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With AI translation tools so powerful, what is the point of learning a language?

Published: October 22, 2024 2.05pm NZDT

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In the age of artificial intelligence (AI), foreign language learning can seem like it's becoming obsolete. Why invest the time and effort to learn another language when technology can do it for you?

There are now translation tools to understand song lyrics, translate websites and to enable automated captions when watching foreign videos and movies. Our phones can instantly translate spoken words.

At the same time, foreign language programmes are closing at New Zealand and Australian universities.

But while technology can translate messages, it misses an important component of human communication – the cultural nuances behind the words.

So, while AI translation might bridge language barriers and promote communication because of its accessibility, it's important to be clear about the benefits and challenges it presents. Merely relying on technology to translate between languages will ultimately lead to misunderstandings and a less rich human experience.

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The rise of translation technology

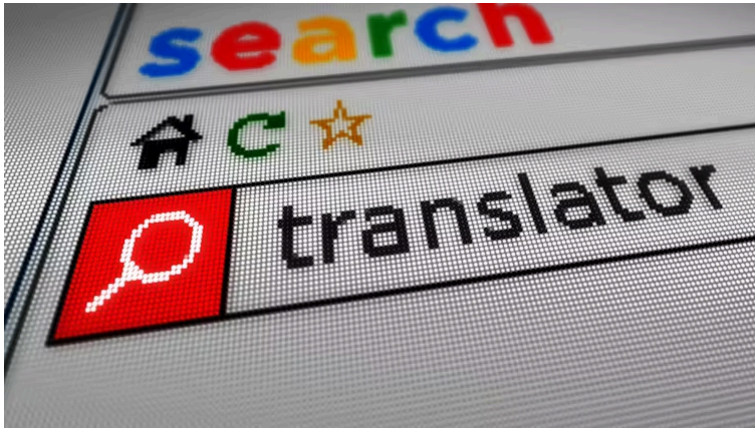
Translation technology has rapidly grown since its emergence between the 1950s and 1960s. This progress was bolstered by the commercialisation of computer-assisted translation systems in the 1980s.

But recent advances in generative AI have led to significant breakthroughs in translation technologies.

Google Translate has dramatically changed since its launch in 2006. Initially developed as a limited statistical translation machine, it has evolved into a “portable interpreter”.

AI translation is useful in some circumstances. For example, helping teachers communicate with parents who speak a different language, or when travelling.

Translation technology may even play a role in the preservation of Indigenous and minority languages on the verge of disappearing by supporting online collections of literature. Incorporating AI-powered technology in these digital libraries can help users access and understand these texts.



Google Translate has changed significantly since it was launched in 2006 but it is far from perfect. Arkadiusz Warguła/Getty Images

But the new technology also comes with limitations.

In 2019, staff at an Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention centre in the United States used AI translation to process an asylum application. The voice-translation tool was unable to understand an applicant's regional accent or dialect, leading to the asylum seeker spending six months in detention without being able to meaningfully communicate with anyone.

In 2021, a court in the US determined Google Translate wasn't reliable enough to ensure someone's consent. A trooper had used the translation app to ask a Spanish-speaking suspect if he could search her car. Google Translate used the word "registrar" (which translates as "register" but can be used to say "examine") when, in fact, the word "buscar" (to search) would have been more appropriate.

Brain health and other benefits

Learning additional languages also stands out as one of the best ways to improve ourselves, with benefits for brain health, social skills, cultural understanding, empathy and career opportunities.

An analysis of studies from 2012 to 2019 found speaking more than one language can enhance the brain's flexibility, delay the onset of dementia, and improve cognitive health later in life. The analysis also recommended starting language learning early.

In 2022, the Council of Europe emphasised the significance of plurilingual and intercultural education for fostering democratic culture, noting its cognitive, linguistic and social benefits.

And this year, the council launched the "Language education at the heart of democracy." programme. The goal is to highlight the importance of learning language for a fairer society.

Lost in translation

In Aotearoa New Zealand, English is widely used. Te reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language are also recognised as official languages. Some 29% of citizens are born overseas. There are more than 150 languages spoken, with at least 24 spoken by more than 10,000 people.

But interest in learning languages has fallen. In 2021, 980 full-time equivalent students studied a language other than Māori or New Zealand Sign Language at one of the country's eight universities, falling from 1,555 less than a decade earlier.

As a consequence, a number of universities have closed, or announced plans to close, their language programmes.

While AI-powered translation technology has its uses, a great deal can be lost if we rely solely on it to communicate. The nuances of languages, and what they say about different cultures, are difficult to communicate via translation tools.

And the benefits of being bilingual or multilingual – both personally and for the wider community – risk being lost if we don't support second language learning.