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Session II: Summary of discussion 2

In the chair: Barbara Snell

(1) The session was opened by Dr M. Sieny from Saudi Arabia, who wanted to know from Ian Pigott why only 10 per cent of the EEC Commission's translations were made using Systran. The answer was that a number of factors were involved. The system ran US software, obtained in 1976, which needed three to four years' development work to make it suitable for use by translators; in addition, user-friendly equipment was needed, so that it was not until 1981, when a few word processors were introduced on a pilot basis in the three translation divisions in Luxembourg, that the system really began to be used. End-users had only recently become aware of the benefits of the new technology. There were still problems with equipment compatibility, and with the fact that not all translators were interested in using the system, which was in any case only being used experimentally at the Commission, and not in any other EEC bodies. Mrs Wagner, also from the EEC Commission, added that the amount of work done on Systran was more like 3 per cent, and that it was used for documents that would not otherwise have been translated.

(2) The next question came from Mr Marques, of UNESCO, who asked Mr Pigott to describe the philosophy of the Eurotra system and give an account of the progress made on it since 1981. Dr Harold Somers of UMIST was asked to answer. Eurotra started in 1978 as a research project of the EEC Commission to develop an advanced machine translation system, ultimately intended to cope with all seventy-two language pairs. In 1982, funding was approved for an initial five and a half years, during which time a prototype would be developed. All member states were represented on the project, which had some 150 people working on it. It

was still only at the research stage. Prototype software was being run in a number of centres. In reply to a question from the floor, Dr Somers revealed that the system had not actually translated anything yet.

(3) Dr Sieny asked Dr Nishida about work in Japan on translation into and from Chinese, and for details of progress made in developing electronic Chinese typewriters. It transpired that the Fujitsu company was developing a system for Japanese and Chinese, although no firm details were known about that or about Chinese typewriters.

(4) The next questioner (Dr Fulton) asked whether there was a Systran bureau in the UK yet: there was not, although negotiations were in progress to set one up. To date, such bureaux existed only in Brussels (run by Orda-B, a computer bureau, and Mendez, a translation agency), in Paris (Gachot) and in Luxembourg (Ecat).

(5) Peter Arthern then asked if there was any move by manufacturers towards establishing an industry standard that would make all hardware compatible. Ian Pigott replied that the only proposed standard was that of Teletex, but it was not widely implemented because it was only a telecommunications protocol; the need was for something much wider. Each new machine seemed to have its own character set, as often as not with restricted capability for handling foreign characters. The problem was that people were prepared to buy, which meant there were lots of quick sales to be made – even without compatibility – and that was all manufacturers were really interested in.

(6) Benoît Thouin added that the character set was the main stumbling block, as it governed the way the screen, keyboard and printer operated. The only way to resolve this problem was from within the hardware's internal memory representation, i.e. on the basis of the machine codes used to form individual characters. He said that the International Standards Organisation (ISO) was currently working on a broadly multilingual character set based on 16-bit code.

By comparison, different disk sizes, disk sector sizes and so on (i.e. varying hardware formats) were a relatively minor problem; automatic devices could act as interfaces. Worse problems were encountered at software level, in that different control codes were used for text presentation features such as underlining and bold text. Similarly, there was no agreement at user level on how to represent groups of information in databases. It really was up to the users to decide among themselves precisely what it was that they wanted the manufacturers to provide.

(7) The next question was directed at Ian Pigott and came from Mrs P. Thomas, at the University of Surrey, who was actively involved in running the British termbank project in conjunction with UMIST, and was about subject classification and whether it worked or not. Mr Pigott replied that at the EEC Commission coding by subject field did not work because all subjects were covered, and some texts were on several different topics. It had been decided to keep very general meanings for one-word equivalents, with sophisticated rules and semantic, syntactic or scanning checks to identify the subject field and actual meaning in a given context. This approach had been found to work well.

Mrs Thomas then added that Surrey University was now marketing the results of a terminology course held in March 1985, in the form of a terminology manual. She also mentioned another terminology manual from the Austrian Standards Institute, by Professor Helmut Felber.

Mr Keil from Saarbrücken said he did not agree with what Ian Pigott had said about subject fields, because his experience had been completely different. At his university, documents were scanned to find their terminological content. The computer decided on the basis of that scan what the text's subject was; any ambiguities were sorted out by human operators.

Towards the end of the session, Mr Le-Hong, of Daimler-Benz, Stuttgart, remarked that although compatibility problems were important, it was even more essential for translators to make a catalogue of minimum requirements for machine aids. They had to accept the challenge offered by high technology, but at present they were too afraid to say how they wanted the new technology to work for them. If nothing was done, we might end up with a phenomenon that could be called HAT – human-assisted translation.

At that point proceedings came to an end, and after a few closing remarks from Catriona Picken, delegates dispersed.

RAPPORTEUR

Patrick Sutton, Translator, Department of Health and Social Security, Room A311, Alexander Fleming House, Elephant and Castle, London SE1 6BY, UK