Duolingo launches as crowdsourced translation service

June 19 2012, by Nancy Owano

(Phys.org) -- A new website wants people to translate the Web for free. The reward is that the website seeks to help the same people doing the translating to learn the language, for free. Duolingo launched today as a new startup, the brainchild of a Carnegie Mellon project. University computer scientists Luis von Ahn and Severin Hacker thought up this venture in translating languages on the web by having language students themselves translate it while they simultaneously learn a new language, as a combination free language education website and crowdsourced online translation service.

Duolingo's mission is to translate the web into every language, as well as make language education accessible to the masses. Right now, Duolingo offers free language lessons in English, Spanish, French and German but the site plans to expand into Portuguese, Chinese and other languages.

[Language learners](#) practice their new [language skills](#) on real-world texts from the web, and the computer provides advice and guidance on unknown words. Computer-generated exercises build vocabulary and grammar skills all the while. For example, if an English speaker seeks out Spanish, Duolingo gives the user a level-appropriate Spanish sentence from a Spanish website to translate, with relevant lessons and education examples too.

The site will only give the user a sentence that fits the user's language level, from a sentence for beginners to complex sentences for advanced [users](#). The users can vote on the quality of other user translations. This technique delivers the most accurate translation, while helping the user better understand the language.

Duolingo kept fairly tight control over the private beta, according to reports. In theory, mischief makers are thwarted because the process is crowdsourced, with people checking and translating the same sentence. The idea is that, given enough iteration and feedback, the good translations win.

The Duolingo team claim the translations are of good quality and are better than most automated translation services. "Hundreds of thousands of beta testers have helped us refine the service," said von Ahn, who is an associate professor of computer science at CMU. Duolingo has been used by about 125,000 users since its launch, and the team says users have so far translated 75 million sentences. Of the beta users, about 30,000 have become regular users who visit the site for at least 30 minutes a week.

von Ahn, co-founder, commented that "So much of the web is partitioned off by language barriers. With more than a billion people on the planet learning a new language, I knew this was the ultimate opportunity." English-speakers can access a little more than half of all

Web pages. That means, however, a significant percentage of the Web is inaccessible because of language barriers. For non-English speakers, the barrier is greater.

The company plans to provide commercial translation services, but maintains its chief purpose is translating web resources for free.

Duolingo has attracted venture capital funding and was spun off from CMU in November last year. The startup employs 13 people in Pittsburgh.

More information: duolingo.com/

Press release

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Citation: Duolingo launches as crowdsourced translation service (2012, June 19) retrieved 16 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2012-06-duolingo-crowdsourced.html