

# European Parliament calls for independent report on Eurotra

## Application for 60% budget increase queried

The European Parliament, concerned at an application for a 60% increase in the budget for the Eurotra machine translation system, has called for work already carried out to be assessed by an independent committee of experts.

With these and other reservations the Parliament on November 14 approved a report from its Committee on Energy, Research and Technology, adopting the research and development programme for the European Communities' Eurotra advanced machine translation system to take account of the accession to the Communities of Spain and Portugal.

The committee had considered a request by the Commission of the European Communities for an increase in the total cost of the Eurotra programme from 27 million European units of account (ECU) to 45 million ECU, an increase of 60 per cent. Of this the Communities' contribution would be 27 million ECU, the rest being financed by national contributions. The programme would also be extended by 18 months, from five and a half years to seven years, and the number of officials involved, it was proposed, would be increased from eight to 14.

The arguments of the Commission had been that the methodology used involved handling pairs of Communities languages which had increased in number from 42 before enlargement (6 x 7) to 72 (9 x 7), i.e. a 70% increase in language pairs; that since the Spanish and Portuguese national teams joining the programme would be doing so at the

end of the fourth year, the duration of the programme had to be extended so that they could be properly integrated; and that the increase in the number of officials was a natural result of the programme being extended and the consequent increase in the number of contracts to be negotiated and contacts to be made.

The Parliament's committee's report expresses reservations concerning the amount of the "budgetary and staffing requirements".

First of all, the committee's report states, it had emerged that "the complexity of the subject makes it difficult to assess the actual progress made".

During an initial exchange of views on the Commission's proposal at a meeting of the committee back in June 1986, it was decided, in view of the insufficient information available to

the committee, to hold a meeting with those in charge of the Eurotra project. This meeting was held on July 3, 1986.

"It emerged clearly from this meeting", the committee's report goes on, "that there were in fact a number of problems, especially administrative ones, preventing the smooth functioning of the programme and necessitating its extension. We discovered that only three national teams out of ten were actually operational and that various problems of a technical, administrative and political nature prevented the other national teams from being set up. With regard to Spain and Portugal, there is little cause for optimism, since it seems that the teams will not be set up for some considerable time.

"Furthermore, it was acknowledged that the Eurotra programme was actually a high-risk basic research programme and hence subject to all the uncertainties of scientific research".

During July 1986 the committee received additional written information, including a draft of the Commission's third annual report regarding the progress made on the Eurotra project up to the end of December 1985 and a note on



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### REPORT

drawn up on behalf of the Committee on Energy, Research and Technology

on the proposal and the amended proposal from the Commission of the European Communities to the Council (COM(85) 676 final and COM(86) 94 final - doc. C 2-14/86) for a decision amending, on account of the accession of Spain and Portugal, Decision 82/752/EEC on the adoption of a European Economic Community research and development programme for a machine translation system of advanced design (EUROTRA)

Reporteur: Mr P. PINO

Eurotra's organisation and structure. These documents had confirmed that only the Federal Republic of Germany, Denmark and the United Kingdom had up to that time formed teams which were operating as planned.

"It is equally difficult", the report states, "to assess the stage reached in research work as such in either the linguistic or software field. On the one hand the figures given in the Commission's reports are neither comprehensive nor very clear and on the other hand, as the Commission likes to point out, the extremely technical nature of this field means that anybody other than the scientists working on it, even a specialist, finds it very difficult to arrive at a judgement.

"According to the Commission, normal progress is being made in every area. A software prototype is beginning to produce satisfactory results, but at present it is not possible to carry out any experimentation to confirm the value of this work.

"Only outside experts will be able to assess the quality of the work done".

The Parliament approved the proposal for a committee of independent experts, whose task would be to assess the results of research carried out so far in the Eurotra programme during the first half of 1987. The experts' task would be to keep the Parliament's committee more directly informed.

Turning to the actual organisation of the Eurotra project, the report is somewhat scathing about the decentralised structure.

"It would appear that the Commission has to a certain extent underestimated the difficulties of setting up this kind of structure, which has meant that now only three teams are able to function.

"It is not for us to discuss, let alone judge, the fundamental reasons for this situation. On the other hand, your rapporteur finds it hard to imagine that this situation will not have serious repercussions on the running of the programme, especially at the scientific level. In fact, it would tend to indicate that the decentralised structure chosen was not the best option, if as few as three teams are enough to run the project".

Apparently 24 formal meetings take place each year in connection with the work of the various organisations involved in Eurotra. At present there are only eight people in a Eurotra project team (one project leader, four linguists for technical follow-up work and administration of the national team, one employee for the specification and follow-up of software contracts, one employee for administrative and financial work, and one employee seeing to the secretariat functions).

The Parliament's committee found it difficult to resist in principle the call

for extra staff, but suggests that the number of new posts created should be limited, and staff should be looked for in the translation departments of the Commission or in other institutions.

The staffing difficulties had led the Commission to delegate some of the work to a "permanent" technical working party of 12 scientists seconded from their national organisations.

"From the linguistic point of view", says the report, "the composition of this team seems to be badly balanced, since there is one representative for Belgium, one for Denmark, one for Germany, four for the Netherlands, three for the United Kingdom and two for Switzerland. It should be noted that the last-mentioned representatives are from a non-member state. This is all the more incongruous in a project where equal treatment of the various languages is supposed to be the first priority.

"As a final comment on these organisational problems, we would mention that in addition to the Commission staff and the permanent technical working party, there is also an ad hoc technical working party set up by CGC 12, a joint steering committee and a coordinating group, which deals with the various association contracts.

"In conclusion, Eurotra seems to be almost as complex administratively speaking as it is technically and hence exceptionally difficult to manage".

Suspicion that the entry of Spain and Portugal may have been used as a way of getting more money for the project seems to be suggested in the report's next two paragraphs.

"With regard to the demands made in the Commission's proposals, it would seem that the current difficulties in the programme are not entirely unconnected with the extension of the programme and the very appreciable difference in cost.

"Spain and Portugal should not be used as a pretext for covertly revising the programme. It is not that the revision in itself is irregular but it would have been preferable for the Commission to make it clear if this is the case."

The Parliament's committee concluded that Spain and Portugal should be included in the programme, but their inclusion alone could not justify the high extra cost and extension of the programme's duration. However, Spain and Portugal must not indirectly be made to suffer the consequences of problems which have arisen. So the Commission's proposals should be accepted, with reservations such as the setting up of the committee of independent experts to review progress so far and to provide more information to the Parliament, and the extra staff being limited to 12, not 14.