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THE ELIMINATION OF OBSTACLES TO MACHINE TRANSLATION'S TECHNICAL PROSPECTS

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The technical prospects of Machine Translation (MT) are and were unlimited throughout its short history. History is a good teacher. I have been continuously active in this field for the past thirty years, which basically comprise the history of MT. It is my belief that if we learn from past experience and eliminate those factors which prevent the present technical prospects being implemented as they should be, we will be making the greatest possible contribution in this field.

In the past, professional jealousy was the strongest detrimental factor; some of those people were willing to use every possible avenue to stop projects when they were close to success. Two examples: When a breakthrough was made at Georgetown University (illustrated by the demonstration of June 8, 1959, for which I was largely responsible), professional jealousy systematically mobilized all its forces. The effect was to slow down the project, and my departure was achieved by intrigue. By 1963 the goal was attained. Subsequently, in a private environment, I developed two new systems. The technical prospects were excellent and they had great potential. While I was demonstrating these systems in Europe, the same detractors in the United States went so far as to mobilize the National Academy of Sciences to introduce carefully planned hearings (as far as the selection of participants was concerned). These hearings resulted in the ALPAC report, which stopped the progress of MT systems which were ready to produce usable output. The climate for MT in the USA became so negative that I had to start SYSTRAN in Europe, where linguists and computer scientists were not under the influence of a group of jealous individuals who had one goal only: to put Machine Translation back on the drawing board and prevent the implementation of operational systems. When SYSTRAN proved itself, the same forces again attempted to stop any further development and prevent technical progress in the field. It was only because of quick action and a degree of good luck that I was able to save the system.

The commercial feasibility of the systems has gradually managed to cancel out the effects of the earlier detractors, but with the advent of the possibility of making real money, a new factor has entered the picture. In my opinion it may even be more detrimental to progress than professional jealousy was. This new factor is the lack of co-operation within projects and between projects. This lack of co-operation is to the extent that even legal threats are used and lawyers are involved. This trend may ruin the wonderful potential of MT before us now.

The technical prospects of MT depend upon the extent to which the managers of our present projects accept that there are higher goals than simple profit-making, and that MT, with its ability to overcome language barriers, can play an historic role in the development of Mankind. Misunderstanding between nations with different languages can be eliminated, and new relationships established between countries. However, to carry out this historic mission requires a perfect harmony in the industry. The market is huge, and all should be content if the marketing is left in each area to those best suited by location and expertise to do it. This would not only result in great returns for all but in the realisation of MT's true potential.