Eurolang: Turning Metal into Gold?

Halfway through the three-year trajectory of the US$l00 million Eurolang MT project, a brief update.

Word of a massive new MT project spearheaded by French technical documentation company SITE first emerged some eighteen months ago. Since then, details about the project, called Eurolang, have slowly been bubbling to the surface. Regular job announcements have appeared for positions with the central development team at SITE headquarters in Maisons Alfort in the suburbs of Paris, and Eurolang project members, most notably project leader Bernard Séité, have been engaged in an active campaign to drum up interest (and cash?) by outlining their plans. While SITE has mobilized a broad international consortium of industry and academia to lend a hand with the development of Eurolang — thereby qualifying for Eureka funding — its chief industrial partner now appears to be Siemens Nixdorf.

On paper, Eurolang will offer a state-of-the-art user and system interface. It will have an SGML-based "spine," or document path, into which various translation support modules can be plugged. Rather than expecting the translator to come to the system, Eurolang will be going to the user. Using SGML as an intermediary, Eurolang will handle the document format of standard commercial software packages, like Interleaf, Framemaker, WordPerfect, and Microsoft Word, thereby relieving the translator of formating chores. Eurolang has evolved away from being simply an MT system to being a total computer-assisted translation environment centered around a multilingual document database system and offering such resources as termbases, mono- and bilingual dictionaries, a translation memory (a bilingual sentence database), project management modules, and — oh yes — an MT system.

With Siemens brought into the Eurolang fold, Eurolang will obviously benefit from that company's long experience with MT. In fact, the kernel of Siemen's Metal MT engine is currently being rewritten in C++ for use within Eurolang. According to Bernard Séité, the Eurolang MT system as planned will be upwardly compatible with the current release of Metal. It will also incorporate some features of Ariane, the MT system developed by SITE subsidiary B'VITAL, as well as a pre-analysis strategy for "deep disambiguation" based on the work of Maurice Gross of the University of Paris. The company is aware, however, that a good industrial pedigree and the right academic credentials are not enough. Says SITE's Lee Humphries firmly, "this isn't an exercise in pretty formalisms. Our goal is to be shipping working C++ code in 1994 — without fail."

Currently working on Eurolang is a team of seventy at Maisons Alfort and a team of thirty at Siemens under the direction of Gregor Thurmair. How far have they come? At presentations, Eurolang representatives show slides of maquettes displaying an attractive X/Windows Motif interface for the system, allowing us to see that the icons for the system have been designed, always a crucial step. Beyond that, who knows? Séité is resolute that a March 1994 deadline is immutable for the launch of a Eurolang "MAHT" product line for Microsoft Windows and Unix. This will *not* include the MT engine; that will arrive later in the year with French, German, and English language pairs.

Eurolang MAHT is SITE's priority; Séité believes his competitors have been obsessed for too long with MT proper, which he sees as being a marginal five percent of the total translation tool market. With its team of a hundred and budget of US$100 million, SITE is throwing a lot of resources at Eurolang, but Séité confidently expects Eurolang MAHT to win a market share of 90% its first year on the market. Concerning MT, he says Eurolang will offer " least bad" solution, sufficient, however, to "surpass Systran and Logos and lead the market by 1995 or 1996."

If SITE were "just" building an MT system, you might be sceptical simply on the basis of principle, if only because of the low success rate of MT systems in general and of internationally distributed MT projects in particular. But the company is attempting no less than to assimilate the last fifteen or so years worth of progress in machine and computer-aided translation and exploit it within a three, year development cycle. By raising people's hopes to such a level, SITE is also setting the stage for bitter disappointment if it can't deliver. The last thing this industry needs is another failed MT project. Given that SITE is committed to meeting its deadline, the question is: just what will SITE be able deliver in 1994?

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