

Translation or dictionary programmes can be useful when reading or writing a text in a foreign language. But they contain a number of problems that you should be aware of.

1 Between simple word replacement and translation programmes

There are automatic translation and simple word replacement dictionary programmes. Dictionary programmes – often marketed as ‘translators’ – simply replace each word by its equivalent in another language. Dictionaries, however, can not really qualify as language translators. What is meant by automatic translation is a process that involves some context and grammatical analysis. The depth and quality of such programmes varies widely. There are free programmes available on the internet (such as Babelfish) while the more sophisticated ones are for sale.

Though frequently coarse and erroneous, automatic translation is useful in a number of ways:

- *It gives a rough idea of what the text is about.* This is particularly helpful when you are doing research on the web and find a document in a foreign language. Automatic translation will tell you quickly whether or not the document is worth looking at in detail. Though the text may not be translated perfectly, simpler things such as tables will also be translated and these facts and figures can reveal interesting information.
- *It serves as a basis for a human translator.* This saves a lot of time, though there is a risk that the human translator will produce low-quality translations.
- Lastly, an author can use automatic translation as an *extra check for clarity and grammatical correctness* of the own text. Translation errors can indicate problems in the original text, such as complicated grammatical structures. If a translation programme cannot correctly process a piece of text, this could for instance be due to features in the original language that will make it difficult for a human reader to understand it as well.

As translation programmes improve, more complicated texts can be translated. As for now, automatically generated text can never be relied on completely.

2 Tips for using translation programmes effectively

- Separate your text into *small short pieces of text*. Translating short texts separately is faster than translating a large text. The downfall is that the translation programme might not be able to make proper use of context.
- *Use normal language.* Avoid proverbs and idioms, dialects, slang or technical terms.
- *Say things directly*, be succinct and literal, and avoid hidden humour and sarcasm.
- *Write short and simple sentences.*
- *Write words and phrases in full form*, avoid abbreviations and do not leave out words that you might think are unnecessary, such as ‘that, which or who’.
- *Use words that have specific meanings* instead of words with several meanings. For example words ending with the suffix ‘ing’ can be ambiguous, like playing, which can be a noun or an adjective.
- Make sure ambiguous words have *suitable contexts* that translation programmes can pick up.

- Use a *spellchecker* and check your *grammar*. Standard *punctuation* is very important; end every sentence with a period or question mark. Parentheses, hyphens, dashes, etc. can cause problems with any translation programme.
- *Avoid special characters or symbols*, these can often cause confusion for any translation programme.