

MT Summit VIII: Opening of the conference, 19 September 2001

Your Excellency, President Fraga, Conseillero Corras, Dr. Antonio Cid, Dr. Jesus Martinez, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the eighth MT Summit conference in Santiago de Compostela.

It is a great honour for us to have with us this morning the president of Galicia. Galicia is a most appropriate location for a conference devoted to machine translation. The main focus of research and development in this field has always been the major languages of the world, the languages of political affairs and of commerce: English, French, German, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, etc. However, other languages have not been neglected, and in recent years there has been increasing attention paid to what are commonly known as ‘minor’ languages. In Europe, for example, there is much activity on the languages of eastern Europe, in Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Bulgaria, Estonia, and so forth, in anticipation of the accession of these nations to the European Union. In Britain, more attention is being paid to the languages of immigrant minorities: Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Gujarati, etc. And in Spain, there is, as we shall hear in this conference, the research on Catalan, Basque and Galician.

We are speaking here not just about systems for automatic translation, but also computer-based tools for translators such as electronic dictionaries, access to large corpora of translations, the management of terminology, use of large lexical resources, and so forth. And we are also talking increasingly about aids for cross-language communication of all kinds and in all media – from the Internet to the television screen, from the technical manual to the history textbook. We are talking about tools for exploiting resources of information and data in whatever language and for the benefit of all, for the general public as well as for the experts. Our common goal is to provide the means for breaking down the language barriers of communication.

Translation and improved communication cannot alone remove prejudice, hatred and enmity – certainly not the fanaticism that led to the horrors we witnessed just a week ago, and which have prevented many of our American friends from joining us here. But translation, whether human or automated, does have a clear role in reducing misunderstanding, in bringing together peoples of different languages, cultures and beliefs.

In medieval Europe, the *lingua franca* of communication was Latin. Nevertheless, not everyone was fluent or confident in it, and here in the Cathedral you will see that confession boxes were specifically designated for pilgrims from France, from Hungary, from Germany, etc. Although today, English is fast becoming the *lingua franca* of the world, the majority of the population will always need, indeed will legitimately demand, translations into their own native tongue. This is as it should be. Linguistic and cultural variety is one of our most cherished assets. Using computers to support cross-language communication serves to mitigate the worst effects of the dominance of English.

Since the Middle Ages, Santiago has been the goal of pilgrims from all parts of Europe. This week, Santiago is the venue for experts in machine translation from throughout the world. Pilgrims came to confess their sins, and to prepare themselves spiritually for their future life. We are here for more mundane and earthly concerns: to learn what progress has been made and to discover and discuss what the future may bring.

We are all greatly honoured that His Excellency the president of Galicia has graciously agreed to open our conference.

John Hutchins
(IAMT president, and conference chair)