PRESIDENT'S LECTURE

Machine Translation Soon To Aid Linguists

By BARBARA STARK

Development of a "cocktail party presence" is Professor Winfred P. Lehman's characterization of the problem of MT—machine, or computer, translation of languages.

Professor Lehman, Chairman, of the Texas University's Department of Linguistics and first guest lecturer of the President's Lecture Series, traced the development and significance of computer translation from an inauspicious beginning that translated the adage "out of sight, out of mind" from English to Chinese to English again as "invisible idiot."

PLAGUED BY enthusiastic over-simplification by non-specialists, he went on to say, MT development suffered from lack of financial support and from professional apathy.

Fragmentation in the humanities provides a need for rapid and accurate machine handling of specialized data to check its validity and coherence. Multiplication of scientific publications adds to the demand for MT.

PROFESSOR LEHMAN reported that Soviet efforts spurred American interest; initial attempts resulted in "considerable floundering" as experts were confronted by the deceptive puzzle "that language is somehow composed of words." Language communication is an intricate function of sound, syntax, and semantics, he said.

Despite the formidability of the problem, Professor Lehman reported that success on the morphological or syntax level had been achieved at Texas University, but that "we're almost total novices" in semantics. Successful MT demands distinction of nuances like those between cocktail party small talk and breezy morning conversation.

SUMMARIZING language as signs for other things, Professor Lehman confidently pointed out that the computer is essentially "a sign manipulating machine. The goal of understanding human communication lies behind the effort to establish a machine interlingua."

Professor Lehman felt that MT is an example of the actual and potential advance in interdisciplinary fields. Further, computers will not surpass the human mind in the creative manipulation of language, but that "only by proper use of computers will we understand language and manipulate it adequately."