Smartphone foreign language apps speak to world

May 4 2011, By Roger Yu

Smartphone applications have left many office tools and devices collecting dust. Add language translators to that growing list.

A few years ago, a wave of portable translation products hit the market, promising to make navigating Russian markets or ordering at a French restaurant a breeze. Ranging from color-screen e-dictionaries to checkbook-size devices that utter travel phrases in a robotic voice, these gadgets typically cost well north of $100.

But translation apps have recently taken over, dramatically improving the experience and lightening the suitcase a little. More words and phrases have been packed into the new generation of apps, which can translate even complicated sentences saddled with one or more dependent clauses.

Thanks to advances in speech-recognition technology, several apps let you skip typing and instead dictate a sentence to have the translation spoken back to you immediately - or to the person to whom you're talking - in a natural human voice. Best of all, many are free.

Competition is about to get a lot stiffer, with no less a player than Google entering the market. The tech giant released its iPhone app Google Translate earlier this year, based on its Web application.

I tested Google's product and several competitors, running them through the same set of words and phrases useful for traveling - a mixture of food- and hotel-related words, American idioms, conversation starters

and corporate jargon.

I was very impressed with the apps' speech-recognition features in particular. They were all able to translate phrases and sentences without too much difficulty and allowed easy switching between a language pair. Although it's cumbersome to talk to a phone while conversing with a foreign friend or merchant, a well-done speech-recognition function will come in handy more than you might imagine. I recently had a taxi driver in Shanghai who couldn't comprehend the word "airport."

A major shortcoming, however, is that most translation apps require an Internet connection to access their dictionaries. Often, travelers can't access a wireless data network abroad or afford steep international roaming charges.

Speech-recognition features also can be spotty, requiring you to repeat constantly. It's best to keep phrases short. The apps particularly had trouble with the word "eggplant," with one app repeatedly insisting I said "xporn." Whatever that is.

SPEECHTRANS:

-Price: ($19.99)

-Overview: Translator with 11 input and 11 output languages. Has a free version that contains only English-Spanish pair and flashing ads.

-Pros: Simple to use. Works well, for the most part. Can hold a recording up to nearly a minute (though a lengthy input produced several errors). Can use it to Facebook chat with non-English-speaking friends (speech input and voice translation output).

-Cons: Pricey. Voice output quality isn't as good as others (robotic voice;

some languages were downright static-y). Occasionally freezes. Speech recognition for input is available for only six languages. Needs Internet.

-Takeaway: Accurately translated six of 10 phrases. Not worth $20 when there's a free alternative that's better.

MYLANGUAGE TRANSLATOR PRO:

-Price: $4.99

-Overview: Features 58 languages for typed input and output (only 20 are speech-capable). Translations uploaded by native speakers. Has a free version with flashing ads and no voice input/output.

-Pros: Voice output is pretty realistic, with good native accents. Ability to switch among languages without retyping input. Keeps history of your searches. Contains obscure languages, such as Afrikaans and Albanian. Lets you select the type of Spanish you want (Argentinean, Dominican or Castilian). Ability to display a larger font, though not as large as Google's enlarged text.

-Cons: No speech input capability, requiring you to type. Speech output is available for only 20 languages. Brief pause prior to rendering speech output. Crashed several times during test. Translations for some non-Roman alphabet languages (Korean, Arabic) are rendered in phonetic-sounding words in Roman alphabet, not its native alphabet. Requires Internet.

-Takeaway: Packs many languages, but its lack of speech recognition for input is a glaring weakness.

JIBBIGO ENGLISH-SPANISH SPEECH TRANSLATOR:

-Price: $4.99

-Overview: Translates English-Spanish via speech and typing. Sells other language pairs for $4.99 apiece. Claims its speech recognition adapts to your voice.

-Pros: Doesn't require Internet connection. Clear speech output, though a bit robotic in sound. Keeps history of your searches for future look-up. Ability to go back and forth between languages.

-Cons: Contains only one language pair. Must pay for other language pairs. Speech recognition wasn't as reliable as Google, at least on first try.

-Takeaway: Speech recognition accurate for six of 10 words/phrases on first try. Not requiring Internet connection is a major plus and makes it stand out from others.

GOOGLE TRANSLATE:

-Price: Free

-Overview: Can translate 57 languages for both input and output. Can accept speech input for 15 languages and provide spoken translations in 23.

-Pros: Simple, clean interface. Speech recognition was more reliable than others. Realistic voice and excellent native accents (rolling Rs for Castilian Spanish, for example). Ability to enlarge text to full screen by tapping on the zoom icon. Can save often-used phrases/words. Has a wide variety of languages, including Albanian, Galician, Macedonian, Welsh and Yiddish.

-Cons: Speech recognition wasn't always reliable, particularly translating from a foreign language to English. ("I'd like to order tofu and fish" in Mandarin Chinese was translated as "I want entertainment tofu" in English.) Needs Internet connection, except for saved words and translation history.

-Takeaway: Lives up to Google's reputation for solid software. A must for next trip abroad, but pay attention to roaming charges. Speech recognition accurately translated eight of 10 test words/phrases on first try.

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