

# Computers Must be Taught the Umlauts

Informal translation (by the author) of a guest editorial in Helsingin Sanomat on May 31st, 2004.

A Finnish municipality cannot obtain a Finnish alahärmä.fi domain name for the Internet, but its proper name can be used with the international top level domains com and net, writes **Erkki I. Kolehmainen**.

People will accept the IT based information society as their own only if it is implemented in their own language.

In addition to the particular letters used in the different languages - such as ä and ö that are commonly used in Finnish - IT should also support the practices of each country for e.g. the rendering of numbers, dates and times, and the use of measurement units and symbols.

On the other hand, wide interoperability between various systems is required in IT. This requirement is being emphasized as Internet based services become more common, since many of these services are intended to be built automatically from various components found in the web at the time the service is requested.

**Technical means** to describe and implement conventions used in the different language and cultural environments have been developed for quite some time. As of lately, this work was given more scope, when the responsibility for the most recent initiative, originating from within the Linux community, was taken over by the broadly-based Unicode Consortium known for its character set related work.

In Finland, however, there is currently no established body to systematically monitor international development and to also participate in it if and when needed. The national working group dedicated to the subject was dissolved last year; thereafter only voluntary work has still lead to the publication in Finnish of the names of a multi-lingual subset of widely used European characters [i.e., MES-2 of UCS/Unicode].

This is quite contradictory to the following statement in the national strategy for education, training and research in the information society 2000-2004: "From a Finnish point of view it is important that official and unofficial international standardisation take into account Finland's needs and wishes. Issues important to the administrative sector of the Ministry of Education concern language and culture-specific matters in particular."

As a result of international co-operation, specific guidance was given in June 2003 on how to use the various native language characters in Internet addresses. After the trail had been blazed by Japan, this guidance has already been implemented also by several European countries.

The implementation in Germany is exceptionally wide for a European country. Of the Nordic

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countries, Sweden and Denmark exceed the requirements of their own majority language, and Norway has resolved to also support their local Sámi languages.

**In Finland the subject** was not yet even brought up in the draft Government proposal to Parliament for an Act amending the Domain Name Act that was circulated for comment in April 2004.

Not everyone can nor even wants to evade the national character problem - unlike Viestintävirasto, the agency responsible for .fi-rooted domain name administration, which has chosen for its own domain name ficora.fi, an abbreviation of its name in English [i.e., Finnish Communications Regulatory Authority].

It is somewhat odd that a Finnish municipality cannot get to use alahärmä.fi as its domain name, but it could use its proper name with the global .com or .net roots.

Important issues that Finland must itself advocate globally are the various cultural conventions that we use, and e.g. the problems met with the browsers due to the profusion of inflections in the Finnish language, in addition to the requirements for keyboards and printers caused by the characters used in the languages traditionally spoken in Finland (Finnish; Swedish; Northern, Inari and Skolt Sámi; and Romani).

Certain commitments result from the ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. In addition, the cultural adaptability of IT systems is also required for immigrants and tourists.

The current set-up is not particularly promising either for further development of the recently established IT base for the research of the Finno-Ugric languages. Also in the area of learning technologies, the adaptation of international standards to the Finnish environment has already come up against inadequate preconditions.

Although the collapse of national activity has not been caused by the Ministry of Education, it is the only one with real possibilities to fix the situation. When and how can we expect the Ministry to act? The resources and the representativeness of private individuals interested in the subject cannot sustain for long.

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