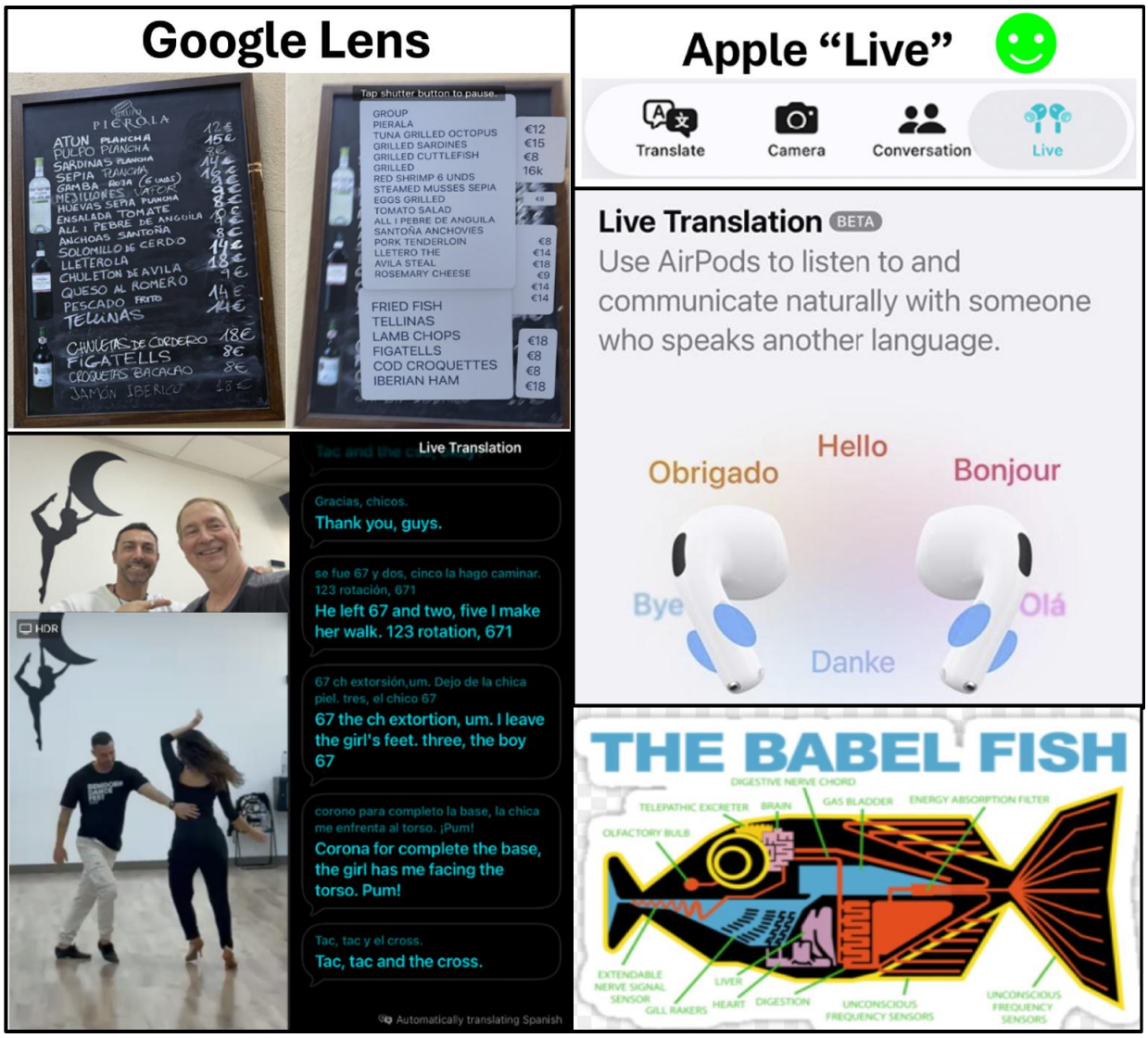
# Lost in Translation – AI Translation Tools in Valencia, Spain — and in the Dance Classes




