources in conjunction with a language course you are currently taking or simply on your own to maintain your language skills. In short, as ever more international businesses, universities, and organizations get connected, the Internet affords the foreign language learner many extraordinary opportunities and services.

That sounds great, but what exactly is the Internet?

The Internet is a loosely organized global network of computers that offers many different types of services. If you are on a computer that is connected to the Internet, you can communicate with a staggering number of businesses, organizations, universities, libraries, governmental agencies, and, of course, individuals like yourself. In other words,

the Internet allows you to communicate with the world in a way that has never before been possible. And that's not hype, that's fact.

When something is as new as the Internet, it often helps to think about it in terms of something familiar. So try picturing the Internet as a college or university campus, a place where people go to learn about the world. Imagine yourself as a prospective student taking a campus tour. What would you expect the tour guide to say? You would probably anticipate some sort of description of the various buildings according to their general purpose ("This building is used primarily for classrooms and that one for administrative offices") as well as academic disciplines ("On our right is the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and on on our left is Psychology"). In a similar way, the Internet can be characterized in terms of what users can do at various sites and what kind of content or information users will find there. For example, just like students and faculty who go to different places on campus to perform different tasks (relaxing at the student union building, conducting research at the library, listening to a lecture in a classroom), Internet users visit different sites to do different things (send or receive a message, search for information about a topic or person, download software). And similar to the academic departments on campus, Internet sites are often devoted to a specific kind of information, although that information is not always very academic.

While analogies and metaphors are useful in pointing out similarities, they may mask important differences. It is important to remember that the physical spaces of a college campus—the buildings and quadrangles—have no real analog in the world of the Internet. For this reason, the term cyberspace was coined to refer to this brave, new electronic world. While the term Internet refers primarily to the hardware, or the actual infrastructure of networked computers, the term cyberspace is more frequently used to capture the psychological experience of communicating via computer, an experience of being in a curious but exhilarating new social context. With these important differences in mind, it may still be helpful to think of the Internet as a campus with "sites" where you can "go" for different kinds of services and information. In the box below are some of the more important kinds of "places" and services you will find in cyberspace.

Do I need to know a lot about computers to use the Internet?

No, not really. You don't need to be a mechanic to drive a car, do you? Sure, it helps to know some technical details about a car's engine if you plan on owning and using a car. But keep in mind that you will pick up many technical details as you learn to **use** the Internet, and

Important Online Services

World Wide Web: a graphics-based, hypertext linked service that allows you to find information and do research about people, places, events, and topics.
Email (electronic mail): a service that lets you send and receive electronic messages.
Newsgroups: a service that allows you to read and post messages to specific communities of users.
FTP (file transfer protocol): a service that transfers or downloads information from another computer to your own computer or vice versa.
Gopher: a text-only application that guides the user hierarchically to information on the Internet.
Telnet: a service that allows you to log on to another computer from your own computer and to use the other computer as if it were your own.
IRC (internet relay chat): a service that lets people communicate with each other synchronously, or "in real time," often in places called chat rooms.

the goal of this book is to help you do just that. In other words, there's no need to be afraid of the Internet because you don't know much about computers. Once you have a little online experience, you will be surprised how easy the Internet is to use. In fact, the Internet has recently become quite user friendly thanks to the graphic design of the World Wide Web.

What is the World Wide Web (WWW)?

People often use the terms Internet and World Wide Web as if they meant the same thing, but actually they don't. The World Wide Web (also referred to simply as the Web or WWW or W3) is only a part of the Internet, albeit a very important and rapidly growing part. The Web is included in the Internet; it is a smaller network within the much larger Internet network. What makes the Web different from the rest of the Internet is hypertext. Even if you have never heard of hypertext, chances are you've probably already used it. It's nothing more than a text that links to another place in the network, or a text that takes you to another text that takes you to another text. Imagine that you had a stack of numbered notecards. If they were hypertext notecards you wouldn't have to thumb through them in sequential order but could jump to any card at any time—as long as there were links already built in. Card 2 could be linked to card 42, and card 42 to card 15, and so forth. Build enough links and you have yourself a Web.

Unlike other parts of the Internet that are text only, the Web is distinguished by the presence of graphics, photos, sounds, even video—and all are linked! In other words, hypertext links are no longer solely for texts. Today, photos can be linked to other photos, or sounds linked to sounds. In fact, texts, sounds, images, and video can all be linked together in endless multimedia combinations giving rise to what is called "hypermedia." Due largely to its powerful capacity to link various media through hyperlinks, the Web is swiftly replacing other ways of accessing and displaying information on the Internet such as FTP and Gopher. Unlike the static text-only files, WWW documents, commonly called Web pages, are typically highly visual, interactive, and dynamic. Several WWW pages that are all linked together are commonly referred to as a Web site.

