Mobile phone translator service unveiled

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If you are puzzled when the German waiter asks you: "Was möchten Sie?" all you have to do is to reach for your mobile phone. Not only will the phone tell you that the waiter is asking you what you want, it will even translate your order into German.

The system, called Verbmobil, can translate spoken English, German, Japanese and Chinese almost instantaneously. It operates over a standard mobile phone network - you just dial a number. Verbmobil, the product of a $90-million research programme, was demonstrated in Seattle last week.

"It's 90 per cent accurate," says Wolfgang Wahlster from the artificial intelligence research institute DFKI in Saarbrücken, Germany.

"We have checked it against 25,000 translation tasks." It is also quick. The delay in translation is no more than a few milliseconds.

Ungrammatical problems

Text-based translators, like AltaVista's Babel Fish, have existed for some time. But their translations are often poor. The problem is even more difficult with spoken language, partly because of background noise and also because people use ungrammatical sentences.

Unlike other translators, Verbmobil doesn't try to filter out background noise, which can cause some of the message to disappear.

"The secret is we don't transform the original signal to get rid of this garbage noise," says Wahlster. Instead Verbmobil tries to make sense out of the noise - discarding any words that don't fit.

Although Verbmobil is still imperfect, people are better at coping with errors in spoken language than in print, says Wahlster. They hear the errors but understand the basic gist, as if someone were speaking a pidgin language.

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