Introduction: Help from the computer

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'THERE YOU HAVE it: the difference between the human translator and the machine', said Barbara Snell, chairman of 'Machine Aids for Translators', when she saw the cover for these proceedings. Fully automatic translation was no longer 'pie in the sky', she had said when introducing the conference: 'machine translation may not be pie on the table, but it is perhaps pie in the oven.' If intelligent youngsters were not to be put off translating as a career, therefore, translators must equip themselves with machine aids in order to fulfil their potential and make the most of one attribute which the machine would never acquire: the ability to think. The translations of the conference title, so non-literal and thoughtful, typify the human translator's approach. We render not words, but ideas.

'Machine Aids for Translators' took place in the Kensington Close Hotel, London, in November 1980, almost exactly two years after the first major meeting on 'Translating and the Computer'.[1] Whereas the 1978 event had introduced both of the twin subjects of machine translation and computer aids, the 1980 one concentrated on the latter. 'The added attraction of an exhibition,' suggested our chairman, 'is significant. It shows that we are keeping our feet firmly on the ground, concentrating on what translators can do to increase their scope with the aid of modern technology.'

Tony Stiegler (Application Programming Techniques) looked at office costs and the likely effects of present and future machine aids. Robert Clark (freelance translator) reported his experience of a word processor ('terrific, but .. .'), and called for a users' group to press for standard media formats and commands. Pauline Duckitt (Pharmaceutical Society) gave a deft and thought-provoking explanation of how translators could use online information retrieval to tap distant sources of information—not only Eurodicautom, the EEC term bank, but all over the world. John McNaught (Centre for Computational Linguistics, UMIST) talked of the proposed British term bank, multilingual, multidisciplinary and sorely needed. Peter Arthern (Council of the European Communities) discussed machine aids for the large European institutions, particularly his own, in which 45 per cent of the translation output is existing text which has been amended. Finally, Professor Juan Sager (UMIST) gave an illuminating summary of the changes in the translation market.

The exhibition attracted much attention, remaining open for some hours after the conference. The European Community institutions demonstrated both their much valued glossary and the Echo service, which provides online access to Eurodicautom. Weidner Communications (Utah) and Hamilton Rentals showed the Weidner machine-aided translation system. Data Recall and Rank Xerox demonstrated their word processors, and Technical Translation International combined with CPT (UK) to present a 10-language integrated word-processing system, which includes input by optical scanning and output on telex or phototypesetting tape.

The great interest aroused by machines was indicated by the fact that 200 people attended the conference, 12 per cent more than in 1978, despite an unfavourable economic climate. Because of the emphasis on human needs, the group with which Aslib Technical Translation Group cooperated on this occasion was the Translators' Guild of the Institute of Linguists (the other British body for technical translators), and not the Aslib Informatics Group as in 1978. The proportion of the participants who were translators remained at 60 per cent, but the ostensible absence of machine translation from the programme seems to have caused a shift away from the universities and information science towards administrators, data processing people and, significantly, translation users. Although the strong pound had made London expensive, one third of the participants came from abroad, the same proportion as in 1978; the number of countries represented was still 12, and included the US and Africa.

'Computers are putting translation on the map,' one large translation company said. 'We could never get in to see senior management before, but when we began using computer aids, they were suddenly happy to talk to us.' Nor is it only large translation services which can benefit from the increased efficiency and prestige. A word processor, for example, may still seem too dear to many translators, at £7,000 or £9,000. However, there is a cheaper alternative. Buy the parts separately—microcomputer, screen, wordprocessing program and printer—and you can have a useful wordprocessing system for as little as £1,400 or, with a better printer, £2,100. (Now, in fact, the cheapest home computers at about £100 may offer simple wordprocessing, but they do not have the versatility and robustness which translators need.) For a small additional outlay, moreover, a word processor can usually be used as a terminal to retrieve information from data banks elsewhere. The disadvantages of machine aids, such as the incompatibility of floppy discs from different word processors, should not be overlooked, but the general picture is very promising.

As the machine streamlines and diversifies the translator's job, our view of that job will change considerably. 'It is only when you have worked day after day with [it] for some time that your conventional concepts break down and you begin—little by little—to glimpse the possibilities,' Robert Clark said of his word processor. This applies also to other machine aids and even, in my experience, to machine translation. Fortunately, unlike some groups, translators need not fear replacement by machines, for the spread of industrialization and the 'information explosion' have produced a huge and largely unfilled need for translations. The computer will, however, allow the translation user to be offered 'a wider range of products', as Professor Sager said, from the traditional full human translation down (far down!) to raw machine translation for information scanning. (This theme of choice was also explored the next day in a Guild seminar on 'Translation Specifications'.)

Choice, of course, requires the exercise of judgment. The translator must become more versatile, the user probably more aware of the translator and his skills. Above all, choice will emphasize the difference between the human and the machine. 'Tout ce qui est mécanique peut être fait d'une façon satisfaisante par un mécanisme, tout ce qui demande les connaissances, l'expertise, l'intelligence, de 1'être humain—c'est-à-dire la partie du boulot [job] qui est vraiment intéressante—tout ça reste du domaine du traducteur.'[2]

Machine translation, although excluded from the conference programme, kept

creeping in. It was even represented in the exhibition, for the Weidner, though marketed firmly and sensibly as a machine aid for translators, is in fact a machine translation system. MT also made an important appearance in Mr Arthern's paper. Systran, bought by the European Commission in 1976, may not yet be good enough for their translators; but the Cambridge Language Research Unit has succeeded in 'machine-translating' the program into English, and once translators can understand it they will see ways to improve it. Machine translation seems indeed to demand the insight of the professional translator, as well as linguists and computer scientists.

The next in this series of conferences is to be on machine translation: the *practical experience of machine translation.* The speakers, notably translator/posteditors, will be people who work with MT systems in regular practical use. Until we see whether the machine is a help or a hindrance, or both, or even neither, the debate will continue.

REFERENCES

1 SNELL, B. *ed. Translating and the computer.* Oxford: North-Holland, 1979.
2 WHEELER, P. J. *La traduction informatisée à la Commission des C.E.* Paper delivered 21 October 1980 to Institut Marie Haps, Brussels.