DAY 22 · Part 3 · What It Can Do

Why is 'You're taking my hair' a mistranslation? — Translation

Five-Minute AI Lessons · Sep 28, 2026

Swap the words, and you get a sentence. Carry the meaning, and you get understood.

In a nutshell

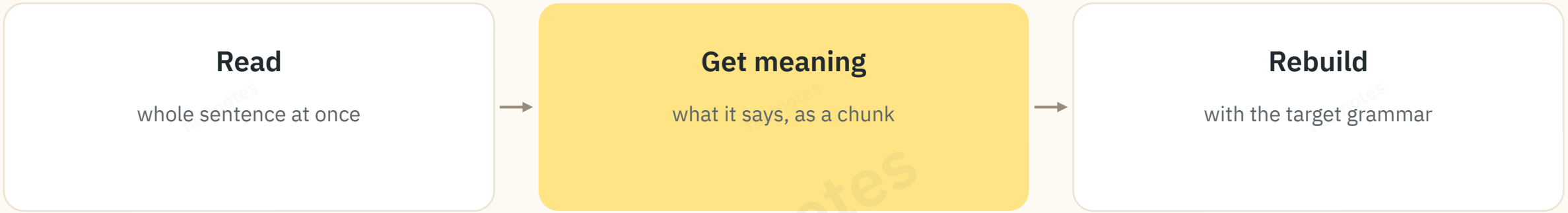
1. Translating isn't swapping words one at a time. It's **grabbing the meaning of the whole sentence first, then building that meaning again in another language**.

2. Old translators swapped in words and short chunks like a dictionary. Today's AI, a lot like yesterday's summarizing, **lets the words in a sentence look at each other to grab the meaning first**.

3. In 2016, Google first put this method into a real translation service (Chinese to English came first). **That's when clunky word-for-word translations dropped sharply**.

In one picture

Three steps of translating the meaning



Because it goes through the middle box, the translation can be right even if every word changes — even if it adds words that weren't there.

Key idea: the unit of translation isn't the word, it's the meaning

Experiment · Before & after

Word-swap translation vs. meaning translation

Me estás tomando el p...

Before

Swap the words in order, one by one, and you get something like 'You're taking my hair.' The gr...

After

Look at the whole sentence as one chunk, and you get 'You're pulling my leg!' Not a single word...

Carry the meaning, and it's a correct translation even when the words disappear...

¿Ya comiste?

Before

Spanish often leaves out 'you' — the verb's ending carries it. Swap just the words and you get...

After

It looks at the whole sentence, works out 'the missing subject is you,' and writes 'Have you ea...

To fill in what's missing, you have to see what situation the whole sentence is...

Se sentó en el banco.

Before

Pick the first dictionary meaning of 'banco' and you get 'He sat in the bank.' Even if the sent...

After

If the sentence before is 'Esperaba en el parque' ('He was waiting in the park'), it writes 'He...

The sentences around it become evidence. That's why putting a whole long text i...

We translated the same Spanish sentences into English two ways. Switch back and forth between the two, and you'...

Try it yourself in the web lesson · next-token.net/en/learn/day-22/

Just three questions

Q1

Why is it wrong to swap 'Me estás tomando el pelo' word by word?

① The number of words is different
② The grammar is too hard
③ An idiom carries one meaning as a whole
④ Because 'pelo' is a Spanish word

Q2

What does AI do when it translates '¿Ya comiste?' into English?

① Copies the words over as they are
② Writes out how it sounds
③ Cuts the sentence shorter
④ Works out the missing subject 'you' and adds it

Q3

Why is it better to translate a long text all at once?

① Nearby lines become evidence
② It has more letters
③ It translates faster
④ It fixes the spelling

Know the why, too

Q1

③

An idiom isn't the sum of its words — the whole chunk carries one meaning. So no matter how exactly you swap the words, the meaning doesn't come through.

Q2

④

Spanish often leaves out the subject. To fill in a word that isn't in the original, you have to see what situation the whole sentence is about — something swapping can't do.

Q3

①

A word with several meanings, like 'banco,' can only be chosen by looking at the sentences around it. Toss in just one sentence, and AI will always give the same answer too.

Swap the words, and you get a sentence.
Carry the meaning, and you get understood.



Tomorrow: Writing helper — on a writing assignment, how much do you hand over, and where do you take over?