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From The Editor

Lost in Translation

There's a new translation machine out there; as usual, the assumption is that technology can overcome every problem

by [Demir Barlas](#), [Line56](#)
Friday, November 04, 2005

Apparently there's a new invention from the International Center for Advanced Communication Technologies (a joint initiative between Carnegie Mellon University and Germany's University of Karlsruhe) that translates what you say into another language.

You can say a phrase in English, for example, and have the phrase translated by a computer into the target language; you can also have the target language phrase appear as text.

One can envision such a technology helping out at a place like the United Nations, where a single speech can simultaneously be translated into dozens of others as per the needs of the audience. At this point, though, the Center admitted that the technology is still nascent and has difficulty for more complicated forms of communication.

Alex **Waibel**, director of the Center, believes that the invention will eventually "make communication and cultural learning more likely" because it will allow people from previously disparate linguistic groups to understand each other (there is even a pair of goggles that displays text subtitles for what people are saying to you).

While I believe that the translation invention will certainly have practical benefits in limited situations, I find it naive to believe that the mere possibility of communication prompts cultural learning.

Here's an example. When I graduated from Cornell University, many students actually organized themselves (complete with banners) to march to the ceremony according to skin color. Rather embarrassingly, then, the graduation ceremony for Cornell's class of 1995 was divided into black, white, and Asian camps which even held separate graduation parties.

Now, all of these students could speak English and most of them had been born in the United States. Moreover, they had spent four or more years attending the same classes, eating in the same cafeterias, and sharing the same University facilities. At the end of that time they couldn't even bear to stand next to each other at the graduation ceremony because, for them, their chance possession of a certain skin color was more important than membership in the same country, culture, and linguistic community.

I humbly submit that language isn't the barrier to what **Waibel** calls cultural learning. Arrogance and mistrust are the barriers. Creating a translation machine just reinforces the urge for people to speak in their own language and refuse to learn others, which in turn reinforces parochialism. It's a classic example of the scientific attitude: create a machine to address the superficial problem, and leave the profound underlying problem untouched.

This is part of a series of high-level discussions of IT and e-business issues that, while grounded as far as possible in data and fact, also incorporates a modicum of speculative thinking. -- Editor

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