Computer translation strides made

KYOTO — Connecting online to three institutions in the United States, Germany and South Korea, the Interpreting Telecommunications Research Laboratories (ITL) have conducted experiments on a speech translation system in four languages.

In the experiment Thursday, one researcher, for example, asked in Japanese how the weather was in the U.S., and a computerized translation system translated the question into the three other languages. A U.S. counterpart answered in English that it was cloudy, which was also translated.

"In the future, we would like people (from different countries) to be able to converse using their mother tongues," said Seiichi Yamamoto, head of the ITL, part of the Advanced Telecommunications Research Institute International (ATR). "This is a step forward to that end."

The experiment was joined by Carnegie Mellon University in the U.S., the University of Karlsruhe in Germany, and the Electronics and Telecommunications Research Institute in South Korea.

After the experiment, Yoshinori Sagisaka, an ATR researcher and an expert in speech recognition, said the translation system has improved enough to cope with speech at ordinary speed.

The first international experiment in January 1993 showed that the system only recognized carefully spoken, grammatically correct speech. The translation process was slow and could not translate conversational speech.

To improve the program, the ATR-ITL has developed the Multilingual Automatic Translation System for Information Exchange that can translate Japanese into English, Germany and Korean.