

01: Dictionaries on legs

Alex D: I'd never do an intro.

Alex G: Hello?

Jonathan: Hello! I think this is going to work.

Alex G: I don't know. Oh Jonathan, please. You can just blab on for hours. This is what you do for a living.

Jonathan: We actually need to have a scene I don't debate about it.

Alex D: I had a very nice bottle of English ale for dinner.

Alex G: Well, I'm drinking a very nice glass of Chianti right now.

Jonathan: I have tea.

Alex G: So, are you going to be the good cop or the bad cop?

Jonathan: Oh, no no no no no. I'm not going there. I'm going to be the sensible one.

Alex G: I figured that.

Alex D: Welcome to the first and inaugural episode of Troublesome Terps, the round-table podcast of interpreters who take issue with anything and everything and who are not afraid to go figuratively and boldly when no interpreter has gone before.

Alex D: To my left, I welcome Jonathan Downie, jack of many trades, father of several children and almost a PhD, just not quite yet. Hi, Jonathan. How are you?

Jonathan: I'm doing well. I'm just waiting until June until I can wear the gown and I will be Dr Jonathan and everyone will have to listen to me.

Alex D: Yes, we hope so, too. And to my right is Alexander Gansmeier, conference interpreter in Munich, Germany, who couldn't think of anything funny to say in his introduction. So, hi, Alexander. How are you?

Alex G: Hey, how are you? I'm pretty good. I'm just looking forward to seeing Jonathan in his pink gown. That's what I'm really looking forward to.

Alex D: I'm very much looking forward to that. [AG: Giggling] That'll make for a great picture on Twitter, I think.

Alex G: Exactly. [Giggling] I wish it can get trending.

Jonathan: There will be pictures on Facebook.

Alex G: Perfect.

Alex D: Excellent. Our topic today is actually a very serious topic. So we'll stop laughing now.

Alex D: So we'll start by taking apart a recent article from The Wall Street Journal, which you may have read. It is called 'The language barrier is about to fall'.

Jonathan: On that note...

Alex D: Cue the giggling here.

Alex G: Yeah, exactly. On that note, that's actually pretty hilarious because the article was, was a riot, was a hoot.

Alex D: Yes, I'll put the link into the show notes for this episode. So, if you're listening to this, you can go to the website and you can read the article for yourselves.

Alex D: But guys, what what was your initial take? Just in very broad and general terms of this article, Jonathan?

Jonathan: OK, I have a really simple take and this is going to make everyone laugh. But my point is the language barrier has already fallen because interpreters exist. [AG: Very good!] That's kind of what we're here to do. The rest of the article, I understand where he's coming from and there's kind of a mix of science and pseudoscience and we wish it were true. I mean, he has this idea that you can be in the middle of the jungle in Papua New Guinea, have an earpiece in your ear. And somehow, in the middle of a jungle where they've not even got electricity, you can get access to big data. Sometimes, I have difficulty, again, access to big data in Edinburgh, which is mostly civilised. There is no chance that we'll ever get to the stage of 100 percent Internet coverage because it's not commercially feasible. And even then. Human beings are just strange. So that's why you have to have interpreters because we can deal with weirdness. That's what we do for a living. I think it's a wonderful idea as a Star Trek fan, I think it'd be great if it were true. As an interpreter, as someone who studied interpreting, I can tell you it's not going to happen in any of our lifetimes.

Alex D: What about you, Alexander?

Alex G: I pretty much concur with what Jonathan said. I thought it read a lot like science fiction in certain parts and kind of like wishful thinking.

Alex G: And this might be the German in me, but I was wondering, where are these facts and figures coming from? Where is he getting all this information or is it literally just pulling it out of his hat?

Alex G: I, [AD: Chuckling] you know, in light of tonight's podcast and also in light of where I'm from, which is Bavaria, which is a, you know, we have a very strong dialect and a very... [AD: Oh, do you?] well, pronounced way of speaking, exactly. Well, you

know. He said something about... Dialects and local intonations being completely... Well, basically, a non-factor in communication. And that just made me giggle because I thought, listen, I can't even understand what Jonathan says, let alone, you know, what anybody from Papua New Guinea says. So that's not going to change anytime soon. [AD: Yeah] Even with machine translation or earpiece interpreting devices or whatever it may be.

Alex D: Yeah, which is just the Babble fish reinvented, right? I mean, he stole that. [JD: Yeah] Let's be frank.

