

BSO gets contract for Esperanto MT project

The Dutch software firm BSO, of Utrecht, has been awarded a Dutch government research and development contract to develop a machine translation system using Esperanto as an intermediate language.

The contract, granted by the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs, is over six years from the beginning of this year until the end of 1990. A team of ten people, half of them linguists and the other half software experts, will be involved, led by Toon Witkam and his assistant Alex Olde Walter.

The project enables BSO to carry on work begun in a three-year feasibility study carried out under the auspices of the European Communities (see report in *Language Monthly* issue number 5). The favourable reception given to their report of that study influenced the Dutch government in funding the continuing of the project.

The main task of the researchers is to produce a pilot operational project for translation from English into French using Esperanto as the intermediate language, with a view to future multilingual use. The system developed is likely to be partly dependent on interactive disambiguation, with a certain amount of pre-editing going on at the

text inputting stage. The person inputting the document need not necessarily be a linguist; it could be the author of the document, or a secretary. As the work is input the system would ask, to take a simple example, whether a "bank" was as in river bank or as in financial bank.

Toon Witkam told *Language Monthly* in March that Esperanto had been chosen because it offered good long-term prospects for maintenance and standardisation. There were source language and target language modules in existence, and it provided an excellent and well-defined interface, which was very well tested. They were having to streamline the Esperanto language to some extent, estimated at between ten and 20 per cent, to make it more suitable for MT purposes. But an Esperantist would still be able to read the amended version.

The BSO company is ten years old and is entirely Dutch. It has 300 employees in the Netherlands, working in various fields, such as medical software, space technology, decision support systems or economic modelling. The department involved in this project is known as DLT (Distributed Language Translation, or Distribuita Lingvo Tradukado in Esperanto).