

Letter to the Editor

Language Technology for Beginners

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I am writing in response to Varol Akman's review (*Computational Linguistics*, 25(1):161–164, March, 1999) of *Survey of the State of the Art in Human Language Technology*, of which I was editor-in-chief. Akman makes three points:

1. The *HLT Survey* does not succeed as a towering reference work on human language technology, much as the *Companion to the Philosophy of Mind* is in its own field.
2. Many or most of the sections are too superficial, nontechnical, and/or of poor quality.
3. The *HLT Survey* is disproportionately skewed to references, glossary, etc.

When form and formality are stripped away, a scientific publication is often much like a letter to a friend. The letter is based on shared knowledge, language, and experience. It is meaningful to the intended audience but makes little sense to strangers. Akman's comments make sense if the *HLT Survey* is viewed as a letter to friends. If it had been addressed to fellow HLT researchers and presented itself as an in-depth examination of research issues, it would surely be a superficial treatment. But unlike most scientific publications, the *HLT Survey* was addressed to strangers. As the foreword explains, "the goal of the survey is to provide an interested reader with an overview of the field—the main areas of work, the capabilities and limitations of current technology, and technical challenges that must be overcome to realize the vision of graceful human computer interaction using natural communication skills."

The *HLT Survey* was created to provide a free, accessible, comprehensive, and useful resource to anyone interested in learning about the theory, practice, capabilities, and limitations of language technology. The editorial board identified the target audience as "intelligent, interested readers," a list that includes teachers, students, industry managers, bus drivers, and circus clowns.

To provide the most benefit to the most people, the editorial board decided to make the book available free of charge via the Web. To my knowledge, there are no constraints whatsoever on use of the book. You can download it and use it in your courses to make friends of strangers.

To insure that the book would be intelligible and useful to a global audience, authors were instructed to follow a common template: define the research area, describe the state of the art, describe the main theoretical or experimental approaches, and identify key research challenges. Authors were limited to four or five pages, were

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encouraged to include descriptive figures, and were instructed to write to an interested, intelligent novice in the field. The editorial board worked hard to insure a consistent level of discourse to achieve the goals of a useful readable volume. These constraints were intended to produce a set of chapters understandable by novices (and consequently superficial to experts). The decision was also made to include a glossary to introduce unfamiliar terms to newcomers and plenty of references for interested readers.

Is the *HLT Survey* a useful resource? It is certainly a popular one. During the past four months (March 1999 to July 1999), 7,600 unique machines were served over 65,000 pages from the survey's Web site, or about 500 pages per day. During this period, the main *HLT Survey* page was accessed over 2,700 times by different machines in 60 countries. From these statistics, I infer that the *HLT Survey* is the most comprehensive and widely read overview of the field of human language technology today. It is being used as a textbook in several institutions, and was awarded the 1997 International Prix Logos by L'Association Européenne des Linguistes et des Professeurs de Langues.

Clearly, Akman and I have different opinions about the value of the *HLT Survey*. For example, I do not believe any sections are of poor quality. But please don't take my word for it. The good news is that, since the *HLT Survey* is a free resource, it costs just a bit of your time to visit the Web site (<http://cslu.cse.ogi.edu/HLTsurvey/>) and form your own opinion. If you like it, tell your friends and students so they can enjoy it too. After all, it's free.