The challenges of translation into Congolese Swahili
Machine translation is a useful language services tool.

For many languages such as French, machine translation services such as Google Translate can render a high quality translation.

However, for local languages there are limits.

Google Translate renders translations into Swahili from Tanzania. However, this Swahili is misunderstood and misinterpreted in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Congo Swahili

DRC Swahili is a mixture of Swahili and French, with many terms specific to the Congolese context.
- **Mtihani** is an exam taken in school in DRC. Here Google Translate uses this word to refer to a medical test. Instead, in the DRC *kipimo* or *vipimo* is used.

- **Kutunza** is «to heal» in Congolese Swahili. Here Google Translate uses this word to mean «to manage the funeral». Instead, in the DRC one uses *kufanya* or *kushurulikia* when it comes to dealing with a funeral. So «taking care of a funeral» doesn’t really mean anything in Congolese Swahili.
What we heard: Why do the Safe and Dignified Burial (SDB) teams insist on intervening even for a death with a negative Ebola test result?

**Timu** is «team» in Tanzanian Swahili. In Congolese Swahili, however, this term is often better understood as a sports team. The term **Vikundi** in Congolese Swahili is better understood in eastern DRC.

**Zinasisitiza** ("insist") is Tanzanian Swahili. In Congolese Swahili it doesn’t mean anything. **Kutaka** (infinitive), **vintaka** (conjugated verb) is used in DRC.

By translating the translation from Google Translate back to English, the result is totally different from the original sentence: What we heard: Why do proper and safe funeral teams (DHS) insist on intervening even in the event of a tragic death?
**English**

There is also the fact of managing several chores around the house which can cause them to touch objects contaminated by the sick family member.

**Congo Swahili**

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**Google Translate**

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**Congo Swahili**

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- **Kuongoza** (infinitive), **wanaongoza** (conjugated verb) for «to manage or direct» is better understood in DRC than **kusimamia** which is understood as «to stand above».

- **Vitu vilivyocharuliwa na yule jamaa wa mgonjwa** means in DRC Swahili «objects soiled by this sick person». Instead of saying «viombo vya mugonjwa wa mu familia vyenye kukuwa na maambukiziaji» which means «objects contaminated by the sick family member».
- **Muda** means time, so the meaning of the sentence changes and becomes: *time to avoid* instead of *term to avoid.*
Machine Translation can be a good tool for translating content from Swahili to French, from French to English or vice versa. However, the nuances and differences present in Congolese Swahili should not be overlooked.

In addition, these machine translation engines do not yet have the capability in many local languages. We see that options are starting to be offered in languages such as Kinyarwanda (Google Translate), but there is still a long way to go.

It is important to communicate in a language understood by the local community, taking into account the specificities of the local dialect.

Translators Without Borders works to strengthen the capacity and quality of machine translation of marginalized languages. To learn more about our work on localization, see: https://translatorswithoutborders.org