***For travelers who love languages, but aren't fluent, the dream of a smooth and frictionless live translator is quite alluring. This article reviews various AI based communication tools, including Apple's new Live Translation, and platform differences with Google Translate. There was a mix of expectations, experimentation, frustration, and then hope for what the future holds. Another amazingly powerful (and scary) application for AI.***

Written by John Buchanan | LinkedIn

# Lost in Translation – AI Translation Tools
## in Valencia, Spain — and in the Dance Classes

*"He wants you to turn and look at the camera."*
*— Lost in Translation* (Japan 2003)

For travelers who love languages, but aren't fluent, the dream of a smooth and frictionless **live translator** is quite alluring. Translation routines have been around for decades. But it is now nearly impossible to keep pace with AI's continual release of transformative features. Live translation is currently a ritual of small interruptions: pulling out a phone, speaking, typing or pointing, waiting, then returning to the moment. Apps like Google Translate work very well this way—but the phone never quite disappears.

So when Apple last year began promoting live translation through new AirPods (with enhanced noise cancelling)—an experience that promised to move translation off the phone and into your ear—it felt like something different. Not just a better tool, but a different and better kind of interaction altogether.

A travel article about testing the feature in Tokyo painted the tantalizing picture: a traveler moving through Japan, hearing conversations translated quietly through their AirPods, navigating restaurants and train stations with newfound ease.

*"A non-Japanese-speaking first-time visitor used Apple's new in-ear translation feature to connect with locals at bars, sushi classes and even a fire ritual." NYT 12/26/2025*

Naturally, that raised the question for anyone traveling elsewhere. Could Apple's AirPods translation get you through Spain or Italy? Those were our upcoming destinations.

My partner, a linguistics professor* and author, and I an actuary, decided to test the capabilities while spending time in Valencia. We loaded up with the latest gizmos, phone, and software updates. This was an ideal test environment, with lively streets, café conversations. And even try the capabilities out in a dance class or two. We knew there would be various scenarios ranging from menu grabs, taxi rides, noisy restaurants and walking around (see *Translation Cheat sheet* later on for a variety of travel scenarios). But we were up for the challenge, with various Apps at the ready.

What followed was a mix of expectations, experimentation, frustration, and then hope for what the future holds. That frustration stemmed from a simple obstacle: contrary to Apple announcements, the **required Live button** in their Translate app wasn't available in the EU at the time of writing, apparently due to regulatory constraints.


** my linguistics partner loved to point out that the app is misnamed – "translation" occurs with written languages, while the app performs "interpretation" between spoken languages*

# The Expectation


The Tokyo story set the stage. And the expectation. In that reporting, translation technology acted almost like a discreet interpreter—bridging the gap between traveler and local in everyday interactions. Imagine hearing Japanese spoken around you and receiving the English meaning moments later in your ear. Perhaps resembling the Babel Fish from *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*. In this sci-fi, a small yellow leech-like creature was inserted into the travelers ear for galaxy wide communication. For AirPods, the leech was replaced with a fat white worm for the earth bound traveler.

The idea seemed perfect for Spain. Even basic travel moments—ordering food, asking directions, chatting with a shop owner—could become smoother with a quiet translation assistant riding along in your ear. And Valencia, with its welcoming culture and vibrant public life, seemed like the ideal proving ground.

The dream scenario was simple. Walk into a restaurant and hear a waiter say:
"¿Quieres paella o arroz negro hoy?"
Your AirPods quietly whisper in English:
*"Would you like paella or black rice today?"*
You reply in Spanish—or even English—while the system handles the translation. You experiment with one or two Pods in. Seeing if your brain can handle the Spanish in one ear, and the English through the Pod.

Even more intriguing was the possibility of **AirBud-to-AirBud translation**: two people speaking different languages, each hearing the other in their own language. Imagine ordering that paella in a seamless interaction, discussing Fallas fireworks, or asking about the best sangria in town without awkward pauses or fumbling with a phone. Or taking a dance lesson. Of course, would need to adapt to lags, noisy environments, missed phrases, dialect issues, and interesting translations (good for stories back home). In one of my tests, it's funny how "gallon of gasoline" can come out as "gallon of cheese" (*queso*) if you don't speak like a native.


