

Working with Google Translate

Introduction

These online study activities will introduce you to Google Translate, its benefits and problems.

We advise you to do these activities in conjunction with the online study activities on plagiarism to ensure that you comply with OU guidance on good academic practice.

What is Google Translate?

Google Translate is a free online automatic translator which uses complex software to provide translations of words, sentences, and entire webpages, between about 60 different languages. You can find it at <http://translate.google.com/> or by doing a web search for 'Google Translate'.

How does Google Translate work?

To generate a translation, Google Translate looks for patterns in hundreds of millions of documents to find translation equivalents in the target language, by determining the most frequent meaning for a word. Nevertheless, it may not necessarily select the appropriate meaning for that particular context. However sophisticated this automatic translation system might be, it doesn't possess the skill of a professional human translator: automatic translation cannot match the sophistication of human understanding. Not all translations generated by Google Translate will necessarily be perfect, and some may even be totally inaccurate. As a consequence, you need to be particularly careful when using this tool in your language studies.

How can you use Google Translate to your benefit?

Google Translate may be a very useful tool in helping you understand the gist of a text written in a foreign language, particularly a language you know little or nothing about. Try the activities below (note that the results shown were current at the time this resource was created).

Activity 1

Enter a text into Google Translate and see if you can get the gist of it using the English translation. Select a text a language you do not speak – perhaps Maltese or Lao – and use Google Translate.

Answer

Can you make sense of the resulting text? You may find Google Translate useful for getting at the meaning of sentences or text at a very early stage of your studies, or in a language you are unfamiliar with.

Google Translate also has some limited use as an online dictionary to search for words or groups of words. However, you need to be extremely careful because, unlike a proper dictionary, Google Translate does not give you the different meanings of a word or phrase in context – i.e., it does not 'understand' the grammar of the language or how words or phrases can be used in differing contexts.

Activity 2

- a) Type in the English word 'court'. What do you get from Google Translate?

Answer

Gericht

You also see:

noun

- Gericht *court, dish, judgment, tribunal, trial, meal*
- Hof *courtyard, court, yard, farm, farmyard, halo*
- Platz *place, space, course, square, room, court*
- Spielfeld *field, pitch, court*
- Instanz *authority, court*
- Feld *field, panel, area, array, court, pitch*
- Rasen *lawn, grass, turf, pitch, green, court*

verb

- umwerben *court, woo*
- hofieren *court*
- freien *woo, court*
- werben um *court, solicit, canvass*
- herausfordern *challenge, provoke, defy*
- b) Using Google Translate suggestions, how would you translate: 'He courts her'?

Answer

The system suggests *Er umwirbt sie*. Google Translate gives the right translation.

- c) Now type in 'They are courting'. What do you get from Google Translate? What does that tell you?

Answer

Sie buhlen. Changing the wording slightly makes a big difference and produces an inaccurate translation. The English sentence 'They are courting' would in the past have been used to refer to a situation where a man and a woman were spending time together with the idea of eventually getting married. The German translation supplied – literally, 'they woo' – does refer to the same old-fashioned concept, but does not incorporate the sense of mutual involvement implied by the English sentence. A better German translation would be *Sie machen einander den Hof* (literally, 'they court each other').

Activity 3

- a) Type in the English word 'trip'. What translation do you get?

Answer

Reise. Google Translate provides an appropriate translation here.

- b) Now type the English phrase 'a boat trip'. What translation do you get?

Answer

eine Bootsfahrt. Google Translate provides the right translation here.

- c) Now type 'a field trip'. What translation do you get?

Answer

eine Exkursion. Again, Google Translate provides the right translation.

- d) Now type the sentence: 'We are going on a field trip'. What translation do you get?

Answer

Google Translate provides *Wir sind auf einer Exkursion gehen*. Here Google Translate selects an incorrect verb and incorrect case form. The correct translation is *Wir fahren auf eine Exkursion*. Google Translate cannot cope with more complex grammar, and has problems choosing the correct equivalent.

Activity 4

- a) Now type the English sentence 'I do not get up'. What do you get?

Answer

Google Translate provides the translation: *Ich glaube nicht, aufzustehen*. Here again the output produced by Google Translate is both ungrammatical and incomprehensible. The German translation should be *Ich stehe nicht auf*.

- b) Now type the English sentence: 'I do not get up very early'. What do you get?

Answer

Google Translate provides: *Ich glaube nicht, sehr früh aufstehen*. Here again the output produced by Google Translate is both ungrammatical and incomprehensible. The German translation should be *Ich stehe nicht sehr früh auf*.

To translate individual words, you can use Google Translate as a dictionary. If you enter adjectives in their standard, 'dictionary' form (i.e., masculine, nominative singular), nouns along with the article (also in the nominative singular form), and verbs in the infinitive, it works rather well. But as the examples show, Google Translate often fails to give translations that fit the required context, and the more complex the sentence, the more mistakes there are likely to be in the Google translation.

To learn more about using proper online dictionaries, try the accompanying Online Study Skills activity 'Using Oxford Language Dictionaries Online – German'.

You might find it fun to play with Google Translate and to find translations for idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms.

Activity 5

- a) Type the English idiom 'It's a piece of cake'. What do you get?

Answer

Google Translate gives *Es ist ein Stück Kuchen* – literally, 'it's a piece of cake', but in German you would actually say something like *Es ist sehr einfach*.

- b) Now type in German: *Es ist ein Stück Kuchen*. What do you get in English?

Answer

Google translate gives the correct translation 'It's a piece of cake', but there is no indication that this can have two meanings in English – the one that something is literally a slice of cake, and the other that a task is very easy.

Summary

As these activities illustrate, Google Translate works reasonably well for translating individual words, or groups of words, but it is not really recommended for translating full sentences, or full texts. Google Translate may provide inaccurate translations for even the simplest phrases, it cannot cope well when confronted with a choice between tenses, and it will most probably provide word-for-word (literal) translations for idioms and colloquialisms. For these reasons, it is not advisable to use it to translate from your first language into the target language.

There are further problems. You cannot claim that a Google translation of something you wrote in your native language is entirely your own work. If you submit machine-translated text as part or all of an assignment, you will:

- be committing the serious offence of plagiarism (the Open University imposes penalties on students found to be committing plagiarism),
- most probably be submitting a text that is full of mistakes,
- not be learning any language.

Instead, you should construct your text from the 'building blocks' supplied in *Rundblick*, reusing and recycling the language structures and vocabulary taught, possibly using Google Translate as a dictionary to check a few words you are not sure about, and then benefit from your tutor's feedback on any errors you might have made.

To learn a language you need to be able to understand texts, but you also need some knowledge of the structure of the language, its complexity, and the way people think when they are using words and expressions in that language – i.e., the cultural context.