

Translation, technology and the future of the language barrier

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Machine translation has changed the practical significance of the language barrier. Tools based on artificial intelligence can translate documents between German and English with a quality that was unattainable a decade ago. Lawyers, authorities and companies use them to produce first drafts of translations, which are then checked by specialists. Foreign residents use them to read letters from the authorities and to write simple correspondence in German. The tools do not replace professional translation for legally binding documents, but they reduce the cost and time of dealing with a second language.¹

The long-term effect of these tools is uncertain. They may reduce the pressure on the canton to introduce English into its institutions, since foreigners can deal with German documents through translation. They may also reduce the incentive for expatriates to learn German, since they can manage without it. The canton's institutions will continue to work in German, but the practical barrier that German represents for foreigners is likely to diminish. The language question will then become less a question of access and more a question of participation and belonging.

1 Notes

1. Federal Chancellery, press release "Bundeskanzlei beschafft das maschinelle Übersetzungssystem DeepL Pro für die Bundesverwaltung", 11 December 2023, admin.ch: after a WTO tender, DeepL Pro is made available to employees of the Federal Administration for two years from July 2024, with a possible extension to 2033. Use by lawyers and companies and the checking of drafts by specialists are not covered by this source. ↩

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