

Systran Flourishes

In an industry which measures lifecycles in months, the longevity of Systran, now twenty-five years old, is extraordinary.

In suitable observation of its 25th anniversary, Systran, working in collaboration with Berlitz, hauled in the largest commercial translation services contract in the company's history late last year. The six figure joint contract was signed with a major CAD/CAM software developer and entails localizing the latter's documentation and software for French, German, Italian, and Spanish. Systran will produce the raw translations which Berlitz's translators will postedit. The new contract was the result of a strategic alliance between Systran and Berlitz, both leaders in their respective fields. Systran now offers Berlitz post-editing services to its customers, while Berlitz in turn offers Systran to customers interested in MT.

For much of its existence, Systran's income was derived largely from government contracts, notably with the US Air Force. While this source of revenue has not entirely dried up, Systran has nonetheless been diversifying in various ways, such as by offering commercial translation services. So as not to compete directly with translation companies, Systran produces only raw translations and subcontracts post-editing chores to them. Systran's services business is growing rapidly; sales are up nearly forty percent for the second consecutive year.

The La Jolla company has also been forsaking its mainframe origins by moving its software to more modern hardware platforms. As part of this process, it will be soon be converting its entire operation from the venerable IBM 370 mainframe to a single ps/2 fitted with an IBM 370 emulator card running OS/2. Some, thing of a technological wonder, the 370 card is approximately twice as powerful as the mainframe it replaces.

The 370 emulator appears most likely to be a temporary stop-gap arrangement while Systran proceeds with the lengthy process of converting its software from 370 Assembler to the C programming language to allow the translation system to run on Unix or 486-based computers. Part of Systran's ongoing seven-figure contract with the US Air Force is for C conversions. In particular, this includes the new Japanese-English system, which the company says is now at the beta testing stage; it is slated for final delivery by the end of the year. The Japanese system will also become commercially available, pending negotiations with a previous Japanese marketing partner.

Conversion to C is long overdue. Systran's enviably huge dictionaries, now containing an estimated two million entries, have traditionally been coded using 370 Assembler macros, an arduous task which requires substantial training. Dictionary maintenance is a crucial aspect of the machine translation process both for users and developers alike — and other MT developers have expended considerable effort in designing powerful yet user-friendly dictionary tools. Systran has offered customer-specific dictionaries in the past, but they have not been fully integrated within the MT system itself. However, the company is now redressing this situation; arriving hand-in-hand with the new C versions is Dictionary Builder, a GUI-based dictionary manager, which should permit faster, more complex, and linguistically more correct dictionaries in less time. What the company calls "assembly line" coding will permit eager dictionary builders to code on the order of five thousand entries per month. All of these come as welcome developments to Xerox, one of Systran's

most faithful and best-known customers in the commercial world. Xerox remains firmly committed to Systran: in February, the two companies announced anew, five-year contract.

Systran Translation Systems, PO Box 907, La Jolla, CA, 92037, USA; Tel: +16194596700, Fax: +16194598487