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USC team working on dialog-translation device

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Courtesy photo

Shrikanth Narayanan led the group that that developed the Transonics Spoken Dialog Translator at USC's Viterbi School of Engineering in Los Angeles.

Doctors in the immediate future could be able to carry on conversations with their patients, even if neither speaks the same language. Using technology developed at the University of Southern California's Viterbi School of Engineering in Los Angeles, translation could become automated -- at least to some degree.

Three years of work by an interdisciplinary team has gone into the Transonics Spoken Dialog Translator. The device is a two-way voice translation system that allows an English-speaking doctor and Persian-speaking patient to talk with each other.

The device translates the doctor's spoken English questions into spoken Persian and translates the patient's Persian, or Farsi, replies into English.

The group was led by Shrikanth Narayanan, an associate professor of electrical engineering, computer science and linguistics at the Viterbi School who directs the Speech Analysis and Interpretation Laboratory in the school's Integrated Media Systems Center.

"Fluent two-way machine voice translation is one of the Holy Grails of engineering," Narayanan said. "We are years away from perfecting it, but we think the choices we have made about how to go about creating such a system are working. We hope to have something that will be useful in emergency rooms or ambulances within two years or so."

The system was programmed based on staged doctor-patient interactions. It contains about 23,000 English and 9,000 Persian words.

After the doctor or patient speaks, the device displays what it is translating and allows the user to choose an alternative phrase if necessary.

The Transonics development was funded by $3.8 million in grants from the government's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

On the Net:

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