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News

THE MILITARY'S NEW TOOL FIGHTS THE LANGUAGE GAP IN IRAQ

A war of words

The Two-Way Speech-to-Speech program is a work in progress with 70 prototypes in use in Iraq.

BY STEPHANIE HEINATZ
247-7821

October 18, 2006

NORFOLK -- The military is using a science fiction-like gadget in Iraq to help troops with few linguistic skills communicate with civilians and Iraqis training in the country's emerging police and military forces.

Photo

Elegear Primus
Brett England, Daily Press
Oct 17, 2006

VIDEO

Laptop translators headed to Iraq

Photo

Two-Way Speech-to-Speech program
Brett England, Daily Press
Oct 17, 2006

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Called the Two-Way Speech-to-Speech Program, it's a translator that uses a computer to convert spoken English to Iraqi Arabic and visa versa.

While the program is technically still in the research and development stage, the Norfolk-based U.S. Joint Forces Command has sent 70 prototypes to Iraq, where troops are using it on the job to evaluate how well it works.

So far, so good, said Wayne Richards, chief of the command's implementation branch.

An inability to communicate with the population has been a problem for U.S. troops trying to win support. Human translators are scarce in Iraq.

The command received an urgent request in 2004 from commanders in Iraq who wanted someone to find a way to bridge the language divide, Richards said.

The device is being used today mostly for what some are calling the most important job in Iraq: training Iraq's police officer and military troops.

Getting those forces trained to secure the country on their own is the ticket home for U.S. troops who continue to rotate in and out of the war zone.

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Experts have been trying to develop this type of translation technology for about 10 years, Richards said.

In its current configuration, the translator is a rugged laptop with plugs for two microphones or two headsets, Richards said, pointing to a prototype and turning it on.

It's as easy to use as talking on the phone, as was evident after a brief demonstration in Norfolk on Tuesday.

Say into the microphone, "We are here to provide food and water for your family." Hold down the E for English key on the keyboard. The written text of your words pops up on the screen.

Scan the words to make sure it picked up the exact wording. If not, change it.

Hit the T key for translate, and the sentence pops up on the screen again, this time in Iraqi Arabic. The computer then broadcasts the words aloud through the computer's speakers.

The process is almost the same going from Arabic to English.

As a human translator would do, the program assumes some meanings. "It's not 100 percent" accurate, Richards said.

Ask, for example, "Did you read the newspaper today?" in English, and the direct Arabic translation turns that into, "Did you read the newspaper the day?" Because the program is a work in progress, every conversation held with the translator is recorded.

Then, the Defense Language Institute in California reviews all the translations and helps correct the linguistic mistakes, Richards said.

The technology was created in partnership with the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and defense contractors.

Right now, because of its bulk, the best place to use the translator is in a headquarters or a classroom setting.

It's too unwieldy for the average Marine Corps sergeant to cart it along with his other 100 pounds of gear as he patrols in Baghdad's Sadr City area.

But one day it could become small enough for that sergeant to carry it in his pocket.

Think about it, Richards said. "Our soldiers today have to interface with the local populace," Richards said.

All kinds of problems, he added, can be solved if U.S. troops can calmly convey what they're doing and what they want.

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