While a printed page in a book typically consists of a single block of text that runs from top to bottom, a Web "page" may be divided into several text fields called frames. Frames can contain images or sounds as well as text. Moreover, they usually contain a scroll bar, a device that lets you control which part of the field is displayed on your computer screen. Remember that a Web page—with or without frames—is not really a page at all. This term is just another metaphor used to describe what appears on your screen whenever you are at a specific location or address on the Web. A Web page with frames and scroll bars is shown below.
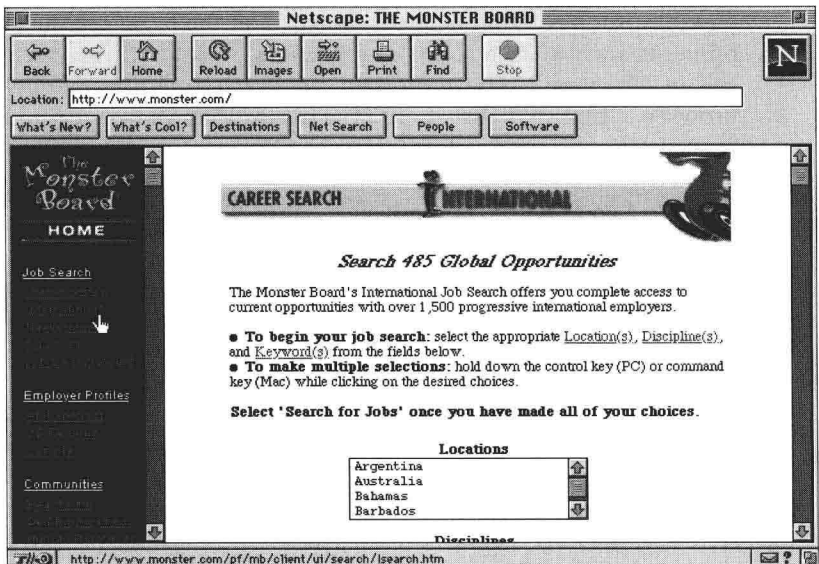

Figure 1.1

The metaphor of surfing used to describe a television viewer who jumps from channel to channel (channel surfing) is often used to describe the behavior of a Web user who jumps from link to link. Browsing is another metaphor that describes this behavior. The user chooses which link to explore, which text to read, which video to watch. Since there is so much exciting material to explore on the Web, people often surf or browse around until something finally catches their attention. But in order to browse you must first have a Web browser.

A Web browser! What's that?

A browser is the software application that "reads" or displays a Web page. In slightly more technical terms, a browser is software that interprets the computer language that all Web pages or documents are written in. The browser interprets this special Web language, called hypertext markup language (HTML), and then translates it into the display that you see on your computer screen. The two most popular browsers in current use are Netscape Navigator and Microsoft Internet Explorer.

The Web's language, HTML, continues to evolve, just like any language. Web browsers have evolved, too, in order to translate the language as effectively as possible. For example, earlier generations of Web browsers were not "frames capable," that is, they could not display frames. Make sure that your computer has a relatively new version of either Netscape Navigator or Microsoft Explorer. Otherwise, you may not be able to take advantage of all the latest technical developments such as Java script and plug-ins, which will be discussed in full in Chapter 2. The important point to remember about a Web browser is that it is the essential software that allows you to visit or "go to" various sites or addresses on the Web.

How do I go to a site on the Web?

Think of your browser as a taxi driver without the attitude. You "tell" your browser the address of where you want to go by typing it into a small space where your browser says "location" or "address." As long as you know the correct address and you type it in correctly, you can theoretically visit any site on the Web. The technical term for a Web address is uniform resource locator or URL. In essence, a URL indicates the location of a file or document on a certain computer in the network and how to get to it. It is extremely easy to make a mistake when typing URLs because of their length and apparent arbitrariness. Actually, they are not as arbitrary as you may think (you will learn how to decipher the syntax of a URL in Chapter 2). You should be forewarned, however, that while your browser is a very courteous taxi

driver, it is very particular about URLs. If you make any mistake what-soever when typing a URL, the browser will not take you where you want to go. You will most likely get an error message indicating that the file was not found. So pay close attention to a URL's every dot, space, letter, and squiggle.

How do I use a URL that I've only seen or heard about?

You have probably noticed that more and more companies are advertising on the Web. You may have recently seen a television commercial that ended with an appeal to "Visit us on the Web at www-dot-something-dot-com." What does that mean? The commercial is giving you the URL of the company's site on the Web. To find that Web site, just type the URL in your browser's location field. The word "dot" indicates a period ("."). Be sure that your URL starts with "http://" which radio and television ads sometimes leave out. URLs will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

What problems will I encounter?

Well, if you are a beginning language learner and a newbie, that is, new to the Internet, it is probably a good idea to practice in more familiar waters before you start surfing modern language Web sites. Even old pros, however, can run into problems. Many of the difficulties that Internet users encounter are directly related to the massive size of the Internet and its phenomenal growth; it is widely estimated that a million new Internet users are added each month.

