

English Conversation Club – Saratoga Library

February 26, 2026

Language and Relationships

As I mentioned in January, we will discuss a variety of topics this year including space, education, learning, humor, art, and architecture. A common thread among all these topics are the ideas of cooperation, connection, collaboration and the ways that we humans organize ourselves.

The past four weeks we explored the topics of space, collaboration and cooperation. Before that we read an article about how learning another language can keep our minds active and slow down brain aging. Today, we return to the topic of language learning.

As you all know, language is important to connect with others. But how can we connect if we don't know each other's language? We can learn new languages, but that may take years to become even a little fluent.

Warm Up Questions

1. What are ways that we can communicate if we don't speak another person's language?
2. Do you ever use hand gestures to communicate with people? In what ways?

Today, we will read about a couple who fell in love even though they did not even speak each other's language. Before we read their story, review the following vocabulary.

Vocabulary: Match the words to their meanings.

1. chemistry between (kem-uh-stree bih-tween)	A. to follow another person's lead especially in going from one place to another
2. earbuds (eer-buhdz)	B. to legally end the marriage contract between two married people
3. external battery pack (ik-stur-nl bat-uh-ree pak)	C. the interaction between two people that determines how well they can get along
4. to divorce (dih-vohrs)	D. overwhelmed with attraction or affection toward someone or something
5. isolated (ahy-suh-lay-tid)	E. very small headphones that are worn inside the ears
6. messaging app (mes-uh-jing ap)	F. a collection of thousands of unique, life-sized, clay sculptures representing the army of China's first emperor who was in power from 221–210 BCE. Terracotta is a baked clay, that is brownish-red in color
7. pandemic (pan-dem-ik)	G. a digital application or program used by two or more people to send messages, photos, and videos to each other
8. smitten (smit-n)	H. separated from other persons or things; alone; solitary
9. to tag along (tag-uh-lawng)	I. a portable device that stores electrical energy to charge devices like smartphones, tablets, and laptops on the go
10. terracotta warriors (ter-ra-co-ta wawr-ee-erz)	J. a disease that has spread throughout an entire area, region, or even the whole world

ANSWERS : 1 –C; 2 -E; 3 -I; 4 –B; 5 –H; 6 –G; 7 –J; 8 –D; 9 –A; 10 - F

DIALOG

Tim: My grandpa feels so **isolated**. He'd like to **tag along** everywhere I go, but it would be too tiring.

Sam: I taught my grandpa how to use a **messaging app**. I also bought him some **earbuds**. I check on him every couple of hours.

Tim: Great idea! I have an extra pair of **earbuds**, an old tablet and an **external battery pack** he can try.

Sam: Give it a try. My whole family messages with him now.

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Love and Language

(based on a New York Times article,

They Are in Love but Don't Speak the Same Language by Love in Translation by

In the fall of 2019, David Duda, a 62-year-old bookstore owner from New Haven, Connecticut, went to Xian (see-ahn), China. He went with his brother who was taking care of some business there. David **tagged along** because he wanted to see the world famous **terracotta** soldiers and Buddhist temples.

His brother's business partner suggested that her friend, 57-year-old Hong Liang, drive David around to show him the sights. By the end of the week, David was **smitten** with her.



Terracotta Army by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC](#)

"She is the most joyous, happy person you'll ever meet," David said. In that short time, he thought that there was **chemistry between** them. He tried to kiss her goodbye before his departure. Flustered, Hong turned her cheek.



However, she was interested and they stayed in touch with WeChat, a Chinese **messaging app**. To do this, David would text Hong in English. She would copy and paste the messages to an English-Chinese translator. And then she would copy and paste her Chinese-to-English answers to the app and send them to David.

Just a few months after they met, the world came to a halt because of the Covid pandemic in 2020. David and Hong were both **divorced**, and they each had adult children who no longer lived with them. They found themselves **isolated** and alone. So, they started messaging each other more often.

They told each other about their personal histories, their failed marriages, and their families. David's business changed because many stores like his had to close in order to survive. David started to sell his books online. To keep up with his orders, he started working at night preparing his shipments.

