

# The Real-Life Babel Fish: A Cultural Crisis

How the TranslatEAR breaks communication barriers and builds cultural ones instead

By Christine Cheng

It's the 22nd century. You're cleaning out the basement of your grandparents' pod, where you dig out a paperback that looks more ancient than that blue whale skeleton you saw in your VR visit to the "Extinct Organisms" museum last week. *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, it says.

You scoff. We haven't gone *that* far yet. We've only just colonized our own solar system, after all.

Though... it's not like you have anything better to do at the moment.

Next thing you know, your back aches from hunching over, your fingers are covered with small cuts (who knew paper could be so painful!) and your vision swims with words like "Vogon", "42", and "Babel Fish".

Wait a second. Babel Fish?

Yep. It's a yellow, leech-like fish placed in the ear canal whose excrement (yeah, I made that face too) essentially gives your brain the power to understand any language. French, Norwegian, Swahili, Alien languages—you name it.

Sound familiar?



Pictured above: TranslatEARCorp's new "TranslatEAR" device

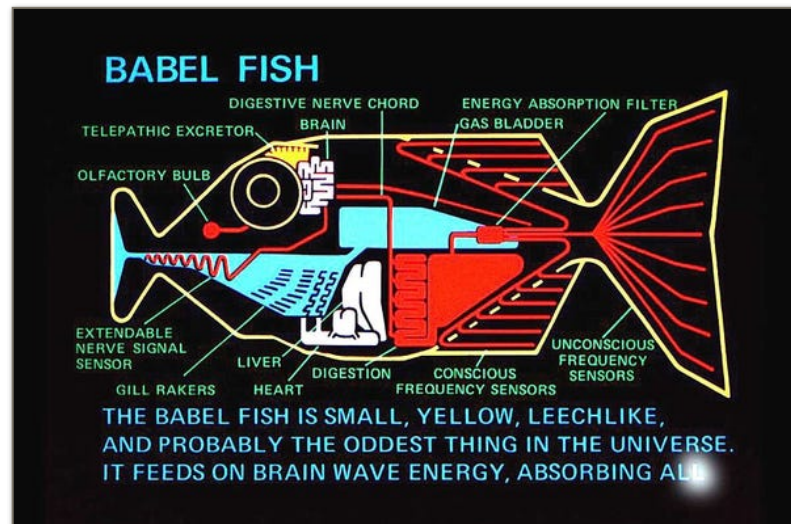
TranslatEARCorp’s newest innovation, the TranslatEAR, is the Babel Fish come to life after decades of intense linguistic and technological research—minus the fecal matter and more of the physical matter, of course. What that means for people like you and me is no more meandering the pods of a foreign metropolis like a lost puppy; no more scrambling to get out your handheld universal translator before the poor local you accosted scurries away in a rush; no more frantically waving your arms around like a malfunctioning android when the waitress garbles out some unintelligible gibberish. (In reality, she was just asking you if you wanted sugar or milk in your coffee.)

However, it also means no more experiencing the rich and diverse histories and cultures that make us humans, well, *human*.

Sure, it’d be nice to converse with someone who speaks a different language without having to play an extremely aggravating game of charades. The compact, convenient shape of the TranslatEAR certainly helps too.

But the TranslatEAR isn’t meant for everyone. Unless we want a cultural crisis, the TranslatEAR must be curtailed from us: the general populace.

Pictured right: The Babel Fish, from Douglas Adams’s *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (1979). The creature gives the user the ability to understand Alien languages.



The natural question would then be to ask: what exactly do I mean by “cultural crisis”?

TranslatEARCorp claims that the TranslatEAR's main purpose is to bridge people together through language when in reality, it's doing the exact opposite. With the ability to translate over 6500 languages, there's no need for us to know the exact language the other person is speaking or even what metropolis they're from. The machine does all of the work for us, and the bridge of communication is built not by the organic development of human relationships but by a machine's cookie-cutter algorithm.

With that, it's important to remember that language is an intrinsic part of every culture. It is the lifeblood that flows from one generation to the next and generates a sense of solidarity and community among all those who speak it, whether they grow up with the words on their tongue or learn it during the long journey of adulthood. Literature, music, the arts—language is the door that opens all of them.

Thanks to the mass consumption of the TranslatEAR, that door is closed before we even know it exists. Children who grow up using the TranslatEAR in their everyday lives won't bother to ask the difference between Mandarin and Macedonian because it won't matter to them when they have a machine that can already distinguish between the two. Instead of little Susie inquiring about the peculiarities of Spanish grammar, and thereby discovering the wonderful world of Quinceañeras, she grows up pressing a couple buttons in her ear and staying in her own isolated bubble—something we very much do *not* want our kids to do. Once the TranslatEAR becomes a ubiquitous part of our lives, and not just little Susie's, the collective human curiosity to learn about other languages and cultures will be significantly quelled, and the human race as a whole will face a cultural crisis.

As a child of immigrants who moved to a foreign metropolis, this definitely hits close to home. My parents and I grew up speaking different languages, learning different mannerisms, and living in different cultures, much like many others I know now that Earth is opening up more pods. A TranslatEAR might help break down the language barrier, but no device could replace the cultural bond I forged with them thanks to our fervent efforts in learning each other's languages. After all, instead of saying you love them, wouldn't you want to show them?

And it's not just the language you or your family might speak. Like the blue whale exhibit in the "Extinct Organisms" museum that you saw, languages can go extinct too—over 7000, to be exact, since the 21st century. That's over 7000 stories filled with idioms and nuances and lore that have simply disappeared, forgotten and forgone by society. With TranslatEAR as a catalyst, that number could very well skyrocket within the next few decades, and with it, the disappearance of even more cultures.

Pictured right: An illustration by Kevin Craft on *The Uncharted Minds's* blog post, "The Disappearance of Languages"



Now that we know more about the cultural ramifications of TranslatEAR, let's go back to what was said earlier about curtailing its use for the average joe. The question now is, who *would* use it?

Well, the TranslatEAR is undoubtedly a breakthrough for international relations. With all the world's metropolises becoming more interconnected, the ability to understand other leading figures is more necessary than ever for foreign trade and policy. Hearing and understanding the words firsthand rather than through a translator would minimize risk of miscommunication and make negotiations quicker and more efficient.

However, remember that the key here is *individuals*, not populations. Release the TranslatEAR to the masses, and we'll undoubtedly face a slew of social problems.

In Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the communication barriers torn down by the Babel Fish didn't bring people together. Rather, the innocuous little marine creature tore societies apart and started some of the most bloody and gruesome wars in the history of creation.

The TranslatEAR (probably) won't be that extreme, but if the Babel Fish itself came to life, who's to say that nothing else will?