

SEO for multilingual websites

Managing **SEO for multilingual websites** is a different beast compared to a single-language site. You are not just translating words. You are competing in separate search ecosystems, each with its own language patterns, user behavior, and Google regional preferences. A French user searching from Paris expects different results than a French user in Montreal. Ignoring this is the fastest way to waste your international budget.

The hreflang tag is not optional—it is the backbone

Google uses the hreflang attribute to understand which language version of a page to show a user. Without it, you get the wrong pages ranking in the wrong countries. A common screw-up: implementing hreflang but forgetting the self-referencing canonical tag. Every language variant must point back to itself as canonical. If you have an English page for /en/ and a German page for /de/, the English page must include a hreflang link to itself AND to the German version. Miss one, and Google might treat them as duplicates.

Another mistake is using two-letter country codes without language codes. hreflang="en-us" is correct. hreflang="us" is garbage. Validate your implementation using Google Search Console's international targeting report or a third-party hreflang checker. Do not trust your CMS plugin blindly.

Rule of thumb: every URL in your sitemap that has a language variant must have a corresponding hreflang annotation. If you have 100 English pages and 80 German pages, those 80 German pages must all be annotated. The 20 English pages without a German version do not need hreflang at all.

Content structure: subdirectories vs subdomains vs ccTLDs

This decision sets the tone for your entire international strategy. A country-code top-level domain (.fr, .de) sends the strongest geotargeting signal. Google knows immediately that the site is for France or Germany. But ccTLDs are expensive, require separate hosting setups, and dilute your domain authority across multiple roots.

Subdirectories (example.com/fr/, example.com/de/) are easier to manage. You keep all authority on one

domain, and Google uses hreflang plus the subdirectory path to infer language. This is the most common choice for businesses launching in 5+ languages. Subdomains (fr.example.com) sit in the middle—they are treated as separate sites but share some authority with the main domain. Avoid subdomains unless you have a technical reason, like different hosting regions for compliance.

If you are targeting three languages or fewer and have budget, ccTLDs win. For ten languages, use subdirectories. The trade-off is clear: authority concentration versus geotargeting strength.

Translation quality is an SEO factor, not just a UX nicety

Machine translation has gotten better, but Google can still detect low-quality auto-translated content. Pages filled with awkward phrasing, literal translations of idioms, or mismatched terminology get lower engagement signals—bounce rate goes up, dwell time drops. That tells Google the page is not useful for that language's searchers.

Worse, if you translate keywords literally without understanding local search behavior, you rank for nothing. A Spanish speaker in Spain searches for "ordenador portátil," not "computadora portátil" (which is more common in Latin America). Your keyword research must be done per locale, not per language family. Use tools like [Ahrefs](#) or [Semrush](#) with country-specific databases to find actual search volumes.

Hire native translators who understand SEO. Give them a keyword list and ask them to create content, not translate it. The difference between "translated content" and "locally written content" is the difference between ranking on page 3 and page 1.

Common multilingual SEO screw-ups that kill your rankings

Here are the mistakes I see repeatedly in audits:

- **No language declaration in HTML.** Your `<html lang="en">` attribute must match the page language. Google uses this as a signal alongside hreflang. If they conflict, you confuse the crawler.
- **Blocking language versions in robots.txt.** I have seen sites block /fr/ because the developer thought it was a staging folder. Check your robots.txt and your noindex tags per language.
- **Duplicate content across languages.** If your English and German pages have the same product descriptions because you used Google Translate and did not rewrite, Google sees duplicate content.

Use canonical tags or rewrite each version.

- **Ignoring regional search engines.** In Russia, Yandex dominates. In China, Baidu. Your hreflang tags for Google mean nothing to Yandex. You need separate strategies for those engines, including hosting in-region and using their webmaster tools.

Real scenario: launching a SaaS product in Japanese and German

You run a B2B SaaS company based in the US. Your English site ranks well. You decide to launch in Japan and Germany. You translate your homepage, pricing page, and three blog posts. You set up subdirectories /ja/ and /de/, implement hreflang, and submit sitemaps. Three months later, your German page gets some traffic, but your Japanese page has almost none.

What happened? Japanese users do not search the same way. Your keyword "project management software" translates to a phrase that Japanese searchers rarely use. They search for "???????" (business management tool) instead. Your translated content did not match the actual search intent. You needed separate keyword research for Japan, not a direct translation of your US keyword list. Also, your hosting is in the US, which adds latency for Japanese users. Google considers page speed as a ranking factor. You should have used a CDN with Japanese edge servers or hosted a copy in Tokyo.

For Germany, the strategy worked better because German search behavior is closer to English. But you still had to adjust for local competitors like [Search Engine Land](#) notes, German users trust local TLDs more. Your /de/ subdirectory under a .com domain might lose some trust compared to a .de domain. That is a trade-off you accepted for easier management.

When to use a separate domain versus a subdirectory

If your business targets only one additional country and you have the budget, buy the ccTLD. For example, if you are a US company expanding to France, example.fr is better than example.com/fr/. The ccTLD gives you a geotargeting boost that is hard to replicate.

If you are expanding to ten countries simultaneously, subdirectories are the only sane choice. Managing ten separate domains with separate sitemaps, separate backlink profiles, and separate hosting is a nightmare. Your link equity stays on one domain, so every link to your English homepage also helps your German and

Japanese subdirectories indirectly.

Subdomains are rarely the best choice. They split authority without giving you the general strength of a ccTLD. The only exception is when you need different CMS instances or different local SEO tools that require data separation.



Prioritization principle: start with the market that has the highest search volume and lowest competition

Do not launch ten languages at once. Pick one or two markets where your product has clear demand and where the SEO competition is not dominated by local giants. Use keyword difficulty scores per country. If your German keyword has a difficulty of 20 but your Japanese keyword has a difficulty of 70, start with Germany. Learn the process, build your internal workflow, then expand. Every multilingual SEO failure I have seen came from trying to do everything at once and doing none of it well.

Technical Verification Node

[recommended tool](#)

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