

Session 9: SEMANTIC RESOLUTION

INTRODUCTION

OSWALD: Gentlemen, as you can all see, because I made the mistake of arriving on time, I have been asked to serve as chairman as well as introducer. So now, in my capacity as chairman, I will introduce the introducer, who is Victor Oswald of the University of California at Los Angeles, and a consultant to Planning Research Corporation. I suppose I am here as the introducer today because I am the perpetrator of several ugly words that are perplexing or certainly are going to perplex the committee on terminology. One of them is the word "micro-glossary". I think I ought to stress the fact that I now regard that as a very old-fashioned word. We were trying to find a little dictionary for the Lilliputian memory stores that were then available. We really wanted them to be micro because everything in the business was micro, we had no hope of doing anything. I have since proposed and used a word which I am sorry to find does not have very wide acceptance; that is, "idioglossary". Obviously, there is no implication of size here. An idioglossary is simply a bilingual glossary of any special realm of discourse. I would like to pick up one or two remarks from the Symposium which seem to me entirely pertinent to a session that is going to discuss semantics. I owe to Mrs. Rhodes that beautiful phrase "the monster of polysemia". The other is from my friend Professor Dostert who says we are facing the "big blank wall of semantics". The situation is hardly so desperate. Instead of Lilliputian memory stores we can now operate with Gargantuan memories, with very rapid access time, and so cheaply that we can afford an enormous memory store for both source and target language. Furthermore, these vast memories can be correlated in such a way that analysis of the source language in the source-language memory is matched by a synthesis of the target language in the target-language dictionary. I will pick up another remark made during the session; this one is from Professor Harper, who said that the Russians are putting great emphasis on what he might call microglossaries. I assume that even with these enormous memory stores idioglossaries will be necessary for idioglottic identification of the components that you put into them. But by this device, on the purely lexical level, I think the monster of polysemia can be cut down to approximately human size. Let me give you my favorite example: there

is a German word die Rinde. In the domain of forestry this means the bark of a tree. In the domain of meat packing die Rinde is the rind on a slab of bacon. In the domain of the baking industry die Rinde means the crust on bread. I do not suppose we are really interested in those three, but when you get to anatomy die Rinde means cortex; and no surgeon, to the best of my knowledge, uses his scalpel on the bark of a tree, the rind of a slab, or a crust of bread--unless he is very hungry, or is a tree surgeon. As for non-lexical problems, I must again quote the most quotable member of this assembly. Mrs. Rhodes said if she knew how our mind works she would know how to handle semantics. I am not entirely sure that we do not know how our mind works in matters of translation. Quite aside from the purely lexical problem that I have just discussed, I would say non-lexical translation is merely a matter of recalling a huge number of acquired associations. No harder than that, but we do it everytime we translate. Such associations as these, "to school" comes out in die Schule, "to the station" comes out auf den Bahnhof, and "to my father", as in "a letter to my father", is ein Brief um meinen Vater. These are not quite idioms. They are discrete items of linguistic information because "to church" happens also to be like in die Schule, it's in die Kirche, for no apparent good, rational, or intelligible reason. I think the problem of such translation can be formulated, at least. It is to rediscover and identify all such discrete linguistic events. The emphasis is on the word discrete because these are, by and large, random linguistic events. It would be systematically perfectly correct, for instance, to put Schule, Bahnhof, and Vater in the same form class, and this plainly would buy you nothing and would produce only fatal results in machine translation. The process of discovery or rediscovery is sure to be long and torturous, and the space for the recording of such information must be vast, speedy of access, and not too costly. Now, actually, I think there is cause for hope rather than despair, if linguists will use a little less of their time working on models and, instead, come bare-knuckled to grip with their data. Our friends, the engineers, have handsomely provided us with a memory almost as good as our own. What we need to do is to learn how to make intelligent use of it.