

1991-1992: The EUROTRA Transition Programme

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****Author's note: Since the programme described here was not launched until several months after the SALT workshop, I have taken advantage of the time lag to update my paper with a view to making it more informative. As such, it is not an exact reflection of the oral presentation given during the workshop.

The opinions presented in the paper are my own and do not represent an official Eurotra viewpoint.

0. Background

For EUROTRA, 1990 marks the end of one era and the beginning of another. As the EUROTRA programme reached the end of its third and final R&D phase, its successor, commonly referred to as the Eurotra "transition programme" was adopted on 26th November 1990 (EEC 1990), just over eight years after the official launch of Eurotra on 4th November 1982 (EEC 1982) .

Details of the content, goals, and financial provisions of the new programme are contained in Council Decision 90/664/EEC. Here, we present an overview of the programme's main components and objectives.

1. Motivation and Objectives

The 1991-1992 Eurotra programme (hereafter referred to simply as the "transition programme") is described in the Council Decision as "a specific research and technological development programme for the European Economic Community concerning the preparation of the development of an operational Eurotra system" (EEC 1990).

Contrary to apparent popular belief, the brief of the original EUROTRA programme was to develop a pre-industrial prototype Machine Translation system. Its objectives did not include the development of a fully operational commercial system; rather, it was to lay the foundations for an eventual transition to industrial implementation. It is precisely this "transition" which provides the motivation for and focus of the 1991-1992 successor programme.

It is important to realise that, while the transition programme is a direct follow-up of the original Eurotra R&D programme, it is quite different in both its objectives and its mode of organisation .

The primary goal of the new programme is to create appropriate conditions for the start-up of the development of an operational system, by facilitating a smooth transition from the pre-industrial results of Eurotra's original programme. At a scientific and technical level, this entails R&D work directed towards improving the performance of the Eurotra prototype and, in parallel, the design and implementation of an enhanced system environment. At an organisational level, it requires the establishment of favourable structural conditions by opening up the Eurotra community to extend beyond its university-based participants to include the European industrial community.

In addition to this fundamental aim, the transition programme has two other objectives, as laid down in Annex 1 of CD 90/664/EEC. The first of these is the "advancement of work on lexicography and terminology" with particular reference to the promotion of common tools and standards. The final goal is to support training and cooperation between industry and research institutes.

2. Action Lines and Modes of Funding

The overall Community funding for the two-year transition programme is 10 million ECU, which is distributed over four main action lines. (Note that the figures given here are only approximate.)

2.1. System development environment (c. 2M ECU)

The implementation of a "system development, testing and research environment" which is a key element in enabling the transition to an operation system is to be commissioned to industry and will be financed entirely by Community funds. The work is to be awarded on a competitive basis and at the time of writing this process has just begun with the publication of a call for tenders, the deadline for submission of proposals being the end of July 1991 (EEC 1991 (b)).

This implementation will build on results of earlier design studies .

2.2. Language-specific work of national research teams (c. 4M ECU)

In the original Eurotra programme, all of the funding was distributed to national research teams via Contracts of Association, the finance being provided jointly by the Community and the national authorities of the twelve member states. In the transition programme, only 40% of the Community funding is to be distributed via Contracts of Association (the funding again being matched by national authorities) and, as a result, most existing national Eurotra teams have had to reduce in size.

The objectives of the language-specific work of national teams are to revise and extend the implementations which resulted from the original Eurotra programme, and to carry out applied research. While this work is similar in nature to that done under the previous Contracts of Association, its organisation has been rationalised and the overall scale of implementation is, of course, reduced.

2.3. Shared-cost research projects (c. 3M ECU)

One of the most interesting components of the transition programme are the shared-cost projects which introduce the possibility of collaboration between European industry and research institutes. A call for proposals for these projects was launched in March 1991 (EEC 1991 (a)) and, at the time of writing, the process of evaluation and selection among bids is underway. Successful projects are expected to start up in autumn 1991.

The Council Decision foresees three main areas for research under this heading:

- linguistic research of general interest;
- reusability of lexical and terminological resources;

- advanced system architectures.

It is envisaged that most projects will be funded jointly by the Community and the participating industrial collaborators.

2.4. Training, subsidies and evaluation (c. 1M ECU)

The programme also foresees the award of a number of grants for postgraduate research and training. Some finance is also required to support the evaluation of the transition programme which is required under the terms of the Council Decision.

3. Beyond 1992

The 1991-1992 transition programme is part of the Second Framework Programme (1987-1991), though in practice its execution will overlap with the Third Framework Programme (1990-1994), in which further provision is made for the support of NLP activities which are considered to have considerable strategic importance in Europe.

The "Linguistic Research and Engineering" (LRE) line of action in the Third Framework programme is based on the results of previous Community initiatives, including Eurotra. At the time of writing, the process of formal approval of work programme proposals is underway. When this process is completed, the first calls for proposals can be launched.

The future of NLP and MT in Europe is, in the short to medium term at least, secure. This is in no small measure due to Eurotra which has heightened awareness and established a body of expertise which is without parallel. There is also good reason to be optimistic about the long-term destiny of European NLP, and it is to be hoped that activities in this area continue to enjoy Community support - and indeed, support at national level - so that the scope of research and the number and diversity of those taking part in it can expand further. The Eurotra transition programme, by encouraging the rapprochement of academic and industrial sectors, is making a useful contribution to these long term objectives.

References

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