

SASKATCHEWAN MT SCAM

When in February 1988, the Canadian province of Saskatchewan was slapped with a Supreme Court decision obliging it to translate all its laws from English into French, they looked around for some hightech help – and stumbled upon a machine-translation solution based on the “psychological approach,” called “non-verbal language understanding.”

The province helped set up a company called Gigatext, into which it sank 5.25 million dollars in return for a 25% share. The province’s partners were a Montreal business person, called Guy Montpetit, and Professor Douglas A. Young, engineer, psychologist, and inventor of the new system.

In addition to provincial monies, Young’s own company, Nolrus Inc. (Non-Verbal Language Understanding Systems), Winnipeg, Manitoba,

received a federal grant to develop the new MT technology.

So far so good.

Things started going amiss when the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) launched an investigation into Guy Montpetit’s activities, following allegations that he was spending too much time and company money on slow computers and fast executive jets.

Still, the investigation resulted in a decision not to bring any charges.

But then, reports in the Montreal Gazette and Toronto Star announced that a federal body going by the self-explanatory title of the Workplace Automation Research Center had examined Young’s software and said it would not work.

EW set out to talk to the protagonists. Neither Montpetit nor Young was available for comment. But Brian

Harris, a University of Ottawa professor of translation, who had consulted Nolrus Inc. in the past, replied: “In practice, such systems are very difficult to devise.”

He added: “Other consultants gave an opinion that the project was not feasible.”

Opposition MP Eldon Lautermilch was much less diplomatic. “The technology just isn’t there,” he said. “It’s not working. It’s not going to work. Quit spending the \$50,000 a month. (*Gigatext’s monthly operating costs, paid by the provincial government – EW*), save the taxpayers a dollar. Cut the people’s losses and run. I mean enough is enough.”

In the meantime, Gigatext has ceased operations. Leo Larsen of the Saskatchewan Economic Development Corp., the provincial body charged with monitoring Gigatext’s activities, told EW that all of Gigatext’s staff had been laid off and a buyer was being sought for the company. However, if none were found, its assets would be liquidated.

Larsen did, however, express optimism for the future of the company’s “promising” MT technology. He even envisaged augmenting the company’s only current language pair, English to French, with new ones, and the development of the technology for other uses in the text-handling field.

Until the arrival of such happy times, it is understood that the province of Saskatchewan has decided to have the laws translated by “conventional” (manual) means. They must be less confident than Mr. Larsen.