

CLASS – Collaboration in Language and Speech Science and technology

Niels Ole Bernsen, Natural Interactive Systems Laboratory (NIS), Odense, Denmark

It is really tempting the Gods to describe an EU project the contract for which has not been signed at the time of writing. I hope that the contract will be signed soon and look forward to the experiment which CLASS is. If not, the reader will get a rare glimpse from the underbrush, from the unpublicised world of projects which never were but which demanded an awful lot of work nevertheless. Even more so in the present case, because CLASS now has also been through the process of being entered into the infamous Electra software. The hands on the keyboard get clammy from thinking of the many dramatic tales which were never told, the software responsables who were never brought to justice ...

CLASS is, indeed, an experiment. The CLASS partners DFKI (Saarbrücken, Germany), IRST (Trento, Italy), LIMSI (Paris, France) and NIS (Odense, Denmark, co-ordinating partner) are committed to undertaking the co-ordination of cluster and cross-cluster activities among the 17 RTD projects which were selected following the IST'99 Human Language Technologies Call. This kind of co-ordination would seem never to have been attempted before. So why should it be attempted now? There are many reasons, shared or not shared by interested observers, and rarely discussed among researchers. Basically, however, indications are that the isolated, three-year advanced systems development project is approaching the end of the road, being increasingly prone to implode from the growing pressures it must endure: from fast technology developments, from market developments, from having-to-promise-to-be-able-to-do-it-all.

Cross-project collaboration is a counter-measure to those developments. We can do useful things in common to speed up progress, leave some tasks to the real specialists in order to have more time for doing what we really want to do and are really good at, etc. From the author's viewpoint, this quest for synergy and critical mass began in 1991 when ELSNET was launched as one of three pilot "Networks of Excellence". It continued in 1996 when i3net (www.i3net.org) was launched as one of the first two "Networks of Excellence" aimed to support large focused programmes of research involving many individual projects. And now CLASS.

The clusters of projects tentatively to be supported by CLASS are in natural and multimodal interactivity, cross-lingual knowledge management, and intelligent interactive information presentation, respectively. In addition, CLASS proposes to carry out cross-cluster co-ordination in evaluation of systems and components. For the three individual clusters, CLASS proposes a simple model for joint in-cluster research activities. The model is to create, financially support, and co-ordinate dynamic working parties of project participants in order to (i) establish and promote best engineering practice in the cluster area of research, and (ii) design and promote cluster-specific standard reference platforms/architectures. Active, constructive and continuous discussion of these two types of issue could hardly avoid creating benefits for all involved. The same applies to the pooling of evaluation and related resources know-how.

These are modest objectives, perhaps. Even then, their achievement requires consensus among the projects involved. We will discuss that at a first meeting, expectedly in March

2000 when the projects have kicked off. In addition, CLASS could do something for all in world-wide visibility and results take-up. This is in the plans as well.

Looking very much forward to the experiment.