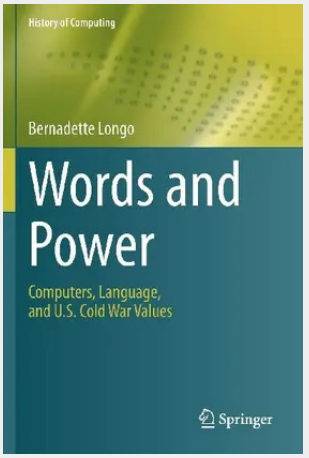
Longo

Words and Power

Computers, Language, and U.S. Cold War Values



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When viewed through a political lens, the act of defining terms in natural language arguably transforms knowledge into values. This unique volume explores how corporate, military, academic, and professional values shaped efforts to define computer terminology and establish an information engineering profession as a precursor to what would become computer science.

As the Cold War heated up, U.S. federal agencies increasingly funded university researchers and labs to develop technologies, like the computer, that would ensure that the U.S. maintained economic prosperity and military dominance over the Soviet Union. At the same time, private corporations saw opportunities for partnering with university labs and military agencies to generate profits as they strengthened their business positions in civilian sectors. They needed a common vocabulary and principles of streamlined communication to underpin the technology development that would ensure national prosperity and military dominance.

- investigates how language standardization contributed to the professionalization of computer science as separate from mathematics, electrical engineering, and physics
- examines traditions of language standardization in earlier eras of rapid technology development around electricity and radio
- highlights the importance of the analogy of “the computer is like a human” to early explanations of computer design and logic
- traces design and development of electronic computers within political and economic contexts
- foregrounds the importance of human relationships in decisions about computer design

This in-depth humanistic study argues for the importance of natural language in shaping what people come to think of as possible and impossible relationships between computers and humans. The work is a key reference in the history of technology and serves as a source textbook on the human-level history of computing. In addition, it addresses those with interests in sociolinguistic questions around technology studies, as well as technology development at the nexus of politics, business, and human relations.

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Kundenservice Verlag Dr. Otto Schmidt KG
Neumannstraße 10, 40235 Düsseldorf | kundenservice@otto-schmidt.de | 0221-93738-997 (Inland)