Now Skype can translate for us, why learn a language?

January 14 2015, by Mike Groves

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

New technology has the habit of making certain professions redundant. Power looms put cotton workers out of job, leading to the rise of the Luddites. Word processors put an end to the typing pool. Now free, computerised translation services could put the language teaching profession under threat.

In December, Skype unveiled a tool it is developing that promises to interpret spoken languages in real time over its video-conferencing interface. At present, it only works between Spanish and English and is certainly nowhere near perfect.

The demonstration on the BBC is not mindblowing. The two people are not having a real time conversation for starters. One person speaks, the system provides a translation, and then the other person answers – it's very slow, and often produces gibberish.

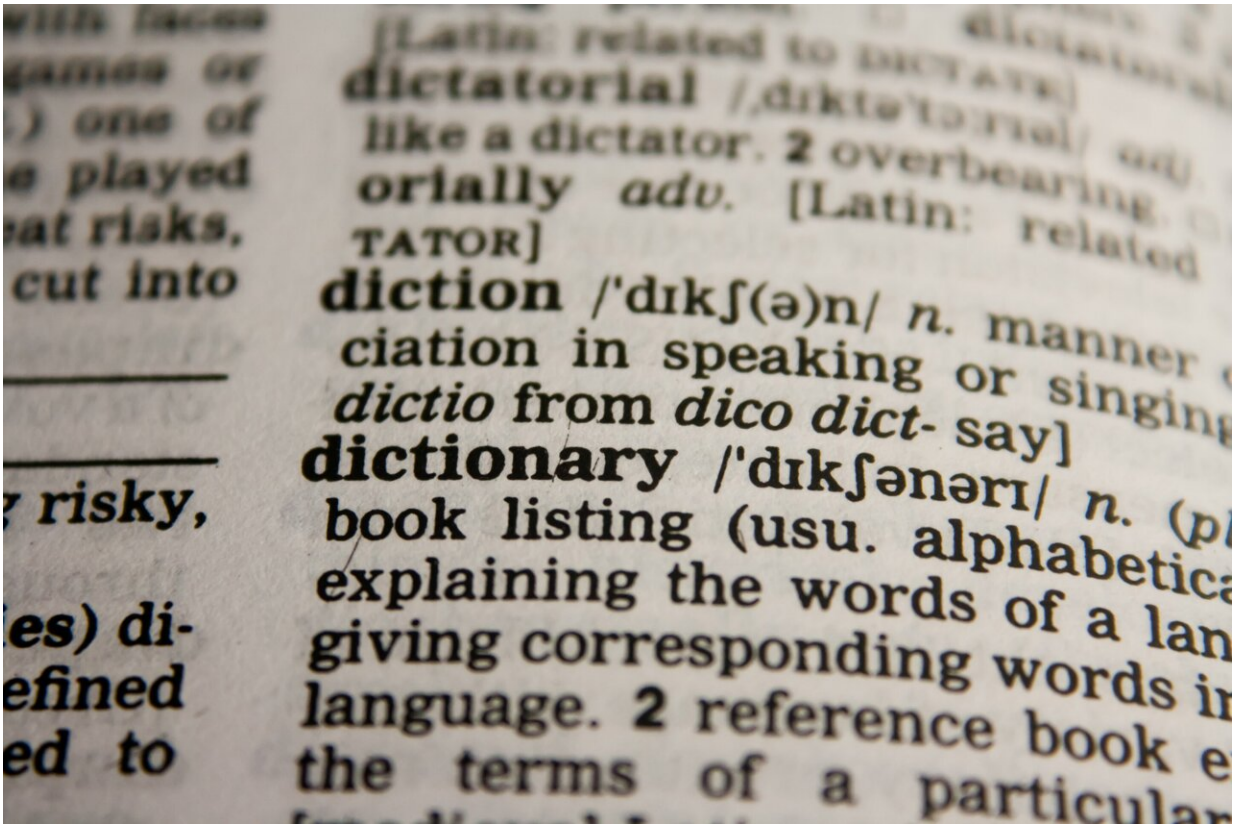
My very poor Spanish has noticed that the system takes "What is your cat called?" and translates it as "Your cat is so cold". But it's not hard to see that an improved version of this could provide a much more seamless translation.

Instant translation at your fingertips

And Skype is not alone. An app called Word Lens will translate signs and menus in situ. You point your phone at the menu, and it will (in theory) show you the translation as augmented reality, as you look through the screen in real time. Again, the quality of the translation is not perfect and the number of languages serviced is small – but it's not hard to see where this could go in the future. Why would I take an evening course in Spanish to help me read menus on my holidays, when I can use this?

Google Translate is also free to use, available on a variety of platforms and based on a vast database of languages. It can handle 90 languages – and according to Google in 2012, the system translated more one million books' worth of text in a day. It is not hard to envision a future where this can be combined with wearable technology – a system that can provide reliable, clear and simultaneous translation of voice and text for free to anyone with the hardware and a fast enough web connection.

Working on the assumption that machine translations will become faster and better, and that it will remain free to use, this leads to a variety of consequences – especially at university level.



Credit: Pixabay from Pexels

Impact on universities

Most English-speaking universities have departments providing preparatory English courses and support programmes for foreign students. In a world where a student could automatically translate lectures and text books, and also have their own writing translated into

English, the expense and effort of learning English – or any other language – may become redundant.

Students are very likely to be aware of the shortcomings of translation technology – but also of the shortcomings of their own writing. It is not about whether the translation is perfect or not – it is about whether it is better than what the student can produce without it. If I needed to write to a French speaker, I know that the Google software is highly likely to produce better French than I can. If the writing were high stakes, like most university writing is, I would be more tempted to use a translation engine. I have more faith in Google than my own French.

But translation software cannot turn a poorly organised piece of writing into a well-organised one. It cannot turn a poorly justified argument into a well-supported one. It can only work at the level of the sentence – it cannot turn those sentences into coherent and effective essays as yet.

Motivation to learn

The question of motivation then becomes key. Students' motivation for learning a language has long been divided (and I simplify somewhat) into instrumental and integrative. Integrative motivation is the desire to learn a language because of an internal desire to do so – because the learner is interested in the language itself, perhaps for cultural or family reasons.

Instrumental motivation, on the other hand, occurs because of the utility of the language – perhaps it can lead to promotion at work, or success in business. This is key for students taking part in education that happens away from their own home language.

If a student wishes to become part of academia, then I would predict they are more likely to make sure they improve their language abilities. But if all they are interested in is a qualification leading to employment,

then they are more likely to turn to translation software.

Keep attitudes flexible

Universities will need to address these developments. Is a text written in a students' first language and then translated into English, their own work? Who does the final translation belong to? Perhaps it undermines the value of a degree if a student is able to satisfy a university's requirements without fluently speaking the language of the university.

There may be need for a more flexible approach. After all, as I am typing this, the spell check and auto correct are quietly working away, often correcting things before I even notice them. The fact that I am an atrocious typist doesn't mean that I can't write.

It is clear that translation software is already having a major effect on how students from different language backgrounds will deal with university. If carefully managed, the technology could remove the obstacle to study for vast numbers of people who speak different languages, making universities more inclusive on a truly global scale.

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