For travelers, and language learners, the potential felt enormous. Could use it to supplement your Google Translate and Lens, Duolingo, your few years of long-ago high school spanish, or maybe just try to use it without much other prep. With trusty Google and Apple Translate to help you along the way. Just need a good environment.

## A Sample Test Environment

If there is a perfect testing ground for ***Live Translation*** technology, it might actually be a dance class. Dance instructors tend to repeat instructions several times. You are typically learning with many others. Movements are demonstrated visually. Vocabulary is often predictable: counts, turns, and basic commands.


In my case, the setting was salsa (*MagicDance* which is a vibrant Valencian dance studio). The instructor called out steps in Spanish while the class followed along:
*"Se Fue"*
*"Uno, dos, tres… cinco, seis, siete."*
*"Cross body lead." (some didn't need translation)*
*"Otra vez."*
Even for someone with modest Spanish skills, the environment provides helpful context. Movements reinforce meaning. Repetition helps the brain fill in gaps. Placing the phone near the instructor unobtrusively for hands-free listening and using the AirPod stem control to start and stop live translation, would conceptually help the lag and background noise issue. That was the plan.

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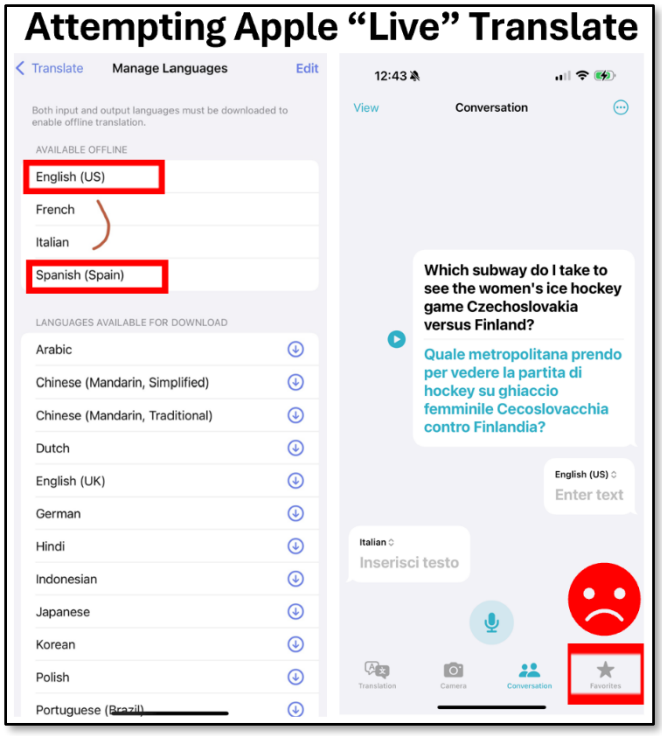
## The Current Frustrating Reality




After assembling the necessary components—a modern iPhone, compatible AirPods, updated software, Apple ID region set to United States, physically in the country of interest, desired languages downloaded (English, Spanish, Italian, even French)—the moment arrived. All boxes were checked (already knew Live for EU IDs were disabled for now).
Open the Translate app. Look for the feature.
….and…
**Nothing.**

The much-anticipated **"Live" button** simply refused to appear. Instead, what showed was the lame "**Favorites**". Every other requirement was rechecked and seemed satisfied. In addition to Apple and Google, used ChatGPT and Claude to see what might be going on. The devices were correct. The software was up to date. Installed / reinstalled the app. Was tested first in Spain. And then in Italy. Same result. **No Live button.**

It was a strangely modern frustration: possessing the hardware, reading about the technology working elsewhere, yet being unable to access it because of regional rollout policies. Despite widespread coverage of the feature's promise in particular during Sept-Dec 2025, real-world accounts of using it—particularly in Europe—remain surprisingly scarce into 2026 as of this writing.

Most reports focus on what the technology can do, not where it quietly fails to appear. "Why" this exciting feature is blocked or paused in EU or elsewhere is beyond the scope of this article, but according to Apple is related to the Digital Markets Act. Asking ChatGPT to provide the best evidence of use, it produced the *Where it Works* (***Exhibit 1***). Hopefully when the "Live" button starts to appear, trumpets will blare, or at least reported more openly than the current apparent silence. *Readers of this article in EU or elsewhere are encouraged to post that they are indeed seeing the "Live" button, or verify that they don't*.

