

To Boldly Go...

**By Reg P. Wydeven
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As many folks know, I'm a huge fan of Star Trek. I enjoy the interaction among the triumvirate of Kirk, Spock and McCoy. The three friends need each other and the galaxy needs them, too.

The show is also inspirational. In the utopian Star Trek universe, everyone is equal regardless of gender, age, race or even species. In fact, Star Trek had the very first interracial kiss shown on television between Kirk and Uhura. In addition to causing us to aspire to ideological ideals, Star Trek inspired viewers with its technological gadgets.

Set in the future, the sci-fi show featured technological advances such as starships that could travel nine times the speed of light. While NASA hasn't yet built a shuttle capable of going warp speed, many of the innovations that first aired over 40 years ago are coming to fruition.

One such gizmo was the universal translator, which interpreted alien languages and allowed Captain Kirk to communicate with new races he encountered. Last month, Google unveiled "Google Conversation," an application for cell phones that can near-simultaneously translate speech from one language to another.

Google Conversation is not truly universal, as it can only translate between Spanish and English so far. Multi-lingual translations are probably not far behind seeing as Google's current text-based "Translate" online software already allows users to get very accurate translations between dozens of languages.

Google Conversation isn't perfect, but it's continuously improving. Linguistic and computer programmers cite several problems with translating, such as the speed of natural speech, accents or regional dialects, proper names and even background noise. While the app does make mistakes, Google felt it was novel enough to patent the idea.

When a company, such as Google, believes it has a unique idea that it doesn't want anyone else to copy, it can apply for a patent with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. Once granted, a patent confers to its holder "the right to exclude others from making, using, offering for sale, or selling" the invention in the United States or "importing" the invention into the United States.

A patent does not grant the right to make, use, offer for sale, sell or import an invention, but rather the right to prevent others from doing so. The term of a new patent is 20 years but is effective only within the U.S., U.S. territories, and U.S. possessions.

Like Google Translate, many other inventions inspired by Star Trek have also been patented. Communications officer Lt. Uhura wore a wireless earpiece that allowed her to communicate over the radio. Today, thousands of people use wireless Bluetooth devices to talk on their cell phones.

On remote planets, Captain Kirk would flip open his communicator to order Scotty to beam him up. I have a Motorola phone that flips open and looks suspiciously like a communicator. One of the most popular gifts this Christmas was Apple's iPad portable computer. The device strongly resembles the computer tablet Ensign Rand would hand Captain Kirk for him to input orders with a stylus. Finally, Mr. Spock could often be seen inserting colorful cartridges into the Enterprise's computer, much like we would plug floppy disks or flash drives into our laptops.

With gas prices creeping back up, I hope someone patents a real transporter soon so I can just beam to work.

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