

The Third MT Summit

A new organization heralds changing landscapes in the world of Machine Translation.

Washington, D.C. — No fewer than twenty-two working Machine Translation systems were demonstrated by developers and vendors at the third MT Summit held in Washington this past July, a clear sign that this, the flagship of NLP research, is no longer in its infancy. As befits a maturing technology, a number of the systems were treated to a theatrical baptism of fire by having to translate random input in the presence of a hall full of scrutinizing onlookers.

Looking back on the Summit, seasoned MT-hand Muriel Vasconcellos noted: "The fact that so many developers chose to take part in this event is testimony to the incrementally changing times: dictionaries are larger and more deeply coded, parsers are making fewer mistakes, hardware and programming languages are turning smarter and more powerful one day to the next, and fresh approaches are coming out of the laboratory and moving into the mainstream." The bottom line, concludes Vasconcellos, is that "MT output is gradually becoming more reliable."

Perhaps the single biggest item of news from the Summit was the emergence (finally) of an initiative to establish an international machine translation association. While the definitive structure has yet to be agreed upon, this new association will function as an umbrella organization for three sub-associations: the existing Japanese MT association led by Kyoto University's Makoto Nagao; the new Association for Machine Translation in the Americas, chaired by Vasconcellos with headquarters in Washington DC, and a European association, to be established under the auspices of the ISSCO, in Geneva. A house organ in the form of newsletter is currently being prepared under the experienced hand of John Hutchins, author of the definitive A to Z of the field, *Machine Translation: Past, Present, and Future*. Co-editors will be Geoff Kingscott of Language International fame and CRP/CU-CRETA's Tom Gerhardt.

Underlying these new organizations is a general perception in MT-land that there is an insufficient flow of information between academics, industry, and potential end-users, especially in the light of the growing number of small start-ups and maverick developers who provide low-price MT systems which bear little structural relation to their large-scale brethren found in the traditional MT sector. While the biennial MT summits go part of the way to alleviating the info-flow problem, associations functioning as central repositories for "local" information might be better positioned to match the demand with the supply, if and where appropriate.

Another area where an association might beef up both industry and public awareness is in training. As information technology changes the relationship between language and technology, an increased supply of MT specialists will be vital. As end-users, they will need to be sensitive to process control issues, document integration techniques, and other targeted skills usually missing from the traditional baggage of the translator. MT Associations could clearly help in ushering in this paradigm shift at a slightly accelerated pace.