

ISSCO: Neutral but not Passive

The Swiss research organization ISSCO has its hand in no less than four LRE II projects.

The Institute per gli Studi Semantici e Cognitivi (ISSCO) did extremely well in the second round of the LRE program despite one serious handicap: it is not located in a Community country. And a handicap indeed it is, for these days, the Swiss, having rejected membership in the European Economic Area (the CEC plus EFTA) last December, are finding fewer open doors within the Community. (ISSCO's participation in CEC-funded Euroresearch programs is currently made possible by matching funds from the Swiss government.) All in all, life would be much easier for ISSCO director Margaret King and colleagues – as it would for the many pro-European Genèveois (it is the recalcitrant Swiss Germans who are against it) – if Switzerland were a member of the EC. ISSCO has nonetheless survived and even flourished in its alpine outpost.

Despite – or indeed maybe because – of its ambiguous position, ISSCO has enjoyed a prominent place in European linguistic research and AI for many years. ISSCO, particularly its director, Margaret King, played a vital role in the initial coordination of the Eurotra program. Says Steven Krauwer of the former Dutch Eurotra group, “In the beginning, ISSCO was one of the intellectual gravity points of the project.” Times, however, change, and ISSCO – like its Community counterparts – no longer pursues grand-scale, shoot-for-the-moon projects like Eurotra. ISSCO now concentrates on more modest endeavors, ranging from basic research in linguistics and AI to providing the more than three thousand users on the Geneva campus network with the means to access nine mono- and multilingual electronic dictionaries, including those of Collins and the Oxford University Press. The ISSCO group has not totally turned its back on translation and in fact has been working for several years on an application for translating avalanche reports automatically. Another area of great potential is ongoing research into ways of exploiting parallel bilingual text corpora (ie, previously translated materials) in the translation process. Of course, no MT conference would be complete without Maghi King leading a roundtable discussion on evaluation; she is also chairing EAGLES, an LRE-funded committee addressing standardization issues in the NLP and speech world.

ISSCO celebrated its twenty-first anniversary in September. A small but lively symposium of presentations by ISSCO staff and alumni was a fitting testament to its illustrious past and still very substantial presence.

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