Jonathan: And we all know how good babel fish was at translating [AD: Giggling]. I think there's another point here and this is maybe to moving towards the topic we're gonna cover in the rest of the podcast and that is that we forget that speech recognition software hasn't actually reduced inequality, it's increased it. So, for instance, if you have a so-called standard accent, you tend to be upper middle class or above. You'll tend to have money and you'll tend to be the kind of people who can afford to buy expensive software. If you're from the east end of Glasgow, Dragon and all of these speech recognition software will not be able to cope with you because they're not designed for you. And so what actually happens is that people who already have the technology get better technology because it's built for them because they have the cash. The people who have technological issues already end up in a worse situation because it becomes more difficult for them to access as a very famous sketch on YouTube of two Scotsmen in a voice operated lift. And it gets a bit absurd towards the end. But this is the point that, you know, if you've got a posh accent, technologies there in your phone can basically run your life. If you're a Glaswegian, [AD: Not so much] sorry [AG: Giggling]. Except if you're from Milngavie, which is in the kind of north and posh end of Glasgow. But if you've got a regional accent, oh well, sorry. Then you can forget about it because they're not working for you. And I think we need to be able to step back from the technology and see actually whose interest are they serving.

Alex D: Yeah, we should probably take a little a small step back here and just say who he is. The author of the article. His name is Alec Ross and he just wrote a book which is called The Industries of the Future, which is going to be published tomorrow, actually,

second of February. And he used to work as the senior advisor for innovation to the US Secretary of State. So there you go. He probably has a book to sell which explains to some extent the tone in the article, but it will go maybe through the article, just paragraph by paragraph and take it apart as I said initially. So if you... If you have the article right in front of, you can read along and we'll just go through it. So he starts out and talks about his troubles and how he had this little pocket dictionary with him that he would use to look up commonly used phrase in words. But today, of course, he does that using his smartphone. He just types the phrase into Google Translate and then he gets a quick translation back in any of 90 languages. It sounds great, but I don't think it always works quite as well as that. I think. What do you think?

Alex G: It certainly doesn't, it certainly doesn't. Also, most of the times you do need an Internet connection.

Jonathan: And anyone who's going about with a pocket dictionary thinking that picking random words and phrases is translation.

Alex G: Yeah. He kind of muddles his terms throughout the entire article because this is exactly where you were just pointing out. This isn't translation what he's talking about in this paragraph but yet, he puts it up there to make a point and then, later on, refers to completely different concepts. He mixes up interpreting and translation. So this is very incongruent throughout the entire piece.

Alex D: But that's the internal pet peeve of interpreters, right? It's not translation. It's interpreting. But of course, if you write an article about the topic, you better get your terms straight. That's right.

Alex D: And then, I mean, he goes on. I think that was your problem as well, Alexander. A decade from now, I would predict everyone reading this article will be able to converse in dozens of foreign languages. The key phrase being, I would predict, because it doesn't really give any, you know, any substantial information on how he comes to that prediction, right? [AG: Yeah] OK, let's jump to the next point in the article. He says here today's translation tools were developed by computing more than a billion

translations a day for over two million, 200 million people. And I think what he's referring to here is that Google Translate and actually also Microsoft translator are using what's called statistical translation so that crawling the web for texts that are available in multiple languages such as published by the UN or the European institutions. And those texts, of course, have been translated before by human translators. So there is no machine translation without human translation.

Alex G: That's exactly right. That's exactly right, and he also says that a couple of lines down that the users can flag the arrows, should they find any and uses this sentence to kind of justify how the machine translations get better. But again, it's dependent on the human factor in the entire equation, just like it relies on the demand made translations from the United Nations translators and from the European Union translators. So.

Alex D: I also think he's giving away himself a little bit there because he says it is just a matter of more data, more computing power and better software. That's... That's the thing that gives him away there, I think.

Alex D: And also maybe on the point of user implication, I don't know if you read this, actually. There was there were a few articles online a couple of weeks ago about, let's say, problems in Google Translate with Ukrainian and Russian. And those languages are quite similar, but they're not the same, obviously. So what happened is that it was gamed by people. And I think so when you would enter Russian federation, it would give you Mordor. The foreign minister Lavrov was called a sad little horse and Russians were called occupants. So there you go with accurate machine translation, right?

Jonathan: I think what people forget... And this is a little bit of technobabble but the paradigm of human interpreting and machine translation are entirely different. So machine translation has to be backward looking. It can only work on data it already has. Even with the best artificial intelligence, it can't predict because humans don't invent language in predictable ways. We do stuff that even confuse linguists. On the other hand, as interpreters, we're used to hearing stuff for the first time and going 'yeah, I'm sure that means something'. And working out based on context and based on what we know of the speaker, I mean, we've all had that meeting where they mention, you know,

X, Y, Z resolution we're like 'we have no clue' but we know enough of the context and what's going on and we can make a reasonable guess, which we'll be right like 98, 99 percent of the time. You throw that into machine translation and what it gives you back is just a source text because it's got nowhere... There's got no reference. So, for as long as language changes, machine translation will always be behind.

