

SMART SPECTACLES AID TRANSLATION

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In Japan's continuing quest to turn the world into a place completely controlled by crazy technology, NEC has announced a pair of glasses that, among other things, work to translate foreign languages.

Foreign language dictionaries could soon be a thing of the past, after Japanese manufacturer NEC unveiled a pair of glasses that can automatically translate spoken words and phrases.

The language barrier which exists between massive groups of the world population went one step closer to elimination when NEC Corporation and NEC Personal Products announced the development of an automatic speech-to-speech Travel Interpreter recently.

The Tele Scouter glasses feature a compact microphone and camera, which picks up the foreign-language conversation. The text - provided instantly through voice recognition and translation programs - would effectively provide movie-like "subtitles" during a conversation between two people wearing the glasses.

This audio recording is then relayed to a small computer worn on the user's waist, which transmits the information to a remote server. The server translates the words from speech to text, and transmits it back to the glasses, where the translated phrase is then appears on a tiny retinal display, providing the wearer with a transcript of the conversation in their own language.

The system is designed to be compact and lightweight, so it can be comfortably worn for long periods and not to use too much battery power. The retinal display projects the text in the wearer's peripheral vision, enabling the user to maintain eye contact with whoever they're speaking to.

Starting in 2010/2011 they'll be sold in sets of 30 at a cost of 7.5 million yen, or roughly 82.5 thousand USD, not including the cost of the translation software. Unfortunately, this puts it slightly out of the price range for everyday people like us who just want to take a trip down to Tijuana without having to learn basic Spanish.

NEC spokespeople claim that the high price will likely be offset by the appeal of having the representatives of those who buy the glasses look like intimidating cyborgs. That's a compelling argument, but whether they'll be effective tools for the business world or will instead cause hilariously offensive incidents due to mistranslation remains to be seen.

The Tele Scouter is currently still a prototype, although NEC plans to start selling the system to businesses next year. The Japanese manufacturer admits that the device's translation capabilities are limited at the moment, so it will market the device as a wearable, hands-free data display.

NEC envisages that it could be used by engineers and technicians to view user guides or manuals while installing and repairing hardware.

One day you may be able to wear glasses that translate other languages in real-time and display them onto the glasses' lenses so you can read it, if NEC is successful.

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THE ARAL SEA MAN-MAID DISASTER

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The destruction of the Aral Sea is one of the most staggering disasters of the twentieth century. Once the world's fourth-largest lake and inland saline body of water the Aral Sea has been steadily shrinking since the 1960s after the rivers that fed it were diverted by Soviet Union irrigation projects. As of 2007, the Aral Sea's surface area was only 10% of its original size. Nearly fivefold increase in salinity had killed most of its natural flora and fauna and left people living in the area in sufferings from a lack of fresh water and health problems.

The History of Aral

Straddling the borders of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and surrounded by the Karakum and Kyzylkum deserts, the Aral has been for thousands of years an inland saltwater lake with no outlet. Because of its size and significance it was regarded by people from ancient times as a sea. Two main rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, kept the salty lake in balance to support a commercial fishery, tourism, and a true oasis in a very dry, remote region of Central Asia. As many as 20 species of fish flourished in the giant glacial bathtub, and life along the shore was intrinsically linked to the inland sea.

Doomed by the USSR

In 1918, the Soviet government decided that the two rivers that fed the Aral Sea, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, would be diverted to irrigate the desert, in order to attempt to grow rice, melons, cereals, and cotton. This