

Session 5: Summary of the discussion

Pamela Mayorcas, an ITI member, asked Dr Thompson whether the Japanese ATR project, which he had mentioned, was similar to British Telecom's telephone interpreting project, which she believed was based on hotel or conference booking dialogues. She asked how much BT had invested in it and whether Dr Thompson felt it was worth it. She suggested the money might be better spent on improving the language skills of humans.

Dr Thompson replied that the BT system differed from the ATR project by being based on a constrained area of discourse. He felt that it was not an unreasonable project to invest in, as it might see a usable product within 10 years. He could not comment on the actual amount of BT's investment.

Anna Cordon, of BT Research Labs, commented that the project could be applied to other constrained subject areas. It might, for instance, be used to help communication between staff maintaining and operating international telephone circuits worldwide, where many language pairs might be required. She offered to enquire about BT's level of investment, for anyone interested, and added that the project had been in existence for several years and would probably continue for a few more.

Steve Rawcliffe, of the International Union of Railways (UIC), asked Ms Cordon why BT didn't train its staff in languages instead.

Ms Cordon said that BT does indeed pay for some of its staff to obtain or maintain language skills. However, many language pairs are involved, between many countries, and it would not be feasible to train all staff.

Jeff Acheson, of the British Standards Institute, asked why Dr Thompson had said that recognisers could not cope with 'grammatical utterances'. It

transpired that he himself misheard 'erratic' as 'grammatical'. There was some further confusion with 'heretical'. Another recognition problem!

Peter Arthern, of the Council of the European Communities, commented that he had had linguistic misunderstandings with his (Dutch) wife and had found that it was important to catch the first word of the utterance. He wondered whether some languages were less readily recognised than others.

Dr Thompson said that he had always been of the impression that all languages were equally difficult. This had been borne out by research results.

Mr Arthern asked if he had tried random noise to improve results.

Dr Thompson: Yes, we called it Chinese whispers!

RAPPORTEUR

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