

ASSTA History and Prehistory – a personal view

Arriving in Australia in March 1970 fresh from a PhD and a post-doc in Speech Communication within an information processing environment in the UK, it was hard to find the presence of interest in speech science or speech technology. I gradually discovered pockets of interest in instrumental phonetics and speech synthesis in both the University of Sydney and the University of Queensland which in fact had a history stretching back into the 1940s and 1950s. As I was working with CSIRO in a Computing Research environment I sought to build up the links between people who could bridge the gap between speech science and information processing. The first initiative was to gather a group of people interested in “Speech Processing by Computer” at a computing conference in 1972 and to commence a mailing list to which were circularised names, contact information and research interests. This directory of interested persons developed year by year and was publicised through the Linguistic Society of Australia and the Australian Computer Society’s conferences through the mid-1970s.

I convened a two-day workshop on Speech Research in Canberra in 1978 adjacent to the Australian Computer Society’s annual conference. At this workshop the informal Australian Speech Research Association was launched. ASRA adopted aims that included:

- Facilitating professional fellowship between persons engaged in research towards a better understanding of the phenomenon of human speech;
- Producing a regular newsletter of relevant developments;
- Affiliating with related groups and societies & arranging joint meetings;
- Facilitating sharing of information and research facilities;
- Sponsoring visits to Australia by speech researchers from overseas.

The 1984 ASRA newsletter and directory listed 25 research groups (comprising 89 listed researchers) in all Australian states/territories (except Tasmania and Northern Territory) and included one group in Auckland New Zealand. A further national two-day workshop was held in Canberra early in 1984 on the topic of “Speech Normalisation”. Following this workshop John Clark from Macquarie University and I proposed that we trial an Australian Speech Research Conference late in 1986. A small committee of John Clark (Macquarie University), Mary O’Kane (University of Canberra), Bruce Millar (Australian National University), and Michael Wagner (University of Wollongong) agreed to organise what was to be come SST-86.

The SST-86 conference was a pivotal point in the advancement of the Speech Science and Technology community in Australia and its recognition internationally. Two eminent keynote speakers (Professor John Laver – University of Edinburgh; Professor Louis Pols – University of Amsterdam) provided an external stamp of quality together alongside the burgeoning work arising from the 20-30 local research groups. It was later recognised that this conference was an “international first” for the field (quickly to be followed by the Europeans in 1987). The existence of a small financial profit from SST-86 was the initial trigger to establish an incorporated body to “own the financial assets of the research community”.

ASSTA Formation

ASSTA Inc was formed in December 1988 at the second SST conference. The Association was incorporated under the ACT Associations Incorporation Act and thus became an independent legal body subject to the Act and its Regulations. An initial membership of about 80 people paid \$1 each to join and the financial assets of the community largely associated with the mounting of SST-86 and SST-88 were transferred from university holding accounts to ASSTA Inc. An executive of five, as defined in the ASSTA Constitution, has been active since that time, initially elected biennially but since about 1994 annually in order to conform with revised ACT legislation. Over the years the executive has spawned many activities designed to stimulate involvement in the aims of the Association. An example is that in 1992 members were encouraged to lobby the ARC to support the development of an Australian English Spoken Data Corpus. As a result the ANDOSL project was born and the products of that project have been distributed to many Australian and some overseas research groups. The Association has gained international recognition owing to its early emergence relative to other parts of the world and to its very active biennial SST conference series attracting international keynote speakers and delegates and further by its involvement in bidding for international conferences to be held in Australia.

Hosting of International Conferences

In 1994 the vision for ASSTA Inc to bid for a major international conference was adopted by the ASSTA executive. Our bid to run ICSLP-98 was successful against strong competition from Japan and Korea. A triumvirate of Peter Blamey, Bruce Millar, and Julie Vonwiller steered the process with strong support in the final year from a wide group of individual members. Following a very successful conference which is still being talked about in international circles as one of the best, the ASSTA executive funded many initiatives to encourage Australian involvement in the international domain and to encourage students and young researchers into the field. Further the executive cast a vision for Australia to aim to host such a conference approximately every 10 years. An unsuccessful bid to host the 2007 International Congress on Phonetic Sciences was followed by a successful bid to host the 2008 International Conference of Spoken Language Processing fulfilling the vision cast some 10 years before.

Relationship between ASSTA and ISCA

Several attempts have been made to formalise the relationship between ASSTA and the International Speech Communication Association (ISCA). There is informal high level of mutual respect between the two organisations. Attempts to formalise a joint membership agreement have foundered on a perception that ISCA, with its roots in the highly technological European Speech Communication Association and in the determinedly multidisciplinary International Conferences of Spoken Language Processing was still insufficiently broad in its areas of overlap with the interests of the ASSTA membership. Clinical speech research has been traditionally very strong in Australia and this was seen as a major area of difference.

It has been an enormous privilege to have been involved with the ASSTA community and its forbears and to observe its growth since 1972.

Bruce Millar – 28 November 2006