

MACHINE TRANSLATION LOOKS EAST

The profound political and economic changes currently underway in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe are about to give a dramatic boost to machine translation technology there – and will doubtless cause more than a ripple in the rest of the world.

The increase in demand will come in large part from the the USSR's non-Russian-speaking peoples: the Baltics, Moldavians, Georgians, Armenians and many more – half the Soviet Union's population and growing. These nationalities are already becoming increasingly vocal in their demands that documentation of all kinds be available in their native tongues.

Says John Hutchins, MT expert at the University of East Anglia (UK): "In the past, the Russians were aware of the potential of MT but did not have the equipment. So they concentrated mainly on the theoretical side of the business. Now, though, they're more interested in producing commercially-viable CAT systems and translation tools."

One such Russian-made system is Mulus, a PC-based Russian-English look-up dictionary developed at the

University of Leningrad.

Without the inclusion of some form of MT technology, it is hard to imagine any sort of leap from the secretive, limited-distribution bureaucracy – as still exists in many Eastern-bloc countries – to the Western-style (ISDN!) office-of-the-future many Easterners are eager to emulate.

At the same time, MT technology worldwide might well gain a few new hormones from the East – despite the sorry state of computer technology beyond the rusting Iron Curtain.

The point is that fast computers are *not enough*. And Easterners have not been "spoiled" with the hardware to accommodate weighty programs – representing elaborate linguistic rules – as have Western and Japanese developers. Instead, they seem to be stronger on the heavy industry side of language technology: lexicography and corpus linguistics.

Eastern bloc MT contacts with Eastern colleagues are not a completely new phenomenon. The Fourth International Seminar on MT was held in Tbilisi, Georgia, in 1989. Participants included such Western leading

lights as John Hutchins, Veronica Lawson, Alan Melby, and Klaus Schubert.

Relaxed travel and emigration policies will no doubt enable new recruitment and exchange possibilities between East and West. And as the emphasis in MT development and production shifts from linguistic knowledge to translator skills, the Eastern-bloc countries will doubtless have quite a number of excellent craftsmen at the ready.

– Tony Whitcomb