

CONCLUDING REMARKS

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A qualitative change has taken place in MT, and this meeting is evidence of it. There is now no place left for the endlessly diverting question of whether MT is possible or not; it clearly is so - you have heard of the practical details of working with such systems here - and the questions are now: do we like what MT systems are giving us; are those products economic - as compared with human translators; and, how much better MT can we do in the near future?

Not everyone will wholeheartedly welcome this change of style in meetings like this: academics will miss the chummy conferences in more dilapidated rooms than these: permanent cynics who still will not accept the results described here will remain angry that consumers assure us they get real benefit from the systems presented to us.

It is most important that we all see and accept these real benefits to consumers. One could have made this point at a much lower level, of course. For many people working on MT years ago, and even today, it verges on the incomprehensible that millions of people are buying hand-held word-to-word pocket calculators that do rudimentary MT. But they are, and in an important sense consumers are, always right at every level of product. It is becoming clear that if price, editing etc. are acceptable, any computer translation aid will find an eager market.

I stress all these obvious facts because they constitute the answer to those, and some are present here, who still believe that we are seeing a bubble about to burst, as the last MT efforts did in the Sixties.

But that cannot be so: for the satisfaction that users are, and have been, getting for some time cannot be taken away, and that was not true last time around. The field is simply more mature.

There are two other features of that maturity.

First, the presentation of older systems, like that by Mr Bostad where, with admirable frankness, he told us how a system of great complexity will degrade by a given percentage, each time you improve it by a (somewhat greater) percentage. It is like an organic being with a life-cycle: one not wholly understood by observers. I take phenomena like this as more evidence of the maturity of MT: all this was simply not envisaged by the founders of the field twenty years ago, any more than the builders of nuclear power stations at the same period thought about what to do with old ones. The very existence of such a problem is proof that one is at the more mature stage of a technology.

Secondly, and perhaps more seriously, a mature field needs not only working systems, and sclerotic systems, but new systems coming into being, and that, of course, was the point of this last session.

The EUROTRA system, described by Mrs King, is the next one coming over the horizon and I look forward to its development and success, as I hope we all do here, so as

to provide more material for future conferences on practical experience of machine translation.