Web watch

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LANGUAGES ON THE WEB

The internet offers many and varied resources for both language translation and language learning.

TRANSLATION

You can translate typed text, webpages or documents using Google Translate (https://translate.google.com), Bing Translator (http://www.bing.com/translator) and long-lived BabelFish (http://www.babelfish.com). It is helpful to compare translations from a number of sources – and to always use a professional translator when it really matters. I spent a few days telling people in Spain that my daughter was allergic to "tercas de árbol" (tree nuts). Unfortunately the translation I had found for "nuts" had the meaning as in "nuts and bolts". The actual words used in Spain are "frutos secos", which literally means dried fruits (or "nueces de árbol").

Google Translate and Bing Translator allow you to select the language that you are entering and the one you want the content translated into. Alternatively, they will attempt to automatically detect the language that you have entered. They both offer a long list of languages. There are, however, some languages that only one or other of the tools provide. For example, Google includes Esperanto (an international language) and Kannada (a Dravidian language from southern India), while Bing includes Haitian Creole and Klingon (the constructed language spoken by the Klingons in the *Star Trek* universe).

At BabelFish you can ask questions (though you may need to login with Facebook, Google or Twitter to use this feature). For example, "How do you say swimming in German?" One of the answers shows the risks of this crowdsourcing approach: "Interesting, those items with the most Votes are containing INCORRECT German (I am a Native German speaker). Jonk is absolutely right with his corrections and yet receives 8 Votes???" (http://www.babelfish.com/how-do-you-say-swimming-in-german).

There are also more specialised sites. One example, Omniglot, (http://www.omniglot.com/language/kinship/index.htm) provides kinship terms in various languages including four Malayo–Polynesian languages (Cuyonon, Javanese, Malay and Tuvaluan).

In addition, a general website search often retrieves useful information. For example, a search for "hmong word for kitchen" retrieved an English–Hmong Dictionary. It provided a number of definitions, with the option to rate them to show which was most useful. The webpage also presented a list of the most recently searched words/expressions in the dictionary. These were "heavy, white pomelo, I don't know how to fix cars, assumptions, pepper, topic, heretic, saucer and cup, new, fifty" – an interesting mix!

LANGUAGE LEARNING: DUOLINGO

There are a number of websites that aim to teach languages, and some of them are free.

Duolingo was co-founded by Guatemalan Luis von Ahn, the inventor of CAPTCHA and reCAPTCHA (those misshapen letters you have to identify and type to prove to a computer that you are human). It currently teaches five European languages (Spanish, French, Italian, German, Portuguese) and a Japanese course is in beta testing.

The provision of an app for use on smartphones has significantly increased the number of Duolingo students (http://time.com/2902109/duolingo-online-education-moocs; http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/features/duolingo-the-future-of-language-learning-that-puts-a-tutor-in-your-pocket-9110192.html).

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[*] All websites viewed September 2014.

I have been using Duolingo to learn Spanish. It provides short modules that enable you to learn step by step. It also clearly shows where you are up to in the course, so it is easy to dip in and out when you have a little spare time. The use of gaming concepts (competition with friends, rewards) is said to motivate users. I turned off the "motivational" sound effects to concentrate better on the lessons.

On Duolingo you read, listen and write. There is also the opportunity to speak but it is not working on my (Linux) system because of a problem with the version of Flash I have loaded. Duolingo doesn't explicitly teach much grammar, but throws you in the deep end to explore. If you get too many answers wrong, it sends you back to the beginning of a module to try again. With repetition, the concepts become clearer.

If Duolingo marks you wrong and you disagree with their answer, you can add a comment. There is also a discussion page where you can ask questions. (I haven't used it for language questions, but this is where I learnt how to turn off the "motivating" sound.)

Because Duolingo has so many users they are able to use AB testing to compare alternative approaches. AB testing is an example of the application of scientific method in product development, and involves Hypothesis creation, Experiment design, Data gathering and Acceptance or rejection of the hypothesis. It has been used by Duolingo to test, for example, the order in which language concepts are presented, and various motivational features. Severin Hacker, co-founder and Chief Technology Officer of Duolingo, explains the process at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbvovGhUotM. He also points out that Hacker is his real name!

Once you have mastered some of the language, you are presented with real-life articles to translate. As a beginner you may just read the translations and make comments or minor edits (for example, you might know a better way for the English version to be written); as you progress you can make more significant contributions. These translations are paid for by CNN and Buzzfeed, and are a way for Duolingo to make money to help finance the free service.

