

ERWIN REIFLER, 1903-1965

Erwin Reifler, Professor of the Chinese Language in the Far Eastern Department at the University of Washington, died at the age of 61 on Friday, April 23, 1965, in a Seattle hospital two weeks after suffering a mild heart attack. Professor Reifler was born in Vienna, Austria, on June 16, 1903, and was educated at the University of Vienna, where he received his doctorate in 1931 in the field of political science. For a time he was an editor of the Chinese New Agency for Europe and then a member of three Chinese Government committees visiting Germany and Austria. In 1932 he went to China as the assistant to the Austrian Advisor to the City Government in Shanghai. His teaching career began shortly after his arrival in China and extended there until 1947, involving positions in various universities in Shanghai and Hong Kong. In 1947, while on a trip to the United States to read a research paper at a scholarly meeting in Washington, D. C., he accepted an invitation to join the faculty of the University of Washington as visiting professor. He became associate professor in 1948 and professor in 1955.

Professor Reifler's scholarly interests were just as varied as his general professional activities. He was first and foremost a Chinese scholar with an excellent command of that language. This body of knowledge led him to the study of the historical development of Chinese ideograms, an area to which he contributed many original ideas. He was one of the few men in this country to teach a course on the development of the Chinese characters. Unraveling the semantic intricacies of the long history of Chinese ideograms provided an easy step for him to the study of comparative semantics, an area to which he was practically the sole contributor. Here he uncovered some striking parallel semantic developments among widely divergent languages. This cultivated interest in semantics and his preoccupation with languages in general were fertile ground for the implantation of the idea of translating from one language to another by machine, an area to which he devoted at least twelve years of research. During the last years of his life he was primarily engaged in research on historical metrology. His attention was drawn to this field by his long-standing interest in Ancient Hebrew and, specifically, by certain deviant interpretations of measurements in the Hebrew Bible. His research in this area promised to be capped by a monumental work on the origin and interrelationship of weights and measures throughout the world.

Erwin Reifler's varied scholarly pursuits and the success with which he operated within each one clearly attest to the superior qualities of his mind, to his imaginative powers, and to his understanding of the research process. Besides being a very competent scholar, Erwin

Reifler, it seems, was a problem solver par excellence. Whereas many scholars hesitate to venture beyond their usual sphere of activity, each new idea, each new problem fired his imagination and drew him inexorably into a new area. But in each sphere he was able to orient himself quickly, put his finger on the sensitive spots, and generate substantive research papers.

Those of us acquainted with the field of machine translation and computational linguistics knew him as one of the truly original pioneers in machine translation. He was one of the recipients of Warren Weaver's historic memorandum *Translation* that appeared in July, 1949. A number of people gave careful consideration to the memorandum; but Erwin Reifler was one of the few to attack the problem vigorously and to set his thoughts down on paper, and he turned out a veritable spate of early publications on MT. These publications are embodied in his privately circulated series of papers entitled simply *Studies in Mechanical Translation* (SIMT) Nos. 1-8. Even in his extensive SIMT No. 1, which appeared in April, 1951, he demonstrated clear understanding of the problems besetting MT, the grammatical and semantic ambiguity of the source language and the transfer function from source to target language, and he documented this understanding with useful examples from a plurality of languages. Not only did he see the problems; he also made significant contributions towards their solution. His SIMT series contained many valuable and imaginative discussions of pre-editors, post-editors, mechanical determination of incident non-grammatical and grammatical meaning by use of "pinpointers" and "pinpointees", mechanical dictionaries, form-class storage in such dictionaries, and mechanical determination of the constituents of German substantive compounds.

Erwin Reifler's own research and zeal soon influenced others at the University of Washington. In May, 1956, the University of Washington Machine Translation Project under sponsorship of the U.S. Air Force, a joint research effort of the Far Eastern Department and the Department of Electrical Engineering, was initiated under Reifler's directorship. Here his previous research bore fruit first in direct application to Russian-English MT from 1956 to 1960 and, subsequently, in application to Chinese-English MT from 1961 to 1963 under sponsorship of the National Science Foundation. Professor Reifler's publications in the field of MT continued through the year 1961 and are best represented by his writings in, and his editing of, *Linguistic and Engineering Studies in Automatic Language Translation of Scientific Russian into English, Phase I and Phase II*, 1958 and 1960, University of Washington Press, Seattle.

LEW R. MICKLESEN