

"FREE" WEB TRANSLATORS -

HUMAN TOOLS OR COMPUTERS?



You may have seen those cute little automatic language translation tools on the Web and may have been tempted to use them for your various translation needs. So I thought I would explain the state of language translation technology, and give you some caveats on using free translation services.

Automatic translations offered this way may be "free", but they are also dangerous, or, down-right funny, however you look at it. However, such free services could end up costing you dearly in terms of lost business.

Machines Can't Translate Nuances

For the last three decades, governments and a number of software companies have invested millions of dollars in developing machine translation, automatic translation and computer-assisted translation software. Except for some very limited uses like weather reports and price/parts lists, they are still very unreliable. A machine just can't translate nuances, tone, idiomatic expressions and turns of phrase in language.

Some of the names of computer-generated translation systems you might have seen on the Web are related to AltaVista, Babel, Systran, LanguageWare, Softissimo, Transparent Language and InterTran. These "free" Web translators are fairly low-tech examples of computerized translation, and they often produce quite silly results.

A European language professional, Philippe Noth, regularly posts hilarious bloopers in several languages on his website - all generated from these "free" automatic translators.

In one example from Mr. Noth, a short, simple German text was fed into five of the most widely promoted online translators. The original German text translates correctly as:
"Welcome to our links collection! We are back! Our names are Reinhard and Jan and we live in Las Vegas. Our passion is to observe stars in the sky. Now click here and it goes on!"

Clicken You Here And It Goes Off!

Here are the results of the "free" online translators:

- 1) Welcome to our to the left-collection! We are cheek! We are named Reinhard and Jan and we live read in Vegas. Our passion is, to observe stars in the sky. Now clicken you here and it goes off!
- 2) Welcomely to our left collection! We of AR bake! We are called pure hard and January and we live in read Vegas. Our passion is to observe asterisks in the sky. Now you clicken here and it go loosely!
- 3) Welcomes to our left-collection! We ary bakes! We are called Reinhard and Jan and we lives in Las Vegas. Our passion is to be observed stars in the heaven. Now clicken you here and it starts!
- 4) Welcome to our link-collection! We ares bake! We call Reinhard and Jan and we live in Las Vegas. Our passion is to observe stars in heaven. Now clicken you go off here and it!
- 5) welcome to of our left-collection! [We] [are] forecastle! we ring up [Reinhard] and [Jan] and we live in read [Vegas]. ours passion am, stars in the sky to observe. now [clicken] she here and not too bad lot

In the International Language Bloopers on the Fun Page of the Esprit website (www.espritint.com), you can read a lot more of this type of idiotic translation; some made by humans, others by computers.

Invisible Idiot

Here's one example we included in our collection: Some scientists were testing a program that could translate from English to Chinese and back again. They fed into their computer the English phrase "Out of sight, out of mind", and out came some Chinese ideograms. Since none of the scientists present in the room knew Chinese well enough to determine whether the computer's Chinese translation had captured the spirit of the English phrase, they fed the ideograms back into the computer. The translation rendered back into English read: "Invisible idiot".

So please beware: All translations are not created equal and no advanced "machine" translation software has yet come close to replacing the brain of a human translator.

Esprit translators are your language allies who will help you sort through the confusion of second-language production to get the control you need in your target markets. We use accredited, highly trained translators, many of whom have a M.A. or Ph.D. in a specialized field and are government-certified. Esprit translators possess strong writing and research skills. We are not "free" (except the humour dispensed along with the work), but we are excellent at what we do!