**Exhibit 1**

**Where Apple's Live Translation Works — And Where It Doesn't**

Best Evidence Summary — March 2026

| Region | Status | Notes |
|---|---|---|
| **United States** | Fully Available | Launch region (Apple Intelligence) |
| **United Kingdom** | Available | Not under EU DMA |
| **Canada** | Partial rollout | Expanding with Apple Intelligence |
| **Australia / NZ** | Partial rollout | AI rollout dependent |
| **Japan** | Confirmed working | Tested in travel article (NYT-12/26/2025) |
| **South Korea** | Rolling out | Language support expanding |
| **China** | Limited | Regulatory constraints |
| **European Union** | Delayed / inconsistent | DMA compliance impact |
| **Norway / non-EU Europe** | Often works | Not bound by DMA |

**Legend:**

Green = Available | Yellow = Partial | Red = Delayed

**Source: ChatGPT -** Availability varies by region. Apple has confirmed that some Apple Intelligence features, including Live Translation, are not yet fully available in the European Union due to regulatory requirements. Real-world testing has confirmed functionality in regions such as the United States and Japan, with ongoing phased rollout elsewhere.

## The Experiment Continues

The experiment continued anyway. Using other translation modes (such as the very nice Apple "Face to Face" view) and recorded dialogue, snippets of translated speech could still be captured and interpreted. The Apple based results were far from perfect (can see typical sample in Translation Test Lab box above). Salsa instructions occasionally emerged from the translator with amusing literalism—numbers, slang, and dance shorthand confusing the algorithms. Like Bill Murray in the Japan movie, extensive verbal description went unheard and reduced to simple statements like *"the girl has me facing the torso"*. This wasn't what the instructor communicated. With Google translate setting a high mark, the Apple translations did seem in general to be much more lacking in quality, with much larger gaps (more on that technically in the next section).

Yet even imperfect translations revealed something exciting: the technology already hints at what it might soon (or later) become. Apple is working on various boosts like:

- "Replay what I just heard"
- "Prime" the translator with dance or other vocabulary right before to warm up the AI's ear
- "Interpreter Earpiece" (Translate-Conversation mode)
- iPhone's Voice Memo app to run a recorded audio through translation more slowly (and use that to practice at home).

This last point opens an interesting possibility: turning a dance class into a dual experience – physical practice and language lesson at the same time. This was one of my goals.

# Impact of Different Platforms and Content Input

My dance class experiments revealed that live translation struggles not at the translation stage, but much earlier—during speech recognition. When that initial recognition step slips up, the system must do what our brains naturally do: make educated guesses. Cognitive science refers to this process as cohesion, where gaps are mentally bridged when words are incomplete or misheard. Ultimately, the accuracy of translation hinges on the quality of the input. If someone speaks directly into a phone, it gives the platform a greater chance to correctly record and interpret their words. However, if the speech is transmitted through earbuds from a more distant phone, the initial recognition is trickier—though it's an appealing idea. These challenges highlight the distinctions between different platforms.

The *Basic Platform Differences* (***Exhibit 2***) summarize the different core approaches and capabilities. **Google with the best engine, and Apple striving for the best experience.**

**Google Translate:**

- Greater overall accuracy
- Better handling of incomplete phrases
- More robust in noisy environments

**Apple Live Translate**:

- More integrated experience (when it works)
- Promise of more natural interaction (less dependence on the screen)
- But, at this moment, with clear limitations in both availability and consistency

**Basic Platform Differences** — **Exhibit 2**

Illustrative Comparative Framing — March 2026

| Dimension | Google Translate | Apple (Live Translation) |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Core idea | Best translation engine | Best translation experience |
| 2. Design approach | Phone-first | Earbud-first |
| 3. Capability | Broad + flexible | Integrated + seamless |
| 4. Maturity | Mature | Emerging |
| 5. Speech recognition (noisy) | Strong | Variable (environment sensitive) |
| 6. Translation accuracy | High | Moderate (context-dependent) |

While this isn't a rigorous study, my hands-on experience with the dance classes and recordings revealed a noticeable difference in outcomes. Google's phone-first method delivered significantly better speech recognition, and thanks to its mature translation engine, produced higher quality translations*. The Apple boosts above may help generate much better results in subsequent testing.

