

DINNER SPEECH

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You probably can't see it from where you sit, but some of you may have noticed that I am wearing a tie clip in the shape of a monkey wrench - or what I believe is called an 'adjustable spanner' in the curious dialect of this country. The story behind this peculiar piece of jewelry goes back to the early 60s, when I was assembling the notorious Brown Corpus and others were using computers to make concordances of William Butler Yeats and other poets. One of my colleagues, a specialist in modern Irish literature, was heard to remark that anyone who would use a computer on good literature was nothing but a plumber. Some of my students responded by forming a linguistic plumber's union, the symbol of which was, of course, a monkey wrench. The husband of one of them, being a jewelry manufacturer, had a few of these clips made. I cannot say that they have become collectors' items, but I would certainly not part with mine.

I later encountered that colleague on some social occasion, and he had the grace to say "Ah, Nelson, me bhoy, it was not you I was after callin' a plumber; it was them other fellows like Henry Kučera." - I should point out that much reading of Sean O'Casey had had a strange effect on his speech. I don't think he is genuine Irish; if so, he's the only Irishman I ever met named Kraus.

People are more familiar with computers nowadays, and perhaps not so hostile as my colleague David O'Kraus. But corpus-based computational linguistics is rather mysterious to the general public. Just a few days before I left home to come here, I found myself at a cocktail party of the kind university administrators feel obliged to give at the end of term. I got into conversation with a middle-aged lady - at least I would call her middle-aged, since she seemed not a day older than I am. She asked the usual question that lay folk ask of academics at this time of year - "What are you going to be doing during the vacation?" I told her I was leaving shortly for England. "And what's taking you to England?" she asked. "I hope it's a 747," I answered, "but you never can tell about British Airways." "That's not what I mean," she said, "why in the world are you going to England?"

"Well, there's a conference going on about corpuses. People from all over Europe are going to be there."

"Oh. But what are you doing about corpuses?" - (as a good Bostonian she doesn't pronounce postvocalic r's).

"Most of the people are trying to parse them with computers. We have a

standard one at Brown."

"Oh, dear. Will you be taking it with you?"

"No, only my wife. They have our corpus there already. The British have made a replica of it."

"Isn't that what they call cloning?"

"Not exactly - cloning means making an exact duplicate. Their corpus is not exactly like ours, because it's British, you see. Whenever we say 'monkey wrench' they say 'adjustable spanner'."

"How odd. But what do you mean by passing it?"

"Well, before you can parse it, you have to segment it. That's pretty hard to do with a computer. But at Brown we have a very sharp hacker to help with that - name of Andy Mackie."

"That's a funny name for a hatchet. But why can't you leave the poor dead corpse in peace?"

"Oh, our corpus isn't dead, it's still living. Or at least it was in 1961 when we collected it."

At that the lady gasped, gave me a frightened look, and said "Excuse me, I think I need another drink."

"Why don't you let me get it for you?" I offered, politely. But within seconds she had disappeared into the crowd around the bar.

Not long afterward, I saw this same lady talking to my wife. From the way they were looking at me I was sure they were talking about me. As soon as I could I got Nearlene into a corner and asked what the lady had been saying.

"Well," said Nearlene, "she asked me if I knew you. When I said I knew you pretty well, she said "I think there's something wrong with him!"

"I often feel that way too," Nearlene responded.

"He told me he was going to a convention in England where they were all going to chop up this corpse and pass the pieces around. And the corpse isn't even dead!"

"Yes," said Nearlene, "they do that sort of thing all the time. That's why they're called computational linguists."

So here we all are, to talk about our ghoulish hobby. By the way, I would like to make a correction to a remark last evening implying that the origin of this disorganized organization occurred near the fish market in Bergen in April of 1979. I should point out that the origin was two years earlier in the English Department at Oslo. There were five charter members, four of whom are here tonight - Stig Johansson, Geoff Leech, Jan Svartvik, and myself. The fifth, Jostein Hauge, could not be here but has sent his deputy, Knut Hofland. On that occasion was formed the International Computer Archive of Modern English or acronymically ICAME. From that grew the first congregation in Bergen, which was not as widely heralded as it might have been because the nuclear mishap at Three Mile Island crowded us off the front pages. Perhaps if Ronald Reagan and

Maggie Thatcher can keep their warships out of the Persian Gulf, we might have better luck with the corpus this time.

The next organization that appeared was the very small and select International Society of Angry Wives or ISAW. This has never had more than four members, two of whom - Nearlene and Fanny - have been brave enough to show up here. Fanny, in fact, following the old American advice "If you can't lick 'em, join 'em", has bored into our midst. We send our greetings to Gunilla and Faith Ann - we wish you was here.

Now I expect the ultimate organization to be born from this conference, by Caesarean section, will be the International Congress Of New and Quite Unusual Experiments Related to English Discourse.