

## An interpreter in your pocket

**An app that translates on the go is being developed in Singapore**

WE'VE all fumbled with unwieldy phrasebooks and dictionaries — probably to unintentionally hilarious effect — on our trips overseas.

Technology to the rescue. Imagine saying a Chinese or Malay phrase into your iPhone or iPad, and having the device translate it instantly into English. Imagine how many frustrating conversations with taxi drivers you could avoid on your travels.

When the NUS Speech Translation System app debuts on the iOS platform by the end of the year, you'll have two professors at the National University of Singapore — Associate Professor Ng Hwee Tou and Assistant Professor Sim Khe Chai — to thank.

The two have been juggling their day jobs as lecturers at the NUS School of Computing while developing this app. Dr Ng was doing research on text translation while Dr Sim worked on automatic speech recognition. The Speech Translation System seemed a natural product of their two specialisations. "We've basically combined the two technologies together," said Dr Ng.

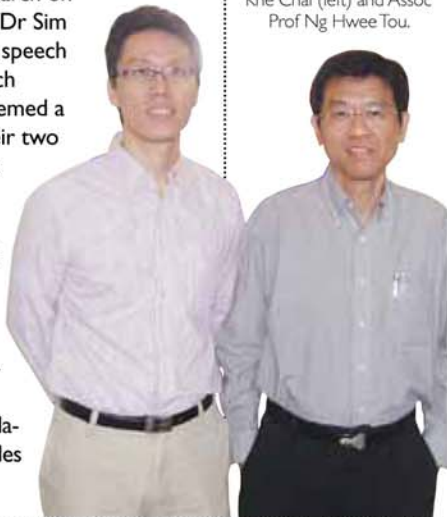
They say it will be particularly useful to foreigners visiting Singapore, or Singaporeans visiting countries where Malay and Mandarin are the default modes of communication.

Users can speak or key in phrases into their devices, and the app will verbalise the translations. The user must have wireless or 3G access as the app needs to access a linguistic database on a remote server, collated by the professors and their team of PhD students and PhD research fellows



**Above:** The NUS Speech Translation System app.

**Below:** Asst Prof Sim Khe Chai (left) and Assoc Prof Ng Hwee Tou.



At the moment, the app, which is still in testing, can only handle a couple of users at a time. However, Dr Ng says the app — whose price is yet to be confirmed while the team works out their revenue model — should be able to handle hundreds of thousands of users once it is launched.

There are various other translation apps already on the market. What will make theirs stand out? The professors say that a good

translation app needs to be accurate and user-friendly, and focus on certain languages.

They are already making plans for future upgrades which will allow translations into other regional languages, as well as making versions of the app which will work on other operating platforms.

"We think there is a demand for this kind of application," said Dr Ng.

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