

TACnology Corner

NEWS NOTES

35th Anniversary of Machine Translation at Georgetown University

Commemorating the 35th anniversary of the Georgetown-IBM project, the first demonstration of machine translation on an electronic computer, Georgetown University's annual Round Table on Languages and Linguistics featured presentations on March 9 and 10 by MT experts from around the world.

The roster of speakers included: Michael Zarechnak, who has headed the Russian-English research effort at Georgetown since 1956; Sergei Nirenburg, a star in the diadem at Carnegie Mellon's Center for Machine Translation; Margaret King of the University of Geneva's Institute for Semantic and Cognitive Studies (one-time secretariat of EUROTRA); Makoto Nagao from the University of Kyoto, director of the team that has developed the Japanese government's MU system; and Winfred P. Lehmann, long-time head of the Linguistics Research Center at the University of Texas, which has been working on MT since 1958. Also sharing the spotlight were two of ATA's own: Veronica Lawson and the undersigned.

The presence of Professors Zarechnak and Lehmann, both of whom have been leaders in MT research for more than 30 years, brought history to life. Professor Lehmann's address summarized "Achievements, Problems, and Promise." Professor Nagao's, in turn, gave a map of new directions in MT. Recent approaches were presented in more detail by speakers Zarechnak (new ways of representing semantic information in MT), Nirenburg (knowledge-based MT), and King (unification grammar in MT).

Professor Yuri Marchuk of Moscow University had also been scheduled to speak about MT on PCs in the Soviet Union, but he was unable to

obtain a visa to travel to the U.S. A hastily organized panel on the subject of MT on PCs in general, chaired by Leonard Shaefer with participation by Marjorie Len, Margaret King, Makoto Nagao, and Veronica Lawson, was the hit of the day. The panelists explored a wide range of issues, pointing out the advantages for users (as well as the hurdles for developers) and providing sound advice on what the public can expect--now, in the near term, and five years from now.

The papers by Veronica Lawson and myself focused on the use of MT in real life--for "translation as she is paid for." Mine undertook to classify the types of corrections that posteditors make and organize them according to whether they respond to problems of syntax, cohesion, or coherence. My hope is that these criteria can be used for the guidance of translators doing a "rapid" postedit as opposed to a "conventional" one. Veronica's title spoke for itself: "Practice Makes Less Imperfect."

Upcoming Conferences

The calendar for 1989 is larded with international conferences on machine translation.

On April 26-28 the International Forum for Translation Technology (IFTT'89), to be held in Oiso, Japan, will be a celebration of another kind. Japan, which was spared the doldrums of the late 1960s and early 1970s brought on by the ALPAC report in the United States, has been steadily whittling away at the problems of machine translation and now has some 20 systems either under development or already in practical use. IFTT'89 will present the preliminary results of the JALPAC Report, a study long in the making of MT around the world, which is expected to show that MT has indeed made many positive contributions. There will be some 500 participants, and speakers and panelists will be coming from Europe and the United States as well as Japan. Again, ATA will be represented by Veronica Lawson and myself.

Another important conference on the calendar is the MT Summit, to take

place on August 16-18 in Munich. This will be follow-on of the first MT Summit, held in Hakone, Japan, in 1987. Bringing together users, experts in research and development, and government policy-makers, the conference will take an up-to-date look at how MT systems are being put to use around the world and how they can best be implemented in the future, especially in support of intra-European trade. And once again, Veronica Lawson and the undersigned will be there!

No, Veronica and I will not be attending the Fourth International Seminar on Machine Translation in the Soviet Union at the end of the year, but hopefully someone else from ATA will be there. Stay tuned...

Clarification

One short comment in closing. The *Washington Post* article of February 24, quoted at length on the front page of last month's *Chronicle*, contained some misleading information about MT which was repeated in these pages. A source, whose identity was not made clear, stated without qualification that "actual machine translation has an accuracy rate of 70-80, and editing of the machine's output can cost up to \$40 per hour extra." In point of fact, the "accuracy rate," if such a thing exists, is considered to be over 90% for the more robust and highly developed systems, of which there are many. The specialized systems do even better. John Chandiooux tells me that METEO 2, which translates Canadian weather forecasts, is now requiring less than 3% human intervention. As for the figure of \$40, it probably refers to what translators are paid per 1,000 words of postediting in my office at the Pan American Health Organization. Our track records show that posteditors often produce 1,000 words of machine-readable final copy in an hour, or 8,000 words of nice usable stuff in a day. Sure they get \$40 an hour, and everybody wins!

— Muriel Vasconcellos, Chair
Committee on Translation
and Computers