
ALL EYES ON GOOGLE AS DUOLINGO LAUNCHES LANGUAGE LEARNING

What Google wants, Google usually gets. And if past acquisitions are any sort of guide to future ones, Google might want Duolingo. Duolingo is an online language-learning system created by Luis von Ahn, a native of Guatemala and former recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship (aka the "genius grant").

The way Duolingo goes about teaching is what truly makes the program unique. In essence, it teaches users a new language by having them translate text that already exists on the web. The same von Ahn created the [ESP Game](#), a crowd-sourced, image-tagging project that Google bought and re-launched as Google Image Labeler. Luis von Ahn's reCAPTCHA startup was also bought by Google in 2009. It is estimated that 200 million [CAPTCHAs](#) (those squiggly words you are often asked to type into spam filters) are generated globally every day.

The new project, which is launching in private beta, seeks to overcome the shortcomings inherent in automated computer translations: computers do not provide accurate translations because of the issue of context. A machine may accurately translate each individual word in a given sentence, but the end result will often make no sense when read aloud. As anyone who has ever tried to learn a second language (and attempt translation) will tell you, context is everything.

EVERYTHING IS CONTEXT

In a wide-ranging interview on CBC radio, von Ahn offered insights into his vision for Duolingo. His aim is to translate the entire web into multiple languages. The idea is to get 100 million people to translate the web (a concept known as [crowdsourcing](#), which he also helped pioneer). The problem is that there are not enough bilingual people online, and it is too expensive to pay those who are bilingual to do the work.

His solution is this: First you offer people who want to learn a language a free program that helps them to do just that. Those people then learn by translating content taken from the Internet. This process is designed to be a game-like experience. A community of users then votes on your translations, with the winner being the individual whose translation is used for the original content.

The system is [beautifully simple](#). An individual is given a sentence to translate into their native tongue. They are only given text that matches their language level: a beginner will never be given a complex text that requires advanced language skills. The user then forms a sentence (in their language) that makes sense and, more importantly, has context. If a word is not known, the individual can simply hover over it for the meaning.

A computer translation of the exact sentence (including those generated by the very able Google Translate) would likely yield an arrangement of words that would be at best awkward to read and at worst, completely misleading.

The service does not use any professional language translators. The text voted as the best translation is said to be comparable with a professional translation, according to its creator. The ultimate goal is to use the information gathered from the project to help develop automated computer translations that actually make sense.

Only time will tell if Google will make a bid to acquire von Ahn's latest project. Given their track record, however, Duolingo is just what the browser ordered