

LETTERS

The Finite String publishes letters of reasonable length on topics relevant to computational linguistics. On occasion letters are reviewed by referees prior to publication.

Fondazione Dalle Molle
6976 Castagnola, Switzerland

May I clarify a little the two sentences of mine about the LOGOS Machine Translation system that you were kind enough to publish and which provoked Mr. Scott's more extended reply? I feel sure that the differences between him and me are only matters of definition of what is unrestricted natural language and it may be worth making that clear. Let me also add that nothing I said was meant to deny that the commercial MT companies like his own have done excellent work, and that I wish them well in the future. But whether they have solved the MT problem for natural language in the sense in which that problem was understood the last time round this cycle in the Fifties and Sixties, is another matter, and I remain to be convinced.

For those who have just joined in, let me remind them that the intractable problems of MT in its first phase were word sense ambiguity, case ambiguity (of prepositions, if you like) and referential ambiguity (roughly, of pronouns). Anyone who claims to have solved those problems without making any general theoretical claims about natural language in the process is either dealing with restricted language, or is in much the same position as one who arrives to demonstrate a perpetual motion machine. In the latter case, he is entitled to a respectful hearing, but there is nonetheless a certain scepticism in the audience. No amount of talk about millions of dollars spent, or important contracts obtained makes that hard fact any softer.

Mr. Scott says that UN treaties should be a test case of what is natural, rather than restricted, language. I quite agree, and if his system can translate an unseen UN treaty chosen by a neutral party to the satisfaction of a neutral audience then I will back down. He is careful not to say he has done it, and I personally believe that

he cannot do it, armed with a phrase structure grammar. a semantic categorisation system and nothing more. The reasons why are set out in any standard paper on Artificial Intelligence and Natural Language. They involve the essential role of semantic structures, inference and knowledge of the world in understanding and so in translation. I will be happy to send him a bibliography.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Yorick Wilks'.

Yorick Wilks