

KATE KNIBBS GEAR JUN 26, 2024 6:00 AM

I Wore Meta Ray-Bans in Montreal to Test Their AI Translation Skills. It Did Not Go Well

WIRED took Meta's Ray-Ban Smart Glasses to French-speaking Canada to trial its AI smarts. *Quelle catastrophe!*



PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION: RAY-BAN; SHUTTERSTOCK



Imagine you've just arrived in another country, you don't speak the language, and you stumble upon a construction zone. The air is thick with dust. You're tired. You still stink like airplane. You try to ignore the jackhammers to decipher what the signs say: Do you need to cross the street, or walk up another block, or turn around?

I was in *exactly* such a situation this week, but I came prepared. I'd flown to Montreal to spend two days testing the new AI translation feature on Meta's Ray-Ban smart sunglasses. Within 10 minutes of setting out on my first walk, I ran into a barrage of confusing orange detour signs.

The AI translation feature is meant to give wearers a quick, hands-free way to understand text written in foreign languages, so I couldn't have devised a better pop quiz on how it works in real time.

As an excavator rumbled, I looked at a sign and started asking my sunglasses to tell me what it said. Before I could finish, a harried Quebecois construction worker started shouting at me and pointing northwards, and I scurried across the street.

PHOTOGRAPH: KATE KNIBBS

Right at the start of my AI adventure, I'd run into the biggest limitation of this translation software—it doesn't, at the moment, tell you what people say. It can only parse the written word.

I already knew that the feature was writing-only at the moment, so that was no surprise. But soon, I'd run into its other less-obvious constraints. Over the next 48 hours, I tested the AI translation on a variety of street signs, business signs, advertisements, historical plaques, religious literature, children's books, tourism pamphlets, and menus—with wildly varied results.

Sometimes it was competent, like when it told me that the book I picked up for my son, *Trois Beaux Bébés*, was about three beautiful babies. (Correct.) It told me repeatedly that *ouvert* meant “open,” which, to be frank, I already knew, but I wanted to give it some layups.

Other times, my robot translator was not up to the task. It told me that the sign for the notorious adult movie theater Cinéma L'Amour translated to ... “Cinéma L'Amour.” (F for effort—Google Translate at least changed it to “Cinema Love.”)

At restaurants, I struggled to get it to read me every item on a menu. For example, instead of telling me all of the different burger options at a brew pub, it simply told me that there were “burgers and sandwiches,” and refused to get more specific despite my wheedling.

When I went to an Italian spot the next night, it similarly gave me a broad summary of the offerings rather than breaking them down in detail—I was told there were “grilled meat skewers,” but not, for example, that there were duck confit, lamb, and beef options, or how much they cost.

All in all, right now, the AI translation is more of a temperamental party trick than a genuinely useful travel tool for foreign climes.

How It Works (or Doesn't)

To use the AI translation, a glasses-wearer needs to say the following magic words: “Hey Meta, look at ...” and then ask it to translate what it's looking at.

The glasses take a snapshot of whatever is in front of you, and then tell you about the text after a few seconds of processing. I'd expected more straightforward translations, but it rarely spits out word-for-word breakdowns. Instead, it paraphrases what it sees or offers a broad summary.

When I came across a plaque explaining that I was standing at the site of an old bridge, it relayed that information, but omitted details included on the original sign, like the date completed.

Ready for some AI translation wizardry (well... hopefully). COURTESY OF KATE KNIBBS

Traveling with friends or family? Warning: There's no speaker option. After meeting up with friends, I was disappointed that there was no way for them to hear Meta's responses to questions.

Right now, there's just a handful of languages supported: Spanish, Italian, French, and German. The AI can identify other languages but not translate them into English. When I went on a stroll through Chinatown, for example, it identified a poster in Mandarin, but did not explain what it meant.

Hopefully a broader array of languages is in the pipeline; if I was traveling in a country where I didn't know the alphabet, like Thailand or Russia, written translation would have come in especially handy.

On my last morning, I made a pilgrimage to Foufounes Électriques, a storied punk bar, because I wanted to see how my glasses would handle the word “foufounes.” In Quebec, it's cutesy slang for butt, the equivalent of something like “bum-bum.” In France, though, it's a much ruder word for genitalia. When I arrived at the (closed) bar, the glasses informed me that they'd been disconnected from Meta View, the app you need to download to use most of the features because the glasses use your phone for internet access.

VIDEO: KATE KNIBBS

I attempted to fix the connection for the next hour, but to no avail. Meta routes anyone who purchased the glasses through Ray-Ban to first contact Ray-Ban's customer service hotline—but Ray-Ban's customer service rep told me it sounded like a Meta problem. I had to lie and say I bought the glasses through Meta to even access the company's customer service chat system, which does not have a phone-call option.

By the time I actually got through to Meta's chat, I only had 10 minutes until I had to head back. The customer service rep who was trying to help me seemed to be running through a script at a slow pace, and after 10 minutes had passed, she hadn't yet offered any advice.

I returned to my hotel woefully ignorant of how Meta's AI translation handles French-Canadian slang. The Meta rep emailed me six hours later to see if I still needed help. I was already back home in Chicago.

Worth the Suitcase Space?

The AI translation feature is simply too rudimentary and buggy to be anything more than a novelty. And yet, these sunglasses will be coming with me on future trips. Meta's Ray-Ban smart glasses are a surprise hit for a good reason: They rule! They are both legitimately functional as shades, speakers, and a camera—plus, as far as wearable computers go, remarkably stylish.

Earlier this year, I bought a pair to replace my old prescription shades, and I've been persistently delighted. I've abandoned my [AirPods](#) whenever I take my dog for walks or go jogging, because the audio quality is terrific. I love them, despite how inherently uncool the concept of Meta-branded smart glasses is.

The AI translation feature is, thus far, still basically an experiment, and the Meta View app is—at least for this traveler—prone to buggy performance. But the other core features of the Ray-Bans are strong enough that the glasses are still a worthwhile travel accessory.

And since Meta is [shifting resources](#) in the wake of its unexpected success with wearables, I'd bet on the AI features improving dramatically over the next year or so. I'll be hoping for drastically reduced lag times for information, and the holy grail of truly live conversation translations. But maybe my Meta Ray-Bans are rose tinted?

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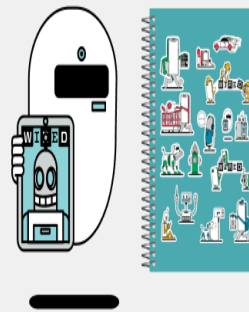
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