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Translation Software Bridges Linguistic Divide

Converser for Healthcare aims to help those with limited English-speaking ability communicate with English-speaking caregivers in real-time, without an interpreter.

By Thomas Claburn, InformationWeek
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At a news conference in San Francisco on Thursday, Spoken Translation introduced new translation software for health care professionals to bridge language barriers between patients and doctors. Converser for Healthcare aims to help those with limited English-speaking ability communicate with English-speaking caregivers in real-time, without an interpreter.

Effective health care depends upon communication between doctors and patients. According to an article in the medical journal *Pediatrics* in 2005, Spanish-speaking pediatric patients in the U.S. whose families have trouble communicating with caregivers face a greater risk of serious medical events during hospitalization than patients whose families do not have a language barrier.

Almost 40% of California adults speak a language other than English at home, according the 2000 census. This October, California will become the first state to require that HMO doctors' offices offer interpreters to patients, something already required at hospitals.

Spoken Translation claims that Converser represents "a fundamental advance in Machine Translation technology." It provides translations either through typed input or speech recognition. It also includes simultaneous reverse translation for verification and error correction in cases where translated words or meanings may be wrong or ambiguous.

Errors are a problem even when human translators are available. Another study published in *Pediatrics* looked at 13 doctor visits and found an average of 31 interpreter errors, 63% of which were considered serious enough to affect patient outcomes. It's not yet clear whether software will fare any better.

Converser will initially be targeted at English/Spanish translation. The company anticipates adding other languages later this year, including Chinese, German, and Japanese. The software runs on PCs. Future versions are expected to work with handheld devices.

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