This meant he was awake at the same time as Hong in China. "We spent the next two years on our phones getting to know each other better," David said. The translation technology and their phones are so important to their relationship, they bought eight battery packs between them to keep up their communications.

In September 2022, China relaxed **pandemic** travel restrictions. Hong booked a one-way flight to the United States. She was still nervous and wondered whether she understood everything that David had expressed to her over the past two years in the way he meant it.

David met Hong at the airport holding a sign that said, in Chinese characters, *Love of my life*. "I was deeply touched, because at the airport in front of so many people, he did something that touched my heart," Hong recalled.

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Communicating on WeChat across a long distance, David and Hong almost forgot they spoke different languages because they could text all their thoughts in translated English. In person, communication turned out to be more challenging.

First they tried a hand-held translator that cost \$600. They also tried **earbuds** that would speak translations into their ears. But these devices had to be connected to Wi-Fi, and any background noise made them useless.



 Finally, they decided to use the Microsoft Translator app. The app produces text translations of what they said. Just two months after Hong's arrival, David knew he wanted her to stay. During Thanksgiving dinner with his extended family, he got down on one knee and attempted to propose to Hong in Chinese.

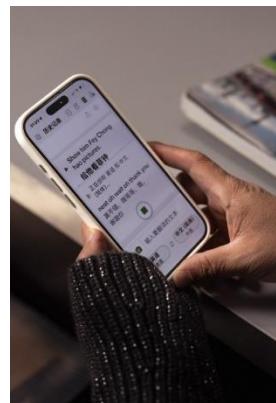
Hong did not understand his words, but the meaning of the kneeling was clear. They married a month later. Their lives are not so different from those of other couples: They eat out, go biking, take beach walks and watch shows with Chinese subtitles. (They liked "Ted Lasso.")

However, in one way, they might not be like many other married couples. In three years of marriage, they have not had a fight. Usually a heated marital spat often would be fueled by a rapid exchange of hurtful words. They would be too difficult through Translator. "Maybe the best way to have a lasting marriage is to speak different languages," David joked.

David and Hong recognized that because they were older and divorced when they met, this may have helped their communication. They have experienced how a marriage can go wrong and better understand the workings of a happy one.



And they are attentive to body language. Hong said that Mr. Duda's facial expressions and gestures tell her more about his emotions than Translator does.



"These translation apps struggle with a lot of things like metaphors, sense of humor, tone register, cultural references," said Per Urlaub, a professor and the director of global languages at M.I.T. But, he added, the apps "are meaningful and functional" for David and Hong.

"Technology is making intimacy possible under conditions where it otherwise would not exist," he said. "In this case, I feel that the proof is in the pudding."

What do you think?

Discussion Questions

1. When you visit another country, do you try to learn some words or phrases of the language spoken there?

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2. Do you use a hand-held translator or earbuds that can translate spoken language?
3. What do you think of the way David and Hong communicate?
4. Do you think you could communicate this way with a good friend or spouse?
5. If you use a messaging app, which do you use?
6. Do you use any translation apps? If so, which ones? Do you find the translations are good or do they make mistakes?
7. What information is conveyed in spoken language that is more difficult to convey in written text?
8. Can you tell how a person is feeling by looking at their face and body?
9. Can you tell how a person is feeling by just their voice?
10. Do you speak differently when you are with your friends compared to when you are with older people or children?

Lost in Translation?

Look at these translations for some statements that Hong made about David in Chinese. These are answers in response to questions from a reporter. Can you tell which one is a machine translation and which one is a human translation:

Translation Set 1

Question: How did you feel when you saw David at the airport?

A: I was deeply touched, because at the airport in front of so many people, he did something that touched my heart

B. I think this is a very, very romantic thing, and in front of so many people at the airport.

Translation Set 2

Question: What do you think about David?

A: He pays attention to all the details and takes good care of me. He really knows and sees what I need.

B: He is very attentive. He thought about anything for me, so I was impressed by a lot of his details.

Answers: for both sets, the human translation is "A", and the machine translation is "B".

Do you think human translation is still better than machine translation?



References

The material for this week is based on the content from these sources.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/14/technology/they-are-in-love-but-dont-speak-the-same-language.html>