# PHONE TRANSLATION?

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**Category:** Translation

In a rather dramatic headline, the Times has announced the imminent arrival of a phone which will translate instantly between 6,000 languages.

> *Google is getting all futuristic on us with plans to implement Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy-worthy mobile phone translation software in the next generation of telecommunications gadgets.*
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> *The Times Online reports that the internet giant has been developing new translation software for mobile phones that will see two people from different sides of the world able to converse in real time, without needing to speak the same language...*
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> *...The technology is still in its concept phase but given the steps Google has already taken with its online text-to-text translation service, and more recently with its voice-to-text GoogleVoice technology, it shouldn't be too long before we start to see this technology implemented into tomorrow's smartphones.*

I have a Google Android phone, and I must admit that I am very impressed by the voice recognition. I can click on a button and then speak into the phone and it will immediately search Google for whatever it is I said. It rarely gets things wrong, even with my odd Mackam-living-in-the-South accent. However, the actual translation bit of the system is a bit of a problem. Google Translate is a very impressive piece of software. It does a good job of translating simple texts between major languages. However, the text that it churns out never quite sounds natural - it sounds like a computer. Not only that, but the system is more or less unable to cope with complex metaphors, and other figures of speech. It's fine if you want to know how to buy a train ticket to Strasbourg, but not so good if you want a good translation of Shakespeare's sonnets.

So, even between major languages, there is still a while to go before this becomes more than just an automated phrase book. But what about the claim that this will reach 6,000 languages? A while ago, I wrote about a claim that Google Translate (or something like it) would allow us to translate the New Testament in 20 minutes. The nub of the problem is that translation software is based on an analysis of a large corpus of data, and those corpora simply don't exist for most minority languages in the world. Very often, the first large text to be available in digital format is the Bible. So if we are going to use our phones or Google translate to do Bible translation, we will have to start by translating the Bible the old fashioned way and loading it up into the system. Hardly a time saver.

The day when people will be able to read the Greek New Testament into their cellphone and have a reliable translation into an African language appear is a long way away.