

ASLIB 14th November 1978 "Translation and the Computer"

About 200 people attended this seminar to hear eight speakers on Machine Translation and related topics, which were being addressed from the point of view of the pure translator.

Professor Sager gave the chairman's address in which he outlined some of the involvement of the EEC in MT, automatic dictionary and thesaurus look-up, and text processing. The enormous costs of translation to the European Commission itself (half the budget of its parliament; one third of the staff) were an impulse towards the allocation of 3M Euro-dollars (about £1½M) to be spent over 3 years - 60% of this budget is earmarked for Machine Aided Translation, though as a later speaker (Mr. Arthern) pointed out, the EEC is not in the business of funding the development of MT.

Professor Wilks highlighted some of the pitfalls in the naive approach to MT, contrasting the views of Bar-Hillel, F.C. Schank and himself. For Bar-Hillel the fact that a sentence in a natural language cannot even be parsed without reference to some semantic elements which have to do not with any language under discussion but with the known or expected properties of things in the real world served as a proof of the impossibility of MT. Schank, however, was formalising and listing just this knowledge. Prof. Wilks offered his own "Preference Semantics" as being orders of magnitude simpler to construct.

Herr. E. Tanke of Siemens gave an account too detailed to be adequately covered here of the machine aided translation system used at Siemens AG mostly for the production of technical manuals. Advantage has been taken of the multi-lingual database to produce some conventional dictionaries.

Messers Goetschalckx of the EEC's Terminology Bureau and Arthern of the English Translation Department between them gave a view of the intent and actuality of EUROCAUTOM, the multilingual on-line terminology data-bank used directly by the EEC's translation staff. This still has some way to go to meet its design level: there are still problems of accessibility and inadequacy of content, but both were hopeful that this would continue to improve.

Professor Knowles gave what sounded like a horror-story about the errors produced by SYSTRAN when translating from Russian into English ("it handled it" instead of "he courted her", and many others too obscene to recount!). But despite this catalogue of woes (each of which was associated with some specific portion of SYSTRAN) Professor Knowles was careful to point out that SYSTRAN was by far the best MT system he had encountered, and he expressed confidence that it could be improved to a useful standard.

Professor Loh described the CULT translation system used at the Chinese University of Hong Kong to produce English translations of the Acta Mathematica Sinica published originally in Peking. Prof. Loh jokingly apologized for the small scale of the hardware he uses in his working system, and then went on to introduce for the first time a Chinese keyboard which had just been developed in his department and which we may expect to see officially announced in the Financial Times on the 8th December.

Finally, Mr. John Eliston of Xerox described the SYSTRAN-based system used for the production of technical manuals at Xerox, from the management point of view.

Ian Kelly