11.1 "SYSTRAN progress: Machine Translation in the European Commission."

Talk given by Mr. Brian Oakley of Logica Cambridge Ltd. on 30 January 1992 at King's College, London.

Mr. Oakley started by explaining that the European Commission had commissioned him to review the ECs multilingual programme. The EC was concerned that translation was still costing them a large and growing proportion of their annual administration budget and that there appeared no immediate hope of their expensive Machine Translation systems making any impact on this figure, and the potential additional countries which could be added to the Community in the not too distant future were an added concern.

He then entertained us with excellent examples of the difficulties of machine translation using quotations from Tom Stoppard's play, "Professional Foul".

After giving a brief history of the SYSTRAN translation system from its earliest days in 1965 with the USAF he said the Commission took a licence to use it from 1976, and in the 16 years since then the EC has spent about 40M ECUs, an average of 2.3M ECUs (current equivalent to £1.8M) per annum, on MT, mainly SYSTRAN.

The Commission employs over 1100 full time translators plus numerous part-timers, equivalent to 1500 full time translators altogether, and this doesn't include simultaneous translators required for meetings.

The MT systems were used mainly by,

- Professional translators

- Translators for repetitive functions (eg. invitations to tender required in each community language etc.).

- Non-translators for 'browsing' community databases.

In reviewing translator output he found marked difference between the EC with less than 1000 words per day of which only 1% was done using MT, and the Pan American Health Organisation with 5000 words per day and more than 65% done using MT. In considering reasons for this, EC translators emphasised quality, greater variety of text material, and more languages to cover.

However, he noted that Italian translators made better use of the MT systems than others, and put this down to wider acceptance of MT in their training.

In considering the reasons for low usage of MT in the EC he thought it might have been better to concentrate the use of SYSTRAN on the minority languages where need could be said to be greater.

However, he noted that translators need more than just a translation system. They also need a complete suite of programs to be able to handle their texts from input to printing, using data scanners, data communication systems, spell checkers, grammar checkers, special and local dictionaries etc. as well as word-processors, all combined with a user-friendly interface. In fact work was now progressing on an Integrated Translators Workbench which should help.

To improve usage he suggested that work should be concentrated on providing standard MT facilities for certain much used 'repetitive' tasks, such as invitations to meetings. He also felt that in the translation of general material, quality of machine translation could be improved if ambiguities were removed by 'pre-editors' who would have to be able to understand the source language and the subject, but need not be experts in the target languages.

The report has not yet been published by the Commission.

A lively debate followed!