
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

The technology of translation



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Rob

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Rob.

Sam

And I'm Sam. Rob, I'm writing a letter to a friend in Spain and I need some help. Do you know the Spanish for, 'it's raining'?

Rob

Don't worry, I have this new app... I just hold up my phone, scan the word I want translated, uh, 'esta lloviendo', is the Spanish for, 'it's raining'.

Sam

Amazing! In this programme we're discussing language technologies – computers that can translate between languages. Modern software like Google Translate has transformed how we learn foreign languages, bringing us closer to a world where language is no longer a barrier to communication. But how well do these computers know what we really mean to say?

Rob

Later we'll find out exactly what machines can and can't translate, and, as usual, we'll be learning some new vocabulary as well. But first I have a question for you, Sam. The translation app I used just now is very recent, but there's a long history of computer mistranslations - times when computers got it badly wrong. In 1987, the American airline, Braniff, ran television adverts promoting the all-leather seats installed on their flights to Mexico. But how was its "fly in leather" advertising slogan mistranslated into Spanish? Did the advert say:

- a) fly in lava
- b) fly on a cow
- c) fly naked

Sam

Hmm, I have a feeling it might be, c) fly naked.

Rob

Ok, Sam. I'll reveal the correct answer later in the programme. Computer software used to rely on rules-based translation, applying the grammar rules of one language to another. That worked fine for simple words and phrases, but what happens when a translator comes across more complex language, for example **metaphors** - expressions used to describe one thing by comparing it to another.

Sam

Lane Greene is a language journalist and the author of the book, *Talk on the Wild Side*. Here he explains to BBC Radio 4 programme, Word of Mouth, how apps like Google Translate allow users to manually translate metaphors:

Lane Greene

If I say, '**it's raining cats and dogs**' and it literally translates, 'esta lloviendo perros y gatos' in Spanish, that won't make any sense, but I think somebody at Google will have inputted the phrase, 'lueve a cántaros' which is the phrase, 'it's raining pitchers', or 'it's raining jugs of water', so that the whole **chunk**, 'raining cats and dogs', is translated into the equivalent metaphor in Spanish.

Rob

Lane wants to translate the phrase, **it's raining cats and dogs**, something that people sometimes say when it's raining heavily.

Sam

It wouldn't make sense to translate this phrase into another language literally, word by word. One solution is to translate the whole idiom as a **chunk**, or a large part of text or language.

Rob

This works for phrases and idioms that people regularly use in the same way because they can be taught to a computer. But what happens when someone like a poet writes a completely new sentence which has never been written before? Lane Greene thinks that even the smartest software couldn't deal with that, as he told Michael Rosen, poet and presenter of BBC Radio 4's, Word of Mouth:

Michael Rosen 14'31"

...if a poet writes a new one then the machine is not going to pick it up, and it's going to have a struggle, isn't it? Sorry, I'm sticking up for poetry here and trying to claim that it's untranslatable – can you hear what I'm doing?

Lane Greene

I hear you, and in a war against the machines, our advantage is novelty and creativity. So you're right that machines will be great at anything that is **rote**, anything that's already been done a million times can be **automated**. So you and I with our pre-frontal cortexes can try to come up with phrases that'll **flummox** the computer and so keep our jobs.

Sam

When we say machines "learn" a language, we really mean they have been trained to identify patterns in millions and millions of translations. Computers can only learn by **rote** - by memory in order to repeat information rather than to properly understand it.

Rob

This kind of rote learning can be easily **automated** - done by machines instead of humans. But it's completely different from human learning requiring creative thinking which would **flummox** – or confuse, even the most sophisticated machine.

Sam

Bad news for translation software, but good news for humans who use different languages in their jobs – like us!

Rob

Yes, if only Braniff Airlines had relied on human translators, they might have avoided an embarrassing situation.

Sam

Ah, in your question you asked how Braniff's television advertisement "fly in leather" was translated into Spanish. I guessed it was mistranslated as "fly naked".

Rob

Which was... the correct answer! Braniff translated its "fly in leather" slogan as fly "en cuero," which sounds like Spanish slang for "fly naked".

Sam

OK, let's recap the vocabulary from this programme about language translations which are **automated** - done by machines instead of humans.

Rob

Often found in poetry, a **metaphor** is a way of describing something by reference to something else.

Sam

When it's raining heavily you might use the idiom, **it's raining cats and dogs!**

Rob

A **chunk** is a large part of something.

Sam

Rote learning involves memorising information which you repeat but don't really understand.

Rob

And finally, if someone is **flummoxed**, they're so confused that they don't know what to do!

Sam

Once again our six minutes are up! Join us again soon for more trending topics and useful vocabulary here at 6 Minute English. Goodbye for now!

Rob

Bye!