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Interview

Translate! Summarise! Telemedia's Heiko Schick is keeping an eye on language technology suppliers.



Heiko Schick

Le Journal asks the German online service's technology watcher about gaining competitive advantage with language automation in the coming years.

LEJ: Telemedia is an online information service. Why are you interested in language technology?

Heiko Schick: Telemedia has several points of contact with language technology.

First, the company operates in a technical sense the largest European local online service called cityweb. This service has over 55,000 customers in the Ruhr area, Hamburg and Berlin. Premium language-enabled features such as translation can help differentiate one online service from another. Any application that boosts multilingual access to information will offer business advantage to providers of online and WWW services.

At the same time, Telemedia is a member of the European Union-funded project MOMENTS (MOBILE Media and ENTertainment Services) and MULINEX (Multilingual Indexing, Navigation and Editing Extensions for the WWW). Through specific issues that arose during these projects, Telemedia has come into increasing contact with language technologies.

Telemedia is also related to Lycos Bertelsmann, the search engine service with a strong interest in German language searching. For typical German users and speakers, English is a foreign language, and since most HTML documents are in English, we have felt a strong need to offer some kind of translation function and enhanced language-specific search options.

Most of our customers prefer German for their Websites, but for internationally-oriented customers we usually add a second language (usually English), e.g. for Sonopress (www.sonopress.de). The Web itself puts no restrictions on which languages surfers might use.

LEJ: How do you evaluate human-machine interfaces in terms of language needs?

H.S. As yet, there is no clear benchmark for evaluating the dialogue process; but there

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is no real need for this for Web business sites. At least in Germany, the majority of users of Web-based information are able to read English Web-pages. As more non-English Websites go up, it will be necessary to offer translation and/or summarisation.

The available automatic translation services are not yet sufficiently adapted to offer the service levels that we require. Which means that for important information, it will still be necessary to use multiple updates across various languages rather than expect users to push the translate button to read a specific document.

Our goal is to automate the translation process and provide very high quality levels of output. We expect human language technologies to provide this sort of performance in the medium term.

LEJ: What formula do you choose to develop language applications -- off-the-shelf technology or in-house research?

H.S. Generally speaking, we try to combine the best of both worlds - R&D and off-the-shelf. We use off-the-shelf technology wherever possible. Naturally we modify and customise the technologies as necessary. Telemedia has its own R&D department, and if there are any promising technologies under research there, we try to "mix" them with the off-the-shelf applications.

LEJ How do you imagine a Web based publisher will be serving its customers in the year 2010?

H.S. In my vision, customers of a Web information provider will get far more personalised information than today. There will be intelligent "agents" to deliver all the information you need on a specific topic. The information will be extracted from the largest knowledge base in existence, i.e. the Web itself.

Due to the growing variety of human languages used on the Web, these agents will have to perform tasks such as summarisation and translation.

I also expect the various media platforms to converge so that it will be possible to communicate (phone and video) and access the Web, television and radio by using just one small device.

All information will be available to you at a single point via this single device. We see our business as developing this sort of integration and providing the technologies required. We also see it as our mission to enhance the cultural shift that will facilitate acceptance for these new technologies.

LEJ: What is your wish list of language processing technology applications that suppliers should take note of?

Well, everything boils down to just three key technologies -- but they cover a vast field of endeavour:

- Semantically correct translation.
- Semantically correct text summarisation.
- Real time translation of audio (video) streams

Heiko Schick is a director of external contacts for R&D projects at Bertelsmann. He studied maths and computer science at Philipps Universität Marburg.

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