With an array of different apps available to users, it's quite tempting to ask, "Which app is best?" The better question is **"Which app works best in various real-life situations?"** To help answer that question, I created a *Conversation Ladder - Translation Cheat Sheet (**Exhibit 3**)*, identifying different scenarios and categories. These range from translating a menu, quiet or loud environments, convenient or critical translation needs, and various larger group activities. The "best" will depend on capability advancements, level of need for exact translation, and desire for natural listening experience. The UN translator scenario is included as a "ceiling benchmark".

**Conversation Ladder — Translation Cheat Sheet** — **Exhibit 3**

Illustrative Comparative Capabilities — March 2026

| Scenario | Best Tool | Why |
|---|---|---|
| **Core (functional, everyday)** | | |
| 1. Menu reading | Google Camera (Lens) | best visual translation |
| 2. Ordering food | Google | fast + reliable |
| 3. Taxi / directions | Google | structured conversation |
| 4. Announcements | Google | workable, but requires active listening |
| 5. Longer speech (recording) | Google | accuracy improves with replay (2 phone setup) |
| **Asynchronous** | | |
| 6. Messaging (text/voice notes) | WhatsApp | asynchronous, simple exchange |
| 7. Coordination / logistics | WhatsApp | iterative, low-pressure communication |
| **Environment (noise / context)** | | |
| 8. Shops/Restaurants/Cafe (quiet) | Apple Live | more natural listening |
| 9. Shops/Restaurants/Bar (noisy) | Google | handles noise better |
| **Conversational spectrum** | | |
| 10. 1-1 (convenient — friend, colleague) | Apple Live | natural flow; minimal friction |
| 11. 1-1 (critical — doctor, landlord) | Google (+ recording) | accuracy critical; enables replay |
| 12. Dance class | Apple (future) | hands-free listening and stem control |
| 13. Group conversation | Apple (future) | multi-speaker flow; continuous listening |
| **Immersive / ambient (future layer)** | | |
| 14. Walking around / tour guide | Apple (future) | ambient listening |
| 15. Movie / TV watching | Apple (future) | immersive understanding |
| **Ceiling benchmark** | | |
| 16. UN Translator | Professional interpreter | tone, idiom, cultural nuance |

** Beyond the scope here, but linguistics experts may point to a Google advantage due to a more extensive usage of "CALP" over "BICS" translation approaches, with a better Back Translation Test (BTT) skill score.*

## The Expected Future

Despite the obstacles, the Apple Live Translate experience left a very optimistic impression. Even partial translation tools helped clarify phrases and reinforce language learning. Hearing Spanish repeatedly in a dance class—paired with occasional translation—created a feedback loop that made certain expressions stick. The larger vision still feels within reach. A traveler stepping into a restaurant, having a conversation translated in real time. Two strangers speak comfortably despite sharing no common language. Hearing dance commands in your native tongue (and your own translation to your feet). **Technology serving as a communication bridge between cultures, much like the Babel Fish did between worlds.**

Apple's live translation features are elusively exciting. After experimenting in Valencia—between tapas tables, Fallas ninots, and salsa steps—it feels less like science fiction and more like a preview. It will require a nicely operating "white worm" and backup support for the best translation experience. While we were very disappointed not to be able to recreate the NYT Japanese experience. We are hopeful that upon our return later this year we can recreate and expand upon our test environment.

**The prospects for live translation are promising under AI's transformative technology. This optimism will require that challenges related to availability are addressed, and advancements are made in speech recognition and translation accuracy. With effective collaboration between corporations and regulatory bodies, the sought-after Live button may soon become a reality*, and a more seamless communication experience will be a reality.**

**Current status (Q1 2026): According to March 2026 documentation, Live Translation is available in the EU, though some features may still be in beta or have specific regional availability restrictions – Apple support*