

The UNL Initiative: An Overview

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Abstract. We present here a description of the UNL initiative based on the Universal Networking Language (UNL). This language was conceived to support multilingual communication on the Internet across linguistic barriers. This initiative was launched by the Institute of Advanced Studies of the United Nations University in 1996. The initial consortium was formed to support 15 languages. Eight years later, this initial consortium changed, many components and resources were developed, and the UNL language itself evolved to support different types of applications, from multilingual generation to “knowledge repositories” or cross-lingual information retrieval applications. We describe the main features of this UNL Language, making a comparison with some similar approaches, such as interlinguas. We also describe some organizational and managerial aspects of the UNL according to criteria of quality and maturity, placing emphasis on the fact that the initiative is open to any interested group or researcher.

1 Background

The UNL project has an ambitious goal: to break down or at least to drastically lower the language barrier for Internet users. With time and space limitations already overcome, the Internet community is still separated by language boundaries. Theoretically, this seems to be the only major obstacle to international and interpersonal communication in the information society. This is why the problem of the language barrier on the Internet is perceived as one of the global problems of mankind, and a project aimed at solving this problem has been initiated under the auspices of the UN, by the Institute of Advanced Studies of the United Nations University. Launched in November 1996, the project embraced 14 groups from different countries representing a wide range of languages: Arabic, Chinese, German, French, Japanese, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Mongolian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Thai. Later on, Latvian and Korean were also included.

2 General Description of UNL

The idea of the project is as follows. A meaning representation language has been designed which has sufficient expressive power to represent the informational content conveyed by natural languages. This language, called the Universal Networking