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A dust storm is not the only thing making life difficult for US soldiers in Iraq

By United States Marine Corps (USMC) Sgt Nelson, USMC LCpl Segovia, USMC Sgt Baumer, and USMC LtCol Delosreyes

## [US Army Develops Automatic Translators for Iraq Soldiers](#)

### *Two-way translation systems*

Language differences are the most important obstacle for an efficient communication, and especially crucial for soldiers fighting in foreign countries. That's why one of the US Army' newest projects is currently searching for real-time, two-way translation systems. Unlike the sci-fi series Star Trek, where a universal translator device can make every alien being speak English instantaneously, the more earthly problems of soldiers communicating with locals, is crucial in obtaining information, especially where human translators are either missing or unreliable. The project, led by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) and commissioned by the Defense Advance Research Projects Agency (DARPA), is meant to provide wartime military patrols with the means of securing critical information and communicating with the local population. TRANSTAC (Spoken Language Communication and Translation System for Tactical Use) currently focuses on English and Iraqi Arabic. Initial tests measured "system capabilities in speech recognition, machine translation, noise robustness, user interface design and efficient performance on limited hardware platforms." "Effective two-way translation devices would represent a major advance in field translators," according to Craig Schlenoff, project leader of the NIST evaluation project. "Although American forces in Iraq currently have the use of phrase-based translators, the devices can only translate English into pre-recorded Arabic phrases. They cannot translate Iraqi Arabic into English," he said. The tests consisted in placing two individuals, one Iraqi and one American, to look at each other during the question and answer sessions. The conversation was recorded on a laptop that neither could see and both wore earphones that transmitted to them only the computer translation of the questions and answers. Preliminary results were satisfactory, which pleased DARPA, who is now considering mounting the applications of handheld devices that soldiers will carry with them on the battlefield and will also be discrete enough as not to require attention or interfere with their ability to stay alert and vigilant. "NIST evaluations provide DARPA with statistically significant data that shows the relative improvements of the TRANSTAC systems over time," said Schlenoff. "Armed with this information DARPA is better able to make program decisions about which technologies are showing the most promise." Final improvements are hoped to develop an automatic translator system in almost any new language in no more than three months after the initial request.