At present a common problem with the World Wide Web is wait time, prompting some people to speak of the "World Wide Wait." People tend to forget that the Internet, while very powerful, is still in its infancy. In fact, the Web as we know it today dates back less than a decade. And as with any new technology there are a few bugs to deal with. Don't forget that when you ask your browser to access a file from a server, the computer where that file resides, many other people all over the world may be trying to access the same file. Similar to a telephone switchboard that can only handle a given number of incoming calls at a given moment, a server can only respond to so many hits, or requests for information. When too many people are trying to access the same information, your browser will be unable to connect to the server and will ask you to try again later. So, do what you do when you get a busy signal on the telephone. Wait a while and call back. On occasion, your browser will tell you that the server or computer that you are trying to contact is "down." In this case, you must wait until whatever is wrong with it is fixed. It may be a few minutes or a few hours or a few days. There is often no way of telling.

Will I have to pay long-distance telephone charges to access an international Web site?

No. How you pay for your Internet usage ultimately depends on your Internet service provider (ISP), the entity that controls access to the Internet similar to the way that a phone company controls access to the telephone system. Typically, you will be charged a flat monthly rate for unlimited usage, or you'll be billed by the minute. In either case, the sites you visit in no way affects your fee. Thus, a trip to a Japanese Web site won't cost you any more than a trip across town.

Isn't it true that most Web sites are the electronic equivalent of junk mail?

Well, there is a lot of garbage on the Web. But there is also a lot of terrific material. Unfortunately, the enormity of the Web coupled with its unrestrained growth creates information overload, perhaps the biggest headache of all. Not only is there too much information to be found, but much of it is not accurate, since there currently are no rules or conventions governing what may be published. Because documents published on the Web are not subjected to the normal editorial rigors of the publishing industry, users must carefully evaluate all information accessed on the Internet. When reading a document, the old warning to "Consider the source!" takes on special meaning. To determine whether a document is trustworthy or not, judge first whether its source seems reputable. Where does the document appear? As part of a personal Web site or as part of a large governmental or commercial site? For a complete guide to choosing and evaluating Internet sources, see *Online! A Reference Guide to Using Internet Sources* (St. Martin's Press, 1997) or visit the *Online!* Web site at <http://www.smpcollege.com/online-4style~help>.

And finally, the dynamic nature of the Internet can create problems for users. It is not uncommon for a Web surfer to visit a favorite Web site only to discover that it is no longer there. It has either moved to a new address or disappeared from the Web completely. When a Web site changes address, the new URL may be temporarily posted so that visitors may take note of the change.

How do I get connected? Where do I get equipped?

Getting connected to the Internet is a lot less of a hassle than people think, although some degree of patience is required. There are two kinds of connections to the Internet: direct or indirect (dialup access). On most college campuses nowadays there are computing facilities where one can find computers with direct access to the Internet.

These computers are already configured for Internet access. You will probably need an account in order to log onto these direct access computers. Go to your school's computing center and ask about the procedure for getting Internet access.

If you are connecting from home, things are a little more complicated. You will need four things: a computer, a modem, dialup software, and an Internet service provider. A modem is a device that allows your computer to send and receive information via telephone lines. Just like computers, there are many models of modems to choose from. In general, modems are distinguished by their various speeds, that is, how fast they download information from the Internet onto your computer. If you purchase a modem that is not very fast, you will waste a lot of time waiting for information to load onto your computer. It is recommended that you buy as powerful a modem as you can afford. Note that many newer computers come with built-in modems. You will also need phone dialer software called PPP (point-to-point protocol) or SLIP (serial line Internet protocol) that allows your modem to communicate with other computers.

Next, you must have a Web browser installed on your computer's hard disk. If you use Netscape Navigator or Microsoft Internet Explorer, you should install the more-powerful recent versions. If you are affiliated with an educational institution, you are eligible for free copies of all start-up software (dialup software for your modem and browser software) at your school's computation center.

And finally, you will need a dialup account with your Internet service provider (ISP), the company or educational institution that is responsible for connecting your modem to the Internet. Internet service providers are similar to telephone companies. When you buy a telephone and plug it into a phone jack in the wall, it is not connected. Your phone won't work until you contact the phone company, which then connects your phone to the system (for a fee, of course). Your ISP will connect you, but only if you ask. There are many different ISPs: your school's computer center, a national commercial service, or a nonprofit organization. If you are a college student or faculty member, check with your school's computer center about getting connected. If you are not sure which ISP to use (there are many different providers with various fees and options), consult professional advice at a nearby computer store.

Can my computer get a virus from visiting a Web site?

You should not worry about viruses if you are simply viewing text and images at a Web site. It is possible, however, to pick up a virus by downloading infected software from a Web site. On the other hand,