LINGUISTIC PRODUCTS

TRANSLATION SOFTWARE FROM TEXAS

Straight off the kitchen table, two Houston, Texas suburbanites have come up with a suite of standalone interactive translation programs (English and Spanish, French, Swedish and Danish) which they claim rival MicroCat and even Systran in price, speed and accuracy.

Ex-oil engineer and language enthusiast Ralph Dessau hit on the idea of his own MT program following enforced early retirement in the 1981 oil slump. He'd seen his share of the worldwide translation explosion as a company man in Venezuela. Back in Houston, Dessau got down to work with neighbor, veteran computer programmer George Mallard, and in February 1985 they launched their first Spanish-English program under the company title Linguistic Products.

The word-for-word direct transfer programs have a 70,000-word resident dictionary for each language, containing closed word classes, singular nouns, adjectives and all verb inflections (the latter making up half the total entries for the Romance languages!). Following transfer, algorithms generate noun plurals and adverbs in the target language, and a syntax subroutine deals with the main English-Romance word order difference: the placing of attributive adjectives before/after the noun. Additional user and phrase dictionaries, with lookup functions, enable the user to build personal word-lists.

Dessau admits the limitations of his relatively simple programs. They can't handle complex text. "But," he points out, "name me a commercial MT package that can! Plus we're the best value. We're offering a manual and a self-contained six-disk two-way package per language pair, to work on an XT or bigger, all for $ 480."

Mallard cites shopping lists, warehouse inventories, invoices and telexes as ideal grist for their mill. So far, they've sold around 80 two-way Spanish-English programs, all on and around the US-Mexico border. Their customers include public bodies: the Customs and Excise Service, local social welfare agencies and the Austin School District. Interestingly, to ensure maximum understandability, all official written communications for public consumption in Austin are first screened for complexity by the RightWriter style checker. They're not allowed to exceed a 6th grade difficulty level. A godsend for an MT program!

So far, Linguistic Products packages can only be obtained from Houston, though Dessau and Mallard are on the lookout for a European outlet. By mid-1988 they envisage a total of 16 two-way language pairs ready for the market. They are also currently negotiating with Laser Magnetic Storage, a joint Philips-Controlled Data Inc. venture to get their packages onto compact disk.