

With AI translation tools, what's the point of learning different languages?

Much is lost if we fail to master the cultural context and nuances behind other languages.

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We have all experienced the moment of digital magic: opening a foreign website, clicking "translate", and watching a wall of incomprehensible text transform instantly into fluent English. Artificial intelligence-powered earbuds now promise seamless cross-lingual conversations, while augmented-reality glasses may soon overlay live subtitles onto the world before our eyes.

It feels like the fulfilment of a long-imagined prophecy – the Star Trek universal translator brought to life, finally bridging divides in a world that was once linguistically fragmented.

A reasonable question follows: if translation can be immediate, even increasingly accurate over time, is learning another language still worth the effort?

THE LIMITS OF INSTANT TRANSLATION

Even if automated systems achieve remarkable fluency, neither these machines nor users without independent language

competence can reliably assess whether a rendering is precise, diplomatically sensitive, or socially appropriate.

Outsourcing that judgment call to AI can have consequences. Just last year, a Japanese broadcaster apologised after automated subtitles rendered the "Senkaku Islands" as the "Diaoyu Islands". The two names refer to the same disputed territory, but each signals a different political claim. The translation was linguistically accurate. The choice of words was a diplomatic disaster.

Such missteps occur because AI systems generate language probabilistically, selecting statistically likely phrasing based on patterns in their training data. They can predict context; they do not understand it in the human sense. When languages are filtered primarily through dominant datasets, nuances shaped by local histories and sensitivities can be flattened.

Because language encodes a community's worldview, losing control over how it is represented can influence how reality is interpreted. Linguistic diversity is therefore not merely a cultural preference but a matter of intellectual and social autonomy.

UNESCO's International Mother Language Day, observed annually on Feb 21, affirms this principle: every language community retains the authority to name and interpret its world on its own terms.

This principle is especially salient in Singapore, where English serves as our working language, but multilingual competence must nonetheless be preserved to sustain cultural memory, intergenerational continuity and regional connection.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE HUMAN LANGUAGE

The belief that instant translation renders language learning redundant rests on the fallacy that meaning travels neatly across languages. But human language is far more complex than that.

There is a difference between using translation to get the gist of something and replacing real language ability altogether. Knowing what a sign says is not the same as understanding what it means in context. Translation can provide surface meaning. It cannot automatically convey judgment, sensitivity or cultural awareness.

A simple "I am sorry" illustrates the point. Is the speaker admitting fault, or carefully avoiding it? Accepting

responsibility, or merely expressing empathy?

For years, doctors in the United States were advised not to say "I'm sorry" after medical complications because the phrase could be interpreted in court as an admission of liability, a concern significant enough that many states passed "apology laws" to distinguish expressions of sympathy from admissions of wrongdoing.

Across languages, the distinctions multiply. French distinguishes between *je suis desole(e)* (regret or sympathy) and *je m'excuse* (explicit apology). Spanish separates *lo siento* (sorrow) from *perdon* or *disculpame* (requesting forgiveness). Japanese and Korean encode hierarchy directly in their apology forms, with entirely different expressions depending on status and degree of responsibility. German differentiates *es tut mir leid* (regret) from *ich entschuldige mich* (formal apology). In each case, an equivalent can be found, but the boundaries between sympathy, fault, and deference do not align perfectly.

This is why language operates on more than an informational level. As Nelson Mandela observed, speaking to someone in a language they understand reaches their head. Speaking to them in their own language

reaches their heart.

The distinction is crucial. To function within another language is not simply to understand its words, but to understand the roles and relationships those words enact.

This is why tools designed to bridge languages can paradoxically widen the gap between speakers. They match words and sentences, but strip away the emotional and social frames that give language texture.

EDUCATION AND THE RISKS OF COMPLACENCY

The limits of AI translation become especially visible in education.

Students today have grown up with automatic translation at the click of a button. Tools such as DeepL and Google Translate are now routine fixtures. Increasingly, learners question the need to memorise vocabulary or practise grammatical structures when fluent paragraphs can be generated instantly.

In December 2025, several universities abroad even announced plans to scale back or consolidate language programmes, citing declining enrolment and the growing availability of AI translation tools. The logic appears pragmatic, but confuses language access with language competence.

Translation software may lower the barrier to reading foreign texts. But it does not cultivate the interpretive judgment, cultural literacy or relational fluency that sustained language study develops. In a world marked by geopolitical complexity and cultural negotiation, reducing language education may prove strategically shortsighted.

A student may produce grammatically polished text yet struggle to define concepts precisely, construct arguments independently, or explain causal reasoning clearly. AI can generate sentences that appear

academically competent. It cannot ensure that the learner has internalised the thinking those sentences express.

Learning a language is cognitive training. It develops meta-linguistic awareness, the ability to reflect on how meaning is structured. As lexicographer Susie Dent has observed, studying another language sharpens a child's understanding of their own by revealing patterns that would otherwise remain invisible.

When learners rely exclusively on AI-generated output, they bypass the mental effort that cultivates analytical flexibility.

The availability of translation apps is also reshaping attitudes beyond classrooms. In Singapore, the decision to allow licensed tourist guides to self-declare language proficiency, instead of passing formal testing for additional languages, reflects confidence that translation tools can supplement real-time communication. The intent may be administrative efficiency. But the underlying assumption is telling: that technological mediation can compensate for uneven proficiency.

Guiding visitors, responding to spontaneous questions, navigating sensitive topics and adjusting tone across cultures require instinct, contextual awareness and internalised fluency. These capacities cannot be outsourced to a device.

When we equate translation with understanding, output with mastery, and access with competence, we quietly lower our expectations of what language proficiency means.

AI can bridge words. It cannot fully bridge worlds. And that is why learning languages still matters.

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