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Posted on Thu, Oct. 27, 2005

Lost in translation? New technology comes to the rescue

RAMESH SANTANAM
 Associated Press

PITTSBURGH - Imagine this: You want to say something quietly in Spanish to a co-worker during a meeting, but you don't speak Spanish. So you simply mouth the words in English, without uttering a sound, and they immediately pop up in Spanish on your colleague's computer screen.

Researchers acknowledge it sounds far-fetched, but they're working toward making it a reality. Their goal is to tear down language barriers and improve human speech translation by using computers.

On Thursday, the International Center for Advanced Communication Technologies, run jointly by Mellon University in Pittsburgh and the University of Karlsruhe in Germany, unveiled on-the-spot human speech translation. The center's director, Alexander Waibel, delivered a lecture that was simultaneously translated from English to German and Spanish.

"We're living in an interesting time," he said. "We're increasingly globalizing. ... We have many groups that speak different languages. We want everyone working together but to maintain

Waibel showed new ways of translating speeches beyond traditional headsets.

Researchers, for example, showed off goggles that delivered translations on a small screen and small ultrasound speakers that delivered a narrow beam of audio in a foreign language to others hear the speech in its original language.

Doctoral student Stan Jou demonstrated a device Waibel described as sounding like scientific mouthed words in Mandarin and 11 electrodes on his face and throat sensed what he said of his facial muscles and promptly translated it into English and Spanish.

He and Waibel envision a day when people have implants in their faces and throats to be able to speak foreign languages.

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Current speech-to-speech translators can be used in limited situations, such as making hot

"If I go to Beijing, I can check in at the Hilton without any problem," said Carnegie Mellon re Stephan Vogel, demonstrating a personal digital assistant with a translator program.

He spoke English into the PDA that translated his words into, in this case, Thai.

While Waibel believes PDAs with translator programs could be sold commercially - right no humanitarian relief workers and for military purposes - within a year or so, the more comple speech translator will take longer.

The current device isn't perfect.

During Waibel's lecture, the translator erred sometimes transcribing his speech in English. showed up as "mate," "some" as "sum" and "patent" as "patten."

"We have to improve performance," Waibel said. "it's very, very important for a system to te wrong. Computers are awful at that."

But he remains hopeful.



"We don't want to be separated by language anymore," he said. "This vision of the future re

ON THE NET

International Center for Advanced Communication Technologies: <http://www.is.cs.cmu.edu>.

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