

*U.S. turns to tech for translators; Government seeks to bolster thin ranks of language specialists USA TODAY December 20, 2006 Wednesday*

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**HEADLINE:** U.S. turns to tech for translators;  
Government seeks to bolster thin ranks of language specialists

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**BODY:**

Intelligence agencies and the military are turning to technology developed for call centers, sporting events and television shopping channels to compensate for an ongoing shortage of qualified translators, interviews and public documents show.

In Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, the Defense Department's research arm is testing portable translation devices that allow English-speaking soldiers to hold conversations with Iraqis.

Government-backed researchers are working to convert broadcasts and website postings from Arabic and Mandarin Chinese into English and to build search engines that can extract complex information from the translated texts.

These efforts are part of a government plan to bolster the thin ranks of skilled translators, say researchers and experts, so human translators can focus on more demanding projects.

"Human language specialists are precious assets," says John Hall, a former Navy SEAL who is president of **VoxTec** International. The Annapolis, Md., company makes a handheld translation device being tested in Iraq. "You're never going to have enough of them," Hall says. "But if a machine can do some basic tasks, that frees up (a translator) for other work."

In-Q-Tel, a venture-capital firm funded by the CIA, has invested in a company that produces software that helps private companies glean information from recorded customer-service calls.

The technology could help intelligence analysts decipher subtleties, such as

differences in accents and pronunciations, that can change the meanings of spoken words, its makers say.

Much of the spending is classified, but available public contracting and budget documents show that the Pentagon has at least \$22 million to spend this year on research. In November 2005, the Pentagon announced \$26 million worth of contracts for translation software.

This month, the Iraq Study Group reported that only 33 of 1,000 workers in the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad speak Arabic, including only six fluent speakers.

The group recommended that the State and Defense departments and the director of national intelligence "accord the highest possible priority" to language and cultural training.

In October, the FBI reported that only 33 of about 12,000 agents have even limited Arabic proficiency. The CIA does not disclose its officers' language capabilities, but Robert Baer, a retired CIA agent, estimates that he was the agency's only undercover officer fluent in Arabic when he operated in Beirut in the mid-1980s.

It takes about eight years to train a CIA officer to be "completely comfortable" speaking Arabic, says Baer, author of two books about the intelligence community and foreign policy.