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Session 3: CURRENT RESEARCH

SUMMATION BY CHAIRMAN

SEBEOK: First, perhaps I had better present my credentials. I am a linguist which is a profession, as you know, that was discovered by Mrs. Rhodes a few weeks ago. I come from Indiana University which is a remarkable institution in at least one respect. I believe it is the only one in the United States which does not have a machine translation project. My personal research lies in the use of computers for purposes of linguistic analysis per se, as outlined in a paper which will appear, I hope, in Session 8 of the Proceedings. It follows that when I speak to you I bring no wares to sell, I have no axes to grind, and I do not want to make friends or influence people. What I really would like to do in these few minutes is to raise some questions—to put my summation in an interrogative rather than a declarative form—questions which I feel need some careful thought. They will refer to Sessions 1, 2, and 3, and will perhaps be abridged to Session 4 this afternoon. My first question is this: Why is MT research entirely government sponsored? I am really very concerned over the fact that it is not supported out of regularly appropriated academic funds, either private funds or state funds. I would like to know why this is. Is it because the deans and presidents and people who manage universities regard MT an an ephemeral field, which does not deserve support? Is it simply because it is too expensive—which I do not think is the case? This leads me to the second family of questions—the problem of recruitment. As I make these remarks or as I raise these questions, please add to every sentence, "present company excepted". It seems to me that the people who work in MT fall generally into three categories. First there are a few very distinguished people in linguistics, mathematics, engineering, physics, a few very distinguished and dedicated people in linguistics. The second group of people, it seems to me, is a group that is attracted by what seems to be easy research money. The third group are simply "cranks" who are interested in mechanical contraptions and I think we can dismiss them quickly. I therefore raise a question: why are there not more first rate scholars attracted to MT ? I think this is a very serious problem for a group which will become a professional

society. The third family of questions I would like to raise has to do with the influence of MT reciprocally on the fields from which we all come. We have heard people make remarks about the influence of this theory of linguistics or that theory of linguistics on MT, but we have heard no remarks about the feedback from MT to linguistics, mathematics, and so on. Is there such a thing? If so, should this not be discussed? In linguistics the benefits that one derives from MT are fairly obvious. The machines are intolerant of sloppy analysis, and they demand precision and an avoidance of ambiguity. I would be very curious to know what effect, if any, there is on psychology, psycho-linguistics, mathematics, engineering, and particularly, on the design of computers. We have been fitting all our procedures to existing computers. I would like to know from some of you whether MT research will in turn lead to the design of computers which are more feasible, which are more usable for this kind of analysis. Obviously, computers are designed to compute not to do translation. Would it not be possible to build machines which are fitted particularly to machine translation? I feel that if these questions which I have raised are answered, perhaps the academic acceptance of this field will be made somewhat easier and MT research will be recognized as a significant scientific endeavor.