

ALLO? ALLO?

La ligne est terrible n'est-ce pas?

A recently privatized UK phone monopoly British Telecom has staked its place in the race for instantaneous automatic telephone interpreting. After three years of research, BT seems to have reached the prototype stage first, unless, as widely suspected, Nippon Telegraph and Telephone is just being characteristically coy.

The British system can translate English into German, Swedish, Spanish and Italian, and reverse capabilities are being developed. But this prototype will need enormous improvement at all levels – voice recognition, MT and voice synthesis – if anybody is ever going to buy it.

The system works with a speech recognition device that picks out key words from a bilingual dictionary of (at present) 400 phrases. The source language utterance is then automatically



translated and transmitted in the target language by a speech synthesizer.

The prototype has two main drawbacks. First, source language words have to be pronounced slowly and separately to be recognized and are then repeated by the speech synthesizer for verification. This makes the process so irritatingly slow that some callbox users might be provoked into acts of vandalism before they even got started. Second, the system's phrase dictionary is too small to be capable of processing anything more than unspontaneous speech in a very restricted variety of fields.

BT is serious though, and hopes to have a marketable product by the mid-90s. An additional projected spinoff is a portable black box interpreter with microphone attached, which, for instance, a tourist could use instead of a phrase book.