A SOCIETY IN TRANSITION

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I was President in 1968, the year during which the Association for Machine Translation and Computational Linguistics became the Association for Computational Linguistics. Names always create controversy, and the founding name, selected in 1962, was chosen in competition with others, not the least of which was the one that subsequently replaced it. In fact, a change of name to the Association for Computational Linguistics was actually approved in 1963, at what has been described as an "unofficial meeting." However, that action was subsequently ruled out of order, since it did not result from a constitutional amendment. Five years later, proper procedure having been followed, the change was made officially.

The organizational impetus for the establishment of the Association did came primarily from a group of people who had been working on machine translation. However, as in most scientific societies, there has always been—and probably always will be—a tension between research and applications. The primary motivation for the name change in 1968 was the recognition, shared but by no means universal, that we needed to address more basic issues first. The report on Language and Machines: Computers in Translation and Linguistics by the Automatic Language Processing Advisory Committee (ALPAC) in 1966 became a focal point for this controversy. It was viewed by translation specialists as an attack on their work, and it certainly resulted in dramatic reductions in funding for machine translation. However, its authors claim it was intended as an argument for increased support of research. Certainly, the lead article in the October-November 1966 issue of The Finite String, which was titled "Potential Bright for Language-Analysis by Computer; NRC Report Urges Support," presented that view. In any case, the argument that computational linguistics "should be supported as a science and should not be judged by any immediate or foreseeable contributions to practical translation" seemed to frighten rather than challenge the funding agencies in the immediately following years.

Another factor motivating the change of name in 1968 was the appreciation of the potential for the use of computational linguistics in information retrieval and in stylistic analysis. Mechanical translation was only one of a number of exciting application areas. During that year, I spent a substantial amount of time coordinating with the Special Interest Group on Information Retrieval (SIGIR) and the Special Interest Committee on Language Analysis and Studies in the Humanities (SICLASH), both of the Association for Computing Machinery, and with the Special Interest Group on Automated Language Processing (SIGALP) of the American Society for Information Science. There were also meetings with the Linguistic Society of America, the Modern Language Association, and the Center for Applied Linguistics. In addition, during the year, ACL became a constituent society of the American Federation of Information Processing Societies (AFIPS), of which it had been first an unofficial and then an official "observer" since 1964. I was the first ACL member of the Board of Directors, and I became actively involved in a number of its committees, most particularly the one on Information Systems. I also became the ACL representative to the newly formed International Joint Conference on Artificial Intelligence and, subsequently, Program Chairman of its first meeting in 1969.

These organizational relationships, coupled with my own tendency toward global perspectives, led me to view the ACL as a central point around which everything else revolved. In computational linguistics, there are aspects of science, engineering, the humanities, the social and behavioral sciences, education, and communications. I contemplated the time when, in addition to being members of AFIPS, our Association would be equally implicated in the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Social Science Research Council. And I only regretted that at that time there were no aggregate groups for education, and communications to round out the picture.

This "message" was the substance of my Presidential address. I tried to leaven it with a little humor to make it more palatable, but I remember the banquet which preceded it (prepared by the University of Illinois Illini Union) as the most horrible meal the ACL has ever had to confront. I am sure that the failure of the members attendant to rally to my cause and carry my message to the multitudes (or even to Garcia) was due in no small measure to the poor quality of the food.

But let me return briefly to name changes and to the tension between research and applications. During our discussions about the forthcoming Conference on Applied Natural Language Processing, which the ACL will be cosponsoring with the Naval Research Laboratory, 1-3 February 1983, in Santa

Monica, we considered calling it "Conference on Applied Computational Linguistics." However, it became clear that we could not expect to have as broadly based a meeting as we wanted with that name. It is important now to reach out to the larger community. Once we have them listening to us, it will be all right for them to find out that they have been "practicing computational linguistics all their (professional) lives!"

Fascinated as I am about the applicability of computational linguistics for its own sake, what I find most exciting is the value that the use of our systems will have for deepening our insights into the basic research issues that still face us. I believe that studying people "organizing and using information" on the kinds of systems we are now beginning to develop can revolutionize our understanding of what we do and do not know about computational linguistics, as well as guide the improvement of our systems more effectively (Walker, 1971, 1972, in press).

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