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Bonjour, Eurolang Optimizer

The first in a line translation tools from Eurolang ushers in a new era in translation technology.

Paris, France — Just a few short days before the launch of Eurolang Optimizer the air is tense at Eurolang development headquarters in Maisons-Alfort, a suburb of Paris. In a large conference room, small groups of people huddle around large A3-size monitors, practicing with the new software. “We made the decision to use translators and other end users to demonstrate Optimizer,” explains Bernard Seite, Eurolang’s director. “Not our technical people. This will be one of my marketing arguments: look, anyone can learn to use the software in just a few days.”

For Eurolang, the Monday event, to be held at the Paris Hilton, will be a crucial moment, for it must make good on its promised first quarter ‘94 ship date and make a start on recouping the hundred million dollar investment Seite has attracted for this undertaking. A new collection of glossy brochures have been prepared, sporting splashy graphics that highlight the Eurolang vision. Naturally, this being Eurolang, a new video has also been prepared, which opens to the strains of Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony, a detail undoubtedly free of any symbolic significance. If all of this sounds like highly unlikely trappings for a brood of Euro language technologists, you are right: something out of the ordinary is taking place here. The hallmarks of “just” another MY project have been briskly swept away in a mad commercial dash to bring a suite of major league translation tools onto the market. While the official Eurolang documentation is festooned with the names of prominent European research institutes, the operation gives every sign of being largely propelled by the efforts of SITE and its major industrial partner Sietec (SiemensNixdorf). With the chain-smoking Seite, Eurolang has an astute businessman leading it into the foray; it also has an experienced systems designer, Fernand Winkler, Eurolang’s technical director, as its architect. Both such entities are still something of an oddity in the linguistic engineering world.

Whereas most of the translation tools introduced over the past ten years originated as simple stand-alone products that slowly evolved in terms of functionality and multi-user support, Eurolang Optimizer greets the light of day as a heavy-weight system capable of tackling large, complex translation projects involving multiple languages and many translators. Eurolang has adopted a client/server model for Optimizer, thereby facilitating the distribution resources among users and sites. The Optimizer server runs under either Unix or Windows NT Advanced Server. For data storage, Optimizer draws on either the Eurolang native database or Oracle, Sybase, or SQL Server RDBMSs, depending on a company’s requirements. A company will want the latter if it plans to handle large amounts of data, such as the Optimizer installation for Microsoft. This contains upwards of 700,000 entries (Microsoft, after all, localizes products for no less than thirty national languages), a volume which Seite claims would “choke” a non-relational system like Trados’s Translator’s Workbench II.

The client/server concept is a new one, and C/S applications have the reputation for requiring extensive support. But Fernand Winkler explains that Optimizer has what he calls a “loosely coupled” design and does not impose steep performance requirements. Optimizer is now being installed on the networks of several of Eurolang’s customers, and according to Winkler they are essentially turnkey installations. In its current client/server configuration, Optimizer is not a package designed with freelance translators or small translation shops in mind. The initial Paris roll-out was largely intended for potential customers with hefty translation appetites. However, a slirnrned-down stand-alone

version of Optimizer has been announced and should be due later this year.

A company with a hefty such translation appetite is Microsoft, and last fall, the word indeed got out that it had licensed a large number of copies of Optimizer, a major breakthrough for Eurolang. Says Seite, “I set as a goal last year attracting Microsoft as a customer. I realized that if I couldn’t capture Microsoft that we were doing something wrong.” The association with Microsoft has gone beyond three hundred or so Optimizer licenses; the latter’s needs have also dictated the design of the final product. Seite’s timing was exceedingly fortuitous, for over the past few years Microsoft had been assessing its internal localization needs and corresponding tool requirements in view of the increasing importance of its international product strategy. This resulted in MATE, a definition study of these needs. Seite obviously saw an irresistible opportunity staring him in the face, and the consortium correspondingly adjusted its course and incorporated Microsoft’s specifications in the final design. Hence, Microsoft’s version of Eurolang is called Eurolang MATE; the rest of the world gets Eurolang Optimizer. In return for this, Eurolang got a ringing endorsement from the world’s most powerful software company; Microsoft’s senior director of international operations Peter Neupert was on hand at the launch to sing the praises of Eurolang.

In a typical Optimizer scenario, a translation manager would prepare a “translation kit” for a translator using the administration module. This would consist of “pre’translating” a section of the source, which amounts to comparing it against a terminology database and a translation memory database. The result would be a color-coded document, with different colors for perfect matches, fuzzy matches, known technical terms, and — eventually — machine-translated texts.

A translator would then open the text in the application in which the document was created (Framemaker, Interleaf, and Word are currently supported) and translate the document on-screen. Optimizer works in close conjunction with the underlying application, providing additional services, such as a glossary and a copy of the source text for reference purposes. It also automatically propagates text strings which occur more than once throughout the text. To allow for validation of new entries, Optimizer does not update the central databases automatically; this has to be done manually by the administrator by merging the translated kit back into the project upon completion. For cost accounting purposes, Optimizer provides statistics on the total number of words in a translation, with the number of exact hits and fuzzy matches.

At the moment, Optimizer supports English, French, German, and Italian as source languages; Spanish will be available at the end of April. Optimizer supports twenty languages for target output.

One obvious advantage of the Optimizer approach is that translators can continue to work in environments to which they are accustomed, i.e. standard word processing packages. This has been woefully underestimated in the past by vendors who have supplied translation tools which require their own editor or do not read formatted files. Another advantage is that the pre’processing of texts, including the computationally intensive fuzzy matching, takes place on a separate system; the end-user package does not need to share processing time and can run on more modest hardware.

At this point, you might ask: “But wait, I thought Eurolang was supposed to be an MT system proper. What have these people spent three years and a hundred million dollars doing?” Regardless of how Eurolang was positioned, promoted, or perceived in the past, today the consortium is focussing on computer-aided translation tools. In Bernard Seite’s eyes, the market for MT is but a small fraction — twenty percent — of that for translation tools. Stronger still, Seite sees the Eurolang mission ultimately encompass’ing the entire field multilingual communication, of which translation tools represent likewise just a small fraction. This makes good business sense: there are a lot more people writing in foreign languages in Europe than there are translators. Yet it should not be construed that the Eurolang consortium has abandoned MT. According to Seite, in September of this year we will be seeing the first Eurolang MT rig rolling off the conveyor belts; this will be a consolidation of Sciotec’s METAL MT system with the

Eurolang Optimizer extensions.

As momentum slowly gathers, Seite is confident that Eurolang Optimizer should be able to capture a solid market share of twenty-five percent within the coming year. Seite says that there is nothing radical about the Eurolang formula, proclaiming that his contribution has been “trivial,” and he is surprised that no one has envisaged it before. For him, the competition is not the small software houses which have largely populated this hitherto peaceful segment of the software market, nor is it IBM; Seite summarily dismisses the translation packages currently on the market as insignificant. Rather, it is the specter of a Japanese software factory turning out a clone in short order which haunts him.

But Eurolang is raising both the profile and stakes of this business, and that risk comes with turf.

While Optimizer may now be shipping, Eurolang still has a long way to go before it establishes itself as the preeminent supplier of translation tools — and before it begins to turn that hundred million dollar investment into a payoff. That means delivering what it has promised, and promising only what it can deliver.

Eurolang Optimizer licenses start at FFR15,000 (US\$3,000)

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