

# Cultural Diversity in eGovernment and eGovernment Standardization in Europe

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## 1 Culture and Cultural Diversity

Culture and cultural diversity characterize many regions and countries across the globe. On a global scale many thousands of languages and an uncounted number of dialects are in use. India alone has 23 official languages, hundreds of unofficial ones and thousands of dialects<sup>1</sup> and many different cultural traditions. Similar statements are true for China and many, if not most other countries across the globe.

Culture in this understanding is something much wider than the arts, literature or folklore, essential though these three are in most contexts. It is the *the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs*, to quote the official UNESCO definition of that term, permeates our lives. It thus brings together a set of features that, taken together, determine to a large degree how we interact with and what we expect of each other.

Some of these features are straightforward to enumerate. Details such as date formats or currencies come to mind, but the most important ones are certainly languages and dialects. Others facets of culture are less well-defined. Cultural elements, such as expectations regarding timeliness and politeness, preferences for certain styles of addressing each other (formal or informal), or for types of imagery, principles guiding the communications between members of different generations etc. are much more difficult to actually pinpoint, yet equally important for forming our view of the world and our expectations of each other.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_national\\_languages\\_of\\_India](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_national_languages_of_India) speaks of “at least 800 different languages and around 2000 dialects” that have been identified (consulted on 2007-05-14). The distinction between languages and dialects is, of course, often difficult.

## 2 The European Perspective

If I choose here to focus on the European perspective, it is not to exclude other experiences, but because it is the one that the author is most familiar with and feels as the chairman of the CEN/ISSS Cultural Diversity Focus Group (CDFG) most entitled to discuss.

The European Union has 27 member states with 23 official languages, all of which are actively used when the European Union communicates with its citizens and which are rightly seen as one of its most important assets:

The EU sees the use of its citizens' languages as one of the factors which make it more transparent, more legitimate and more efficient”<sup>2</sup>

The European Union consciously embraces the principle of cultural diversity right down to its well-chosen official motto “Unity in Diversity”. Many member countries, in turn, have a number of official languages that they use when interacting with their citizens, not counting that many have a number of officially recognized minority and immigrant communities with their languages, some of which are used at least regionally also in official contexts.

## 3 Cultural Diversity and eGovernment

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that cultural diversity related issues are counted among the key topics in European eGovernment and eGovernment-related standardization on the European, national and often also regional levels — and hopefully also on the international one. While exact rules are in the nature of things not always easy to formulate, general guidance is possible. In eBusiness standardization the Memorandum of Understanding Management Group (MoU/MG) has taken the lead by endorsing a cultural diversity checklist proposed by ISO TC37 and the CDFG<sup>3</sup> — a direction that, *mutatis mutandis*, we should also embrace in eGovernment standardization.

The impact of cultural diversity ranges across many aspects of eGovernment, interoperability and standardization. This leads to a four postulates as discussion points for the Washington meeting:

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.europa.eu/languages/en/home>, checked on 2007-05-18.

<sup>3</sup>The list is contained in document MoU/MG/05 N0222, cf. [http://isotc.iso.org/livelink/livelink/fetch/2000/2489/Ittf\\_Home/MoU-MG/Moung222.pdf](http://isotc.iso.org/livelink/livelink/fetch/2000/2489/Ittf_Home/MoU-MG/Moung222.pdf)

## 4 Four Postulates

1. Taking cultural diversity issues in focus results in better standards and better services for all citizens;
2. Cultural expectations comprise linguistic expectations, but have many other facets;
3. Cultural diversity impacts all of semantic interoperability and many aspects of organizational interoperability;
4. Cultural diversity impacts not only front-end issues, but all level of eGovernment systems across the stack.