LANGUAGE LEARNING: FOR TOURISTS

As well as Duolingo, I have used the BBC website for Spanish learning (http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/spanish). It is targeted towards travellers so includes useful phrases to do with transport and accommodation. It is well-structured for teaching and practice, but it is not being updated and the videos are slow to load (http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/spanish/mividaloca/ep01).

Surface Languages (http://www.surfacelanguages.com) is designed for travellers and language lovers. It provides free online language learning resources in 37 European and non-European languages including Afrikaans, Catalan (spoken in Catalonia, Spain and Andorra), Hindi, Maltese and Yiddish. You can listen to thousands of phrases and use language learning games. (The audio worked better for me than the games, which I never properly mastered). Surface Languages teaches colours, numbers, basic phrases, food words and basic conversation.

Surface Languages also provides content for people just curious about language, for example, how to say "hello" or "please" in 30 different languages.

UNDERSTANDING NAMES

Wikipedia now explains the structure of names, for example, at the entry for Joan Miró (full form "Joan Miró i Ferrà"), it explains: "This is a Catalan name. The first family name is Miró and the second is Ferrà." Similarly, the entry for Buenaventura Durruti (full form José Buenaventura Durruti Dumange) says: "This name uses Spanish naming customs; the first or paternal family name is Durruti and the second or maternal family name is Dumange." This is helpful for all readers, and especially for information specialists such as indexers and cataloguers.

Translators also have to know which words should be translated, for example, "Madame Bouillant et sa famille" ("Mrs Bouillant and her family") should not be translated as "Mrs Boiling" (http://www.touho-tourisme.nc/hebergement-repas/gite-mangalia-touho-bungalow-nouvelle-caledonie-tourisme-nord.html).

LANGUAGE LEARNING: PAID SERVICES

There are also paid language learning services. For example, Rosetta Stone (http://www.therosettastone.com.au) teaches 27 languages including Korean, Irish, Tagalog and Turkish; and Babbel (http://uk.babbel.com) teaches13 languages.

POLYGLOTTERY

A polygot is an expert language learner, and they are a rare breed, says Alexander Arguelles in his talk "The Price of Polyglottery: The Case for Establishing a Polyglot Institute" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsUm1Q-GLDw). He says the requirements for learning many languages are a passion for learning languages, developing good techniques for learning, and spending the required time. The recipe for success is the same as for mastering any field. He thinks that the reason we don't have that many polyglots is that it is a very hard skill to explore academically in its natural environment.

UNGLUE.IT

Unglue.it is a crowdfunding service that aims "to pay an author or publisher for publishing a Creative Commons ebook". The author sets the amount of money they require to be contributed before they will make the work available forever. If that amount has been offered by the deadline they have set, they "unglue" the book and make it available under a creative commons licence.

In a recent expansion of this model (called Buy to Unglue), authors make the book available for sale. This means that people donating have access to the book immediately (this is good for libraries); once sufficient sales have been reached, the book is made freely available to all.

For more information, see the article by Matt Enis at http://www.thedigitalshift.com/2014/02/ebooks/buy-unglue-ebook-crowdfunding-model-goes-beta.

ATLAS OBSCURA

Atlas Obscura (http://www.atlasobscura.com) was founded in 2009 by Joshua Foer and Dylan Thuras, to "create a way for curious travellers to find the hidden wonders of the world". They say "Atlas Obscura is for people who still believe in DISCOVERY".

From Michigan, for example, it has photos and information about the week-long National Baby Food Festival, the Bottle House (made with over 60,000 glass bottles), Ypsilanti Tower (winner of the World's Most Phallic Building contest) and the small town of Hell, where you can pay to be mayor for a day.

A search for things "near Sydney" (using the term "near" somewhat loosely) has 39 interesting results from around New South Wales, including museums and many of the "big things" Australia is renowned for.

The site is good for browsing, but I didn't always find it easy (or even possible) to get back to items of interest that I had passed over earlier. So, if you find something you like, make a note of it immediately.

RENT A DRONE

The library at the University of South Florida has purchased two remote-controlled drones that students can borrow to take aerial video and photography for university projects. They will have to undergo training and work with a faculty member. At this stage they will only be able to use the drones on campus unless an exception has been made (http://edition.cnn.com/2014/06/21/us/college-lends-drones-to-students).

FOR FUN

See an article on scientists' tattoos, including one encoding his wife's initials in DNA, at http://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/nov/27/science-ink-tattoo-design-zimmer. See the accompanying images at http://www.theguardian.com/books/gallery/2011/nov/27/science-ink-tattoo-design-pictures#/?picture=382370674&index=6.