

Japanese plan for automatic translation of telephone calls

Brief reports have appeared in a number of newspapers in the United Kingdom and the United States about a Japanese long-term plan for the automatic translation of telephone conversations, as part of Japan's fifth-generation computer programme.

Asked by *Language Monthly* to look into these reports Jiro Tsunoda, reporting from Tokyo, states that proposals have been put forward by the Japanese Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications to major

advanced countries for an earlier completion of the plan to develop the system. A basic agreement has been reached between Japan and France, and the Ministry will shortly begin sounding out the United States, the United Kingdom, the Federal Republic of Germany and others.

The Post and Telecommunications Ministry estimates that in the event of Japan having to undertake the development on her own, it would take some 15 years and would cost about 100,000 million yen (400 million dollars). It was in order to shorten the development time and reduce the cost that the Ministry was inviting major countries to participate in the project and share the efforts.

An automatic telephone translation service would be a system which enabled the telephoning parties to communicate with each other with the aid of simultaneous translation;

so, for example, a Japanese telephoning England could speak in Japanese and his interlocutor in England would hear what he had to say in English. The Ministry had decided to undertake this development because of the benefits which would result when it was implemented, in improving mutual understanding between people in the countries involved, and because of the impetus it would give to the information- and communication-oriented industries.

In a master plan worked out by the Ministry's Automatic Translation Telephone System Development Council, set up last year, it is estimated that 15 years would be needed from the initial simulation experiment to the completion of a prototype, and would require 20,000 million yen (\$80 million) for system construction alone, with additional costs for the construction of databases, plus the basic technological research making up the \$400 million overall estimate.

Where an arrangement can be made for joint development with other countries, the construction of databases could be shared, with the United States, say, for English, France for French, etc.. Speed of the development of the system might also be accelerated if the other countries were to also collaborate in basic technology research.

During a recent visit to France the Japanese minister for posts and telecommunications, Mr Sato, proposed to his French counterpart a Franco-Japanese joint development, and a basic agreement was reached. In France research into "automatic translation" technology has been taking place at Grenoble University, and it is intended to set up a greater degree of exchange of information on basic technology between the university and Japanese research organisations and groups.

The Japanese ministry is expected to put forward other joint development proposals to the United States and to other advanced countries, and when the degree of collaboration has been sorted out, the Ministry will be working out the overall organisation, and approach computer manufacturers and communication service industries in Japan interested in being part of this international project heralding the 21st century.

There are reports that a less ambitious programme for the automatic translation of telexes may be in operation by 1991.