

Shorter notices

Seventeenth ICAME Conference in Stockholm (15–19 May 1996)

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The 1996 ICAME gathering provided participants with its time-honored blend of academic, professional and social events, returning to Stockholm after 16 years through the hospitality of Magnus Ljung's English Department. The conference took place in the attractive and well-appointed Wennergren Centre, with expert support from Ingegerd Folcker and her assistants. More than 70 participants came from the ever-widening circle of ICAME people round the world, including Canada and the USA, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand, while ICAME's heartland in northern Europe (Scandinavia, England, the Netherlands and Germany) was as always strongly represented.

The program was designed to allow presentations by most participants, and included for the first time a day of parallel sessions. No single reporter could therefore witness all the papers, and like the best smörgåsbord, the program offered more than one could taste and savor. A gourmand's report was out of the question – but a gourmet review of selected pieces would not do justice either to the range of offerings in corpus research, methodology and applications. What follows is a synoptic report of the major areas of corpus work that were so well represented in Stockholm, and the centres that contributed them.

ICAME grew out of the first generation of corpora: Brown, LOB, London-Lund, Helsinki; and their research value continues to appreciate while they serve as reference corpora for the second generation: ACE, BNC, Cobuild, COLT, FLOB, FROWN, ICE, Lampeter, Nijmegen, POW. The two tiers of English corpora provide a wealth of comparative regional, historical and stylistic data, and the contrastive perspective is extended by the compilation of new translation corpora with Norwegian,

Swedish and German, all of which were discussed at ICAME 17.

Advances in corpus processing were either the means or the end of various studies reported. Translation corpora continually present new challenges in the alignment of parallel texts (U. Bergen). But there are no fewer challenges in monolingual corpora, particularly in applying existing parsing systems to spoken discourse (U. Lancaster). Building on the familiar word-class tagging systems, researchers at U. Zürich have been able to identify zero relatives with the aid of further surface parsing algorithms, involving successive NPs and VPs. The use of inventorised T-Tags, supplemented by probabilistic data (U. Uppsala), aids in marking structural boundaries within sentences, and promises to improve the efficiency of parsing. Meanwhile the quest for deeper structures has generated better computer displays of the hierarchy of sentence elements, in work associated with the ICE project at UCL. The AMALGAM enterprise (U. Leeds) aims to coordinate the functions of diverse automatic parsing systems, and to promote mapping between them. Statistical profiling of English verbs (UCL), and automatic deconstruction of pluralised nouns (Nottingham-Trent U.) provides auxiliary information for complex knowledge-based systems. Automatic semantic analysis is the general focus of the ACRONYM project (Liverpool U) into thesaural relations; and other semantic relations were explored through research into anaphora in dialogue (U. Sussex), and the semantics/pragmatics of Air Traffic Control language (U. Nottingham-Trent).

English grammar was the focus of several papers. Both NP and VP were under scrutiny, and both yielded intricacies enough to confirm the comments of Briscoe (on the VP) and Sampson (on the NP), that each was still the most untractable unit of grammar! The case for the VP prevailed in so far as there were rather more papers on verbal constructions: contracted forms (U. Göteborg), phrasal/prepositional verbs (TU Chemnitz-Zwickau), modal verbs (Freie U. Berlin), relative infinitives (Uppsala), and cross-category exponents of modality (TU Chemnitz-Zwickau). But the NP was represented in a fine analysis of its post-head elements (U. Nijmegen). The interface between grammar and lexicography was explored in lexicalised noun phrases (U. Nijmegen), and in by-phrases (U. Wellington). The grammar-discourse interface was inherent in several papers which examined grammatical items as exponents of stylistic, historical, regional and social variation. The *-ing* suffix featured in both historical and pedagogical papers, as a flexible element of style and argument.

Larger methodological and theoretical issues emerged in presentations

as well as the subsequent discussions. The relationship between corpora and culture was questioned by researchers from U. Freiburg, and the need for sociolinguistic information to complement corpus data (Macquarie U.) The role of elicitation tests was highlighted (U. Nijmegen), and the value of conversation analysis and pragmatic interpretations of discourse were demonstrated by researchers from U. Bergen. Ongoing questions of corpus annotation were raised, as well as corpus design. The most fundamental issues of corpus methodology were raised by a paper (U. Georgia/U. Massachusetts) on the validity of statistical inferences made from corpus data, which in turn depend on the validity and accuracy of the categories being quantified.

ICAME 17 was preceded by a productive workshop on English diachronic corpora in both Helsinki and in mid-Baltic. The historical and marine themes were reinforced in Stockholm by an informative visit to the VASA ship museum, and a very enjoyable excursion by launch round Mälaren, taking in the narrowest of lochs and the broadest of bays. The delights of Swedish piscatorial cuisine also linger in memory, from downtown at Clas på Hörnet to the aerial dining room on the top floor of the Wennergren. Many thanks to our hosts and all who contributed to an excellent conference.

