

A Score or More of Languages in Your Pocket



Minh Uong/The New York Times

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In Douglas Adams's "[The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy](#)," the hero sticks a so-called Babel fish in his ear and can understand everything said to him in any language. Today's apps for language translation try to accomplish the same thing. While not as accurate or instantaneous, they are nevertheless useful and greatly improved from just a couple of years ago. And you don't have to put anything slimy in your ear.

The reason these kinds of apps have gotten so much better is simply that more people have been using them, said John Garofolo, a senior adviser at the [National Institute of Standards and Technology](#) who has studied and tested the software. The more a translation app is used, the more it learns to statistically make correct associations with sounds, text and meaning.

The latest translation apps incorporate voice-recognition software so you can speak as well as type in the word or phrase you want translated and then get both a text and audio response. While there are a bewildering number of translation apps, most use one of just three voice recognition programs ([Google](#), [Microsoft](#) or [Nuance](#)) mixed

with translation software (either Google or Microsoft) plus the app developer's own tweaks. An exception is the app Jibbig, which has its own system, developed by computer scientists at [Carnegie Mellon University](#).

The language apps differ markedly in price, user interface, added features and functionality offline. Accuracy seems to depend on your accent and dialectical proclivities as well as the range of words you use and how noisy the environment is where you say them. Some apps may be better at translating, say, curse words, while others might be better at culinary terms. Some may be super at French, but miserable at Hungarian.

But no matter which app you choose, you can't use it for long and involved conversations. These apps work only when you speak very slowly and distinctly and in short sentences. Be prepared to rephrase when you get quizzical looks or uncomfortable giggles — as when asking in English for a baby's "crib" in your hotel room and the app's French translation intones that you need a "favor" in your hotel room. Mon Dieu!

After testing most of the voice-recognition translation apps available (and listening to more mechanical speech than a healthy person should), I found a few standouts in reliability and usability. The trials occurred over several days, in different noise environments, and involved at least three languages. Here are my picks:

GOOGLE TRANSLATE for iOS and Android: When [Google Translate](#) works, it's fast and accurate. It has a way of seizing up at times, usually in loud places or when you give it a long sentence or multisyllabic word. After a long wait, you might get a message saying "Speech recognition not available." Also, it's not particularly good at recognizing proper names or names of cities.

Nevertheless, it's probably the most widely used translation app and is powered by Google's behemoth worldwide computing power and data sets. Indeed, the company used all available [United Nations](#) documents, each translated into six languages, to build its statistical translation system. That is in addition to countless Web documents and voice actors' recordings plus feedback from the billion or more translations it delivers daily to users.

Like most Google products, the free translation app has a simple and uncluttered interface. It covers 63 languages (20 with voice-recognition and 43 with text to speech), including four dialects of Spanish and three for Chinese. This is good because trying to use a Mexican-Spanish translation when talking to a Salvadoran can be extremely frustrating.

Also, Google last month introduced 50 offline translation packages. You can download a particular language package to use when you aren't near Wi-Fi and don't want exorbitant roaming or data charges. Just know the offline translation service isn't as comprehensive in terms of vocabulary as what you'd get online.

JIBBIGO for iOS and Android: The work of Carnegie Mellon computer scientists, Jibbig is also [free and a generally useful translator](#) although it doesn't recognize some seemingly simple and useful words like "corkscrew" and "cellphone" and it particularly has trouble deciphering thick accents like some heard in Oklahoma or Massachusetts.

The app covers 13 languages (including English dialects for the United States and Britain and Spanish dialects for Mexico and Spain), which are available online and offline for \$5 each. Or you can buy languages in bulk; a European bundle, for \$10, includes French, Italian, German and Spanish. You download them from the cloud only when you need them so you don't take up too much of your mobile device's memory.

Jibbig has an intuitive interface. It keeps a history of your translations and also has a way for you to control the speed with which the translated words are spoken, which is helpful if you are trying to learn the language. Jibbig also has a button for allowing explicit language. On other apps, you tend to get error messages or asterisks. Another nice feature is the ability to input a list of proper names (in text and voice) for it to readily recognize.

VOCRE for iOS and Android: Vocre, which costs \$5 and covers 36 languages for Android and 66 for iOS, is a [true hybrid of technologies](#). It uses Nuance's voice recognition program and Microsoft's translation program but rolls over to Google's system when Microsoft gets stumped. The app also taps into a database of crowdsourced translations.

The voice recognition is excellent even when using proper names. The translation is good even when conveying more complex thoughts. And you can choose whether you want a male or female voice speaking the translation. The split-screen feature allows two participants in a conversation to use the app while facing each other. A big drawback is that there is no offline functionality.

ITRANSLATE for iOS and Android: This [app also uses Nuance software](#) for voice recognition and Microsoft and Google software for translation with some proprietary software in the mix. It will translate 36 languages with impressive accuracy even in noisy environments.

The cost is \$5 but only for one year, and it will not automatically renew. There are less expensive versions of iTranslate, including a free version with annoying ads, but don't waste your time or money. They are like getting just a few pieces of a larger puzzle you're trying to solve, and it's irritating.

The interface is user-friendly and seems to translate faster than the other apps. You can choose a female or male voice, as well as the speed at which it speaks. Also very useful are dictionary entries that pop up to show you various possible definitions. But like Vocre, you can't use the app offline, which for international travelers is not good, bon, bueno, dobre, gut, buono, bra, goeie, jo or geras.