Alex G: Yeah, but see and I love that you use the term backwards looking for machine translation because in the next at the end of the next paragraph, he says that in ten years time a small earpiece will be able to translate language nearly simultaneously. And what he means by nearly simultaneously is that the lag time will be the speed of sound. And that's why I was thinking. Are you even trying to think this through? Because how could a little piece inside your ear are anything, any interpreter, even any person even... Translate or interpret something so quickly, you have to see where a sentence, a thought a person is going, you can't just, you know, look into the future.

Alex G: And that's why I really like the fact that you mentioned backwards looking for machine translation because he's really trying to go into the future with this, which is obviously a thing of wishful thinking.

Alex D: Yeah and interpreters make up things all the time. I mean, we don't make up meaning, but we can make up words from time to time and just, you know, put the Lego bricks together in a different way, which is also why this profession is so much fun.

Alex G: Because we get to play with Lego.

Alex D: Yes.

Alex G: Mentally [Giggling].

Jonathan: Yeah. Although I think also one of the things that we're finding out now is that the best interpreters are the best text analysts, not necessarily the best word analysts. So, for instance, they gave us a test when I was doing my interpreting degree where they had the French... They call it kind of almost like an accusing conditional. So

they're not saying so-and-so has done something. They're doing what we would say in English so-and-so allegedly did something. But it looks like the conditional in French. In fact, there is a conditional French or... Wherever. And because it looks like the conditional when you're training, you treat it as a conditional, but it's not. It's simply there so that you don't get sued [AD: Yeah] [AG: Laughing]. Like the English 'allegedly'. And so the more as an interpreter you understand the little quirks like that. So, you know Brits, when they're doing a speech, they say 'of course', are about to rip apart whatever they say 'of course' too. That's how we do language. And computers will see whatever level they're taught to parse. They will go, of course means 'bien sûr'. Well, maybe or maybe mean something completely different. We are really, really good at context because humans are great at working out context. Computers can't because that's not what they do.

Alex D: Yeah, exactly. And also it's a complete Babelfish rip off, right? The small earpiece, I mean... That's just completely stolen so, dismissed, I think.

Alex D: Let's move on to the next bit because that's also quite interesting because here he gets into the territory of Siri and Cortana and the voice assistants. And he says that because of advances in bio-acoustic engineering, which I've never heard of, but probably just me, measuring the frequency wavelength sound intensity... Ba, ba, ba, ba, ba... The earpiece in your ear will recreate the voice of the speaker. But speaking your native tongue, I mean, it sounds very cool but I think it's a bit creepy, actually, don't you think?

Alex G: Very! [Giggling] I mean, again, that is completely unrealistic. How, you know, this is just complete science fiction based on nothing but him trying to write a compelling article, which I think, you know, he succeeds in because this reads very... It's very riveting. But again, where is he getting anything, any of that from? And...

Jonathan: Well, he's extrapolating on the basis of trends that will stop at some point. Every trend ends, otherwise human beings would be 50 feet tall [Laughing].

Alex D: And it just it's so much reminded me of the promises that we had. I don't know, maybe 60 years ago, when they started building computers. Because one of the very first use cases actually was trying to do machine translation and thinking, well, it can't be that hard, which is take this word and then we put it into the other language and you'd be done with it. But as we've said numerous times now, that's not how language works. That's not how communication works.

Alex G: Yeah. And can I just point out a very practical issue that I have with this particular paragraph? And I think he brings it back again later in the article is the whole cloud aspect of it. I mean, I'm all for the cloud. I basically live in the cloud. But if you're looking at interpreting or even translation, you don't necessarily want to have everything in the cloud. Your clients, I'm sure, would not appreciate their confidential. I don't know, finance talks being in the cloud, potentially being hacked when they don't have to be because they're just simply offline. So I think this is just a very basic technical or technological aspect that's... Yeah, I'm not so sure about.

Jonathan: I just want to throw in something and make a suggestion. And I know you two will hopefully disagree with me. But I think my point is that the reason why techies and science people can treat languages as if is just replace sentence for sentence or word for word is that, sadly, we've sold interpreting as doing that. We've said to people that interpreting is about being neutral, about being terminologically accurate, about being cohesive, about being grammatically correct. And what we're selling people is dictionaries on legs. So we shouldn't really be surprised if they are trying to replace us with dictionaries on legs. Because that's what we've told them our job is about. And so I want to, perhaps make a controversial suggestion, that to some extent it's possibly our fault and we haven't done a good enough job of explaining not the neural linguistics of interpreting. But the sheer people skills involved in interpreting and maybe if we help people understand how much of our job is people work, they would realise that you can't replace us.

