

Message from ELRA President

Joseph J. Mariani

LREC, the Language Resources and Evaluation Conference has now become the regular rendez-vous of those who believe language resources and evaluation are of crucial importance for the development of written and spoken language science and technology.

But this fourth issue of LREC is different from the three previous ones, as we are deeply missing our friend Antonio Zampolli, the first president of ELRA, and general chairman of the first three LREC conferences, who died in August 2003. And we also miss Angel Martin Municio, ELRA Vice-President and a major actor in the decisions of having LREC in Spain in 1998 (Granada) and 2002 (Las Palmas), who died in November 2002.

Since its creation in 1995, ELRA, the European Language Resources Association, has developed a lot its activity, in strong relationship with ELDA, its Evaluation and Language Distribution Agency. With close to 100 members, and more than 700 resources in its catalogue, ELRA now appears as a major actor in the field of language technologies worldwide. Its initial activity was only related to LR distribution. Since then, it was extended very naturally to LR validation, and, more recently, to LR production and Language Technology evaluation.

The activities of the association depend deeply on the participation and initiatives of the Board members. I take this opportunity to thank all those who participated in ELRA, since its very beginning. I would like to mention especially those who are quitting the Board, in agreement with the statutes of the association, which limit the number of consecutive terms to three: Daniel Tapias, ELRA secretary, Harald Höge, ELRA Treasurer and Volker Steinbiss, ELRA Vice-President. I will also quit the Board for the same reason, with the satisfaction of having participated in the founding of a successful initiative, starting from the EC Relator project, where the idea of a European association on Language Resources was worked out, and with the pleasure to have now an healthy entity, benefiting from the support of ELDA, which has now close to 20 employees.

I would also like to thank the actors who participated in the definition and creation of ELRA, with a special mention to the representatives of the European Commission who helped the association in its early days, and especially Vicente Parajon-Collada, Roberto Cencioni and Nino Varile, and to the Relator group of high level consultants, comprising Brian Oakley, André Danzin and Bernard Quémada.

The idea of creating a scientific conference in the field of Language Resources and Evaluation, in order to meet the needs of the Language Technology community, both scientific and industrial, was expressed at an Elsnets Advisory Board meeting, and was immediately submitted at the next ELRA board meeting. The initiative has been a success from the very first conference in Granada, and each time since then, in Athens, Las Palmas and now Lisbon, the number of papers submitted and presented, and the number of participants increased. Antonio and Angel would have been proud to announce more than 500 papers and more than 800 attendees from 50 different countries this time. I dedicate this success to their memory.

LREC 2004 will also be the place where the Antonio Zampolli prize will be awarded for the first time, in order to recognize outstanding contributions to the advancement of Language Resources and Language Technology Evaluation.

Language Technology appears as a very active field of research and development. More and more actions are gathering the specialists of spoken language processing and written language processing altogether, with links to other communication media, such as vision and gesture. The coverage of that field by the European Commission went from a specific program on Human Language Technologies in FP5, to larger programs on Multisensorial interfaces and Knowledge management in FP6. Now we are preparing FP7.

Even if the efforts devoted to that field have been large for many years, even if they resulted in many applications and products which have been put on the market, even if Language Technologies are used everyday, embedded in various devices and services, it clearly appears that the mystery of processing language is still unsolved and needs further and larger efforts, both at the basic scientific level, and at the system development one.

In Europe, the integration of 10 new member states in the European Union has enlarged the number of languages, and combinations of languages, that have to be considered in order to address both the need to preserve the individual language and culture of all members states and regions, and the need to communicate in a large community of countries respectfully of all its constituents. The European Commission has not enough means and forces to cover the effort aiming at providing the various Language Technologies for all those different languages. Our proposal is therefore to join forces in order to better coordinate each national effort, addressing their language, or languages, and taking care of making available all the language resources which are necessary to develop those various technologies, and the activity of the European Commission, of generic and organizational nature. This is in full agreement with the concept of subsidiarity, and with the spirit of the European Research Area.

But this question is in fact wider and can be placed at the international level. The need for better exchanges on spoken language resources and evaluation was expressed very early by the speech community, with the creation of Cocosda, the Coordinating Committee on Speech Databases and speech I/O systems Assessment, in 1991. I'm glad to see that a comparable initiative has been developed for the written language community, with the recent creation of an International Coordinating Committee on Written Language Resources and Evaluation, which will meet for the first time together with Cocosda during this LREC conference.

Finally, I would like to thank the general chair of the conference, Nicoletta Calzolari, and the CNR team in Pisa, Khalid Choukri and the ELDA team in Paris, Teresa Lino and her team and friends in Lisbon and in Portugal, the International Advisory Committee, the Program Committee and the Scientific Committee for the tremendous work they achieved to make this conference a wonderful and renewed success.

Enjoy !

Joseph J. Mariani
President of ELRA