

SESSION 8: CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

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As some of you will know, the British Library Research and Development Department is the funding body for library and information research in the UK, currently with an annual research budget of around £1.4m. We inherited many of our functions from our predecessor the Office for Scientific and Technical Information (OSTI), but acquired some new ones with our change of name and our move to the British Library in 1974. The Department has never seen itself as a major contributor to research and development in the terminology field, but our programme now covers scientific and technical information and also information in the social sciences and the humanities. We support research on the information needs of the professional specialist, whilst not neglecting the information requirements of the ordinary citizen. The latter are covered in our programme of community information and public library research.

The wide range of projects supported by OSTI and the British Library R & D Department over the past 17 years has included experimentation with new information services, assessments of the potential of new technologies, investigations of primary journal publishing, and developments in indexing, classification and cataloguing. The fields of language and terminology have always been somewhat peripheral aspects of our programme, although indexing and thesaurus construction overlap with these fields. Terminology is not an area in which librarians and information specialists in the UK have shown a great interest. Perhaps they regard the language in which concepts are expressed as something outside their responsibility, much as they regard the content of books and documents as a subject over which they would not wish to exercise any control.

Although terminological research may be of only limited interest to the library community, term banks could offer considerable benefits to librarians and information specialists, amongst many other types of users. Indeed one of the obstacles to the establishment of a UK bank may be the sheer diversity of its possible uses, an aspect which other speakers have touched on. In the public sector it is not clear where responsibility for its creation should lie. The high capital cost of setting it up, and the likelihood that a fair amount of subsidy would be required, at least in its early years, have acted as additional disincentives, both to the public and private sectors. There is also a

"chicken and egg" problem in that until users have access to such a service, they do not appreciate fully the extent of its usefulness.

In 1980 the Department made a contribution to breaking this circle by supporting a one year feasibility study by Professor Sager's group at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology. We also supported a study visit overseas enabling Professor Sager's research worker, John McNaught, to visit a number of European term banks and report on their organisation and services. Most of you will probably have seen the extensive documentation resulting from these studies (1)

The Department's involvement did not end with providing the money for this work (which, incidentally, amounted to around £11,000). We try to ensure that the results of projects are effectively disseminated not only through reports but also through journal articles, seminars and workshops. Our main effort in this case was directed into the organisation of a small meeting in December 1981 bringing together interested people both from Government departments and from the private sector. At the meeting, Professor Sager presented a paper outlining two approaches to establishing a term bank in this country. The first approach was the "top down" route, involving joint funding, development and exploitation by a combination of public and private sector bodies. The other was a more cautious approach whereby existing terminology collections would be coordinated across a variety of organisations. Since then I understand there has been some progress on the second approach but rather less on the first.

British Library R & D Department can do little more to help either approach. Our funds are for research only and cannot be used to support the building of a database. Having made our initial contribution, we hope that other organisations will now come forward with funds for development work. Of course further fundamental research may also be required and it is likely that the Department will be seen as a possible source of funds for this type of work in view of our past contributions. In fairness, however, it should be pointed out that the Department's funds are at present heavily committed to research more directly linked to the operational problems of library and information services. Naturally research of this kind must be our main concern and this has been underlined in the priorities set for the Department by its Advisory Committee.

I do not want to end this introduction on an entirely pessimistic note so I will conclude by expressing the hope that any conclusions and recommendations of this conference are widely disseminated to policy makers and funding agencies, including the British Library! The high attendance, and the enthusiasm apparent in the discussions, can only bode well for the future.

REFERENCES

- (1) SAGER, J.C. and McNAUGHT, J. Feasibility study of the establishment of a terminological data bank in the UK (September 1981), BL R&D Report 5642; idem, Selective survey of existing linguistic data banks in Europe (October 1981), BL R&D Report 5643; idem, Specifications of a linguistic data bank for the UK (October 1981), BLR&D Report 5644. All available from Centre for Computational Linguistics, University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, P.O.Box 88, Manchester M60 1QF.