Alex G: It's funny that you would say that because one of my biggest direct clients, it's a direct selling company from America. And I mean, we all know how Americans love their showmanship. But I kid you not. The very first time that I worked for them, one of the

organisers took me to the side and said 'listen, whatever you do, just remember it's 150 percent about power and energy and 50 percent about the content'. So every time I've worked with them and every time that I've organized interpreting teams, I always try to emphasise the fact that they will make sure that the energy comes across, the power comes across, you know, just the enthusiasm and that... Kind of like, you know, on a side note, I also say 'well, of course, they're also incredibly professional and proficient and expert interpreters'. But with that particular client, you really have to stress that they just really know how to basically rile up a crowd in a good way.

Alex D: That's a good point. And I think, Jonathan, what you just said there, that we were trying to sell ourselves as... dictionaries on legs. I think it... Was never really true because I don't even know if that's possible.

Jonathan: I think this is the... There's a section of, I think, in my book, which I'm not going to go into, coming out May 12th 2016, all good bookshops. But the... Point is that people will expect what you teach them to expect. And one of the really fascinating things I came across during my PhD is clients whose views of interpreting were changing because they saw interpreters do things that were unexpected but worked really, really well. So they saw interpreters do things like act out what the speaker was saying. They saw interpreters kind of use the speaker as a visual aid sometimes. They saw interpreters create things on the spot. And these people who come in, one of them was actually, a kind of, I think was a computer scientist or something. And had this very... We call it the conduit model of interpreting the dictionaries on legs thing.

Jonathan: He had that model, but he's watching these interpreters do something completely different. And as I'm interviewing him, he's going 'you know what? Actually, interpreters aren't machines'. And I thought, well, he may have got that from the interview, possibly, but is far more likely that what he's been doing is he's trying to process these interpreters doing things that none of us are trained to do. But pulling it off amazingly. And his brain is going 'but what does that mean?' And so I'm beginning to argue that we should give clients more than what they're asking for, just that little bit more because then they will value us more because they will see that we have more potential than they thought we had.

Alex D: Good point. The next interesting bit is actually a completely different topic, but very interesting nonetheless because he's talking about... That the research and commercialisation for these breakthroughs are coming from the intersection of the private sector and the defence and intelligence communities.

Alex D: So... There's a lot of stuff in here. The thing is, of course, that the defence industry or the complex or whatever you want to call it, has always been a very powerful driving force behind language technology simply because they needed in the field. If you think back to Iraq or Afghanistan, I think they've been working on these hand-held translators slash interpreters for a while and trying to use it. But I think most of the time they weren't actually machine interpreters but just like phrasebooks. And you could pull up phrases like 'please stop the engine', 'please show me your ID', that kind of thing. So they weren't really translation devices or interpreting devices but more like a fancy dictionary. I think a voice dictionary.

Alex G: Well, this comes back to the idea that he had in the beginning, right? That he's too lazy now to pull out his little pocket dictionary [Giggling].

Jonathan: I mean, I think to say something more about this machine interpreting thing. It's fascinating that he doesn't understand or hasn't heard of what happened. What's happened with machine translation sort of replaced translators in some areas, but largely what's happening there as being integrated into their workflows. So when I think machine interpreting could go if it got smart enough, was kind of like an auto-suggest dictionary for interpreters. So I would love to see computer-aided interpreting the same way as we've got computer-aided translation. And I think there is a possibility of going 'well, OK, the computer's never gonna get a hundred percent match', but it can say, 'OK, here's resolution X, Y, Z'. If it hears that it could feasibly pull up, set translations for us and stuff that we wouldn't otherwise know. And I think that's where machine interpreting probably could go and should go, it's not going to replace us. But maybe it could be an aid in our work somehow.

Alex D: Yeah, it could transcribe the numbers for us, for example. I'd love that.

Alex G: [Laughing] That would be very nice.

Alex D: Especially with French. [JD: French is easy] Oh, Danish is worse, I think. But now we're just getting email from from those people. We should stop dissing other languages [Giggling].

Alex D: Just one more bit on this whole intelligence community, which I found a bit creepy as well because he goes on to say that the National Security Agency and the Israeli National SIGINT Unit massively invest in basic research in voice biometrics and translation. So, of course, I mean they they already filter all the phone traffic and Internet traffic. Of course, they'd be interested in automatically translating everything that goes through their filters and picking out voice patterns and that kind of stuff, which I don't really like, I must say.

