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Multilingual phone calls in your future?

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TOKYO - Ever wanted to phone overseas but been put off by the language barrier?

Japanese scientists hope the world's first experiment involving simultaneous translation by telephone will help overcome the problem.

The experiment, due to take place on Jan. 28, will link up three sites - in Japan, Germany and the United States - and involve translation between Japanese, English and German, a spokesman for the Japanese research group said recently.

A set conversation piece, containing some 700 words, will be relayed by international telephone circuits and be turned into the recipients' language by a speech synthesizer.

The speaker's voice is converted into text by a computer which then translates the words into the relevant language and transmits them as a digital signal on the telephone circuit.

The signal is then converted back into a sound - the recipient's language.

"The whole process from the moment of speaking to the recipient's hearing the words in his own language takes about 20 seconds," said the Japanese spokesman who belongs to the Advanced Telecommunications Research Institute International, based in Kyoto, Japan.

"We can handle about 90 percent of standard, everyday expressions," he added.

"We expect this performance to accelerate the worldwide spread of interpreting telephone research," the spokesman said.

The company said it will likely be another 10 years before the technology is perfected and available for public use.

Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh and the University of Karlsruhe in Munich, Germany, are joining the institute in the experiment.

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