

## e -AFRICAN

# Travelling to a foreign lands? Just download an app and start chatting

Gone are the days when tourists wander around clutching guidebooks

By STEPHANIE ROSENBLUM  
New York Times

You're going on vacation to a place where you don't know the language, and English isn't widely spoken. Sure, you've learned how to say "Hello" and "where's the bathroom?" but beyond that you're clueless and your flight is tomorrow. What to do?

Gone are the days when tourists wandered around clutching guidebooks with an index of handy phrases. Today there are more convenient ways to facilitate communication. This is not a comprehensive list of the copious digital language tools available; rather, these are two go-to options I'm using right now. Consider it a cheat sheet for when you touch down in a city and are at a loss for words.



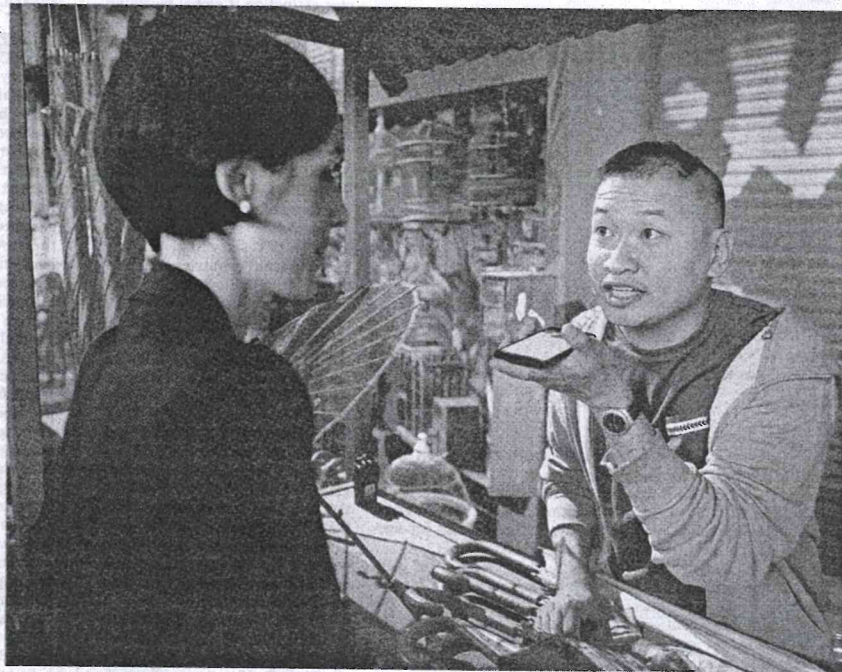
**Bravolo!** One of the easiest (and cheapest) things to do is to download one of

Bravolo's phrase book apps, available in more than a dozen languages including Chinese, Vietnamese, Portuguese, Russian and Arabic. Each app comes with several free categories of useful phrases and essential words such as "Greetings" (with remarks like "Good morning"); "Shopping" ("May I try it on?" as well as words for different kinds of clothing); "Eating" ("I'd like a table in a nonsmoking area" along with words for types of food); and "Emergency" ("Call the police").

But what makes these digital phrasebooks stand out among language apps is that when you tap a phrase, the app speaks it aloud. There's no guessing how to pronounce the words.

And if the app is talking too quickly for you, simply tap the turtle icon to hear the words more slowly (you can also adjust this in "Settings"). Ideally, you listen to the phrase and repeat it, but if your accent is terrible, you can play the voice on the app to, for instance, a waiter or store clerk. (If you don't want the app to talk, you can turn off that feature in "settings.")

Google Translate



A shopkeeper and an attendant using Google Translate. Picture: File



My other in-the-moment communication tool is Google Translate, which is free and can

be used in a few ways. (Note: Try it out before you're at happy hour in Lagos, as this app is a little more complicated.)

One way to use the app is to tap the camera icon, then hold your smartphone's camera lens up to the words you want translated on, say, a street sign or a menu. In seconds the instant translation feature transforms the words on the sign into your desired language, virtual-reality style.

I don't recommend using the camera option to read your horoscope in *Vogue Japan*, however, as I did on a recent trip there. Long blocks of tiny text have not been the app's strong suit, as others before me have written.

Happily, the app is helpful in other ways. Say you're asking for directions. You can speak, type or draw characters on your smartphone screen with your finger to indicate whatever it is you want translated.

Then up pops what you just said or wrote in the other language (along with a transliteration if relevant) and an icon that you can tap to have the words spoken, aloud in the for-

## MORE TRANSLATION APPS

iTranslate Voice currently supports 42 languages for both translation and dictionary services. Just speak the phrase or word you want to translate and iTranslate Voice speaks the target language. If you are misunderstood, you can tap the pencil to correct the translation.

AirTranslate lets you pair with someone else wirelessly who also has iTranslate Voice installed. You can both speak

your native languages and let iTranslate Voice take care of the rest.

Other translation apps include: Speak & Translate

iHandly Translator

AVDic Player

Translator Pro

HTranslator

Lingodiction

Speech Translator

ign language.

There's also a nifty icon (a square with only its corners outlined) that allows you to make the translation fill your entire smartphone screen. Star a translation such as "Where is the bathroom?" by tapping the icon beside it, and it will be saved to a "starred" folder for easy access the next time you need it.

Once you begin this process — writing or speaking in your native tongue and then seeing and hearing the translation — you have a few options. For instance, you can show the text translation on your smartphone to whomever you're trying to speak with.

Or you can let them listen to the audio translation. From there you can continue a conversation, either in writing or

by talking into the phone. The app can listen for whichever language is being spoken and then translate as you converse.

To use the app in the moment with the least amount of fiddling, set it up ahead of time. This involves a few taps to select the two languages you'll be using and the direction you think you'll begin typing or speaking (for example, English to Italian).

In the end, there's no substitute for learning a language, or some vocabulary, in advance of a trip. Even knowing five words — "hello," "thank you," "please," "sorry," "goodbye" — shows locals that you're making an effort. And they will be all the more willing to help you. No matter how short your flight, you certainly have time for that.

## Can a computer tell the sex of writers?

By C. CLAIBORNE RAY  
New York Times

**QUESTION:** CAN a computer tell from published documents whether the author is a man or a woman?

One computer programme had a reported accuracy rate of 80 per cent in its analysis of language patterns in modern written material.

In a study published in 2002 in the journal *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, researchers analysed 566 published documents in British English using a programme they called Winnow.

The programme was "trained" on material that was labelled having been written by men or women. It then analysed the comparative frequency in unlabelled documents of scores of features of writing judged to be independent of content.

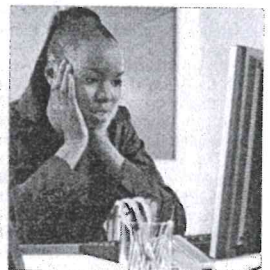
The features included parts of speech, like nouns and pronouns, and function words like "and" and "the" which have little meaning on their own but indicate grammatical relationships within a sentence. It also studied patterns like two- and three-word phrases, for example, "above the table."

### Accuracy

The writings were fiction and nonfiction, and the same techniques can make that distinction accurately 98 per cent of the time, the researchers said.

In the training phase, the authors identified as male made more frequent use of "a," "the" and "as." Female authors frequently used "she," "for," "with" and "not." In nonfiction, male features included "that" and "one," and female features were "for," "with," "not" and "in."

The underlying reasons for the differences and whether they would apply to other languages and cultures are subjects for further research. The programme was far from flawless. One of the works it miscategorised as having been written by a man was the novel *Possession*, by A.S. Byatt, a woman.



A woman working at her computer. Picture: File