Alex G: Hmm... Yeah.

Jonathan: I think, though, to the extent that what they're doing is pattern matching, then they're doing stuff that computers are really good at. I think to stay on the kind of interpreting side of the argument. It all depends on what interpreting is. If we ever find out that interpreting is simply pattern matching, then we're all out of a job, sorry boys.

Jonathan: But if we find... I've got this saying that I use where I say, you know, when I started, I thought interpreting was a language activity with people attached. Now I think it's a people activity with language attached. And, well, this is the thing is that you're not just saying, 'OK, he said he's he's done an introduction in French. I need to do the same introduction in English.' You're understanding where this person is and his or her speech, you're understanding why this is being said. I remember I did a job not so long ago on fisheries policy. And, you know, the scientists could see something. And because I'd done it before, I understood not just 'OK, the scientists are saying about fish being at this depth', I could understand how that's being understood by the fishermen. And I could then kind of help them, not necessarily always changing what was being said or making a massive difference, but seeing in a way that emphasised the parts

they needed and could have felt... Felt is the wrong word. But understanding the situation and so adjusting my interpreting to help the situation work. And I think that's the side of interpreting that we don't like to tell people about. We don't like to admit because it sounds like we're being inaccurate. It's not that we're being inaccurate, it's just we're doing a job and we're being accurate, but being accurate with what we need to be accurate with and understanding why we need to be accurate.

Alex D: That's a good point, yeah. Because it emphasises that communication and interpreting actually is not just about the words and, you know, just exchanging words from one language to the next, but rather about communication. And I think that's a bit of a misunderstanding, to put it mildly, actually, that he has in the next bit where he talks about that, the technology will be removing the need for a shared language. And he gives us an example here for Korean speaking business people talking to Mandarin speaking executives at a conference in Brazil. They would probably use English now, but using that great technology that he proposes here, they could just, you know, communicate without even knowing that they speak different languages. And there are few things wrong with that because at one level, it presupposes that they will give up speaking English, which may not happen. And probably will not happen on a chore. And the other thing is that it sort of presupposes that you can just take Mandarin translated to Korean and have it work. But as you just alluded to, Jonathan, there's so much more to communication. I mean, you have this boring example of how to hand over a business card properly to people in Asia and that kind of thing. But I mean, that's just part of the whole deal.

Alex D: Crickets?

Alex G: Oh, sorry, I couldn't hear anything, you guys.

Jonathan: We all went silent at the same time.

Alex D: Yeah.

Alex G: All right, fair enough. I thought it was just my connection [Giggling].

Alex D: Do you want to say anything about this? Yeah, this bit that you're highlighting right now, Alexander? So the Korean speaking, Mandarin speaking and... Just removing English as a lingua franca.

Jonathan: I just want to make one mention in that as I have a colleague who's our business negotiation interpreter. And she says part of her job is helping people understand the protocols of the country that they're working in. So, I mean, as an interpreter, if someone says something that's going to get them killed. Dead people don't pay very well [Giggling]. We will tend to understand, you know, if something's going to make the job completely crash and it's not unintentional. We know what to do. A computer hears, you know, your mother looks like horse. I will just see your mother looks like a horse. And even if it is some bizarre joke. And that's where you need a human to go 'hold on a minute. Yeah, he's trying to make a joke. I wonder if I can find an equivalent one. Or maybe you can just gloss that'. And that's absolutely OK.

Alex D: That's a good point. Yeah.

Alex G: That's a very good point. Don't get people killed. I love that [Giggling].

Alex D: I think it doesn't get any better than that. We should probably just stop the conversation here. Just to refer to the last sentence in his article, which says it will make any of us in principle a master of the Tower of Babel. And if you're at all familiar with the Tale of Babel and you've ever heard the word hubris before, I think that's a very fitting end to the article and a very fitting end to the conversation.

Alex D: So thank you very much to Alexander Gansmeier. Thank you very much to Jonathan Downie for this great conversation. I can say I hope that we'll be back at some point with another very interesting topic. We'll tell you when it's ready. So talk to you next time. Bye bye.

Alex G: Good talk, see you soon. Bye bye.

Jonathan: Can I just say for the tape, this is the problem with interpreting technology. Anything that relies on a stable Internet connection... [AD: What could possibly go wrong?] Is going to have issues.

Alex G: Oh my God! Now I'm just kind of winging it, pretending to poker face my way through this [Laughing].

Jonathan: Dadidadida... We were saying intelligent things here.

Alex G: Very sorry you had to listen to all of this nonsense and rambling.

Jonathan: For people who go on too long and spoke it.