DISCUSSION ON SESSION 4:
Speculation: The Limits of Innovation

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The final discussion period of the conference covered some of the topics raised by speakers in the last session and some general issues from the conference as a whole.

1.    There were a number of comments relating to Margaret Masterman's remarks about the need for a model of human translation processes. It was a matter for speculation what similarities and differences there might be between language performance in general and translation activities, but it was suspected that processes involving pattern matching, assembling and restructuring were common elements. It was suggested that research on the psychology of interpreting might offer some insights as it is likely that interpreters speak and think in ways that resemble the methods and performances of translators. Another speaker pleaded for a neuropsychological model on the grounds that computational models tend to rein-force trends towards the subjugation of people to computer requirements (citing the 'multi-national customized English' of the Xerox Corporation as an instance). But there was not much enthusiasm for the models of neuropsychology and it was argued also that there can be no conclusive proof that individuals do or do not behave according to a particular model or like a particular computer program.

2.    It was remarked how little is known what post-editors actually do and what they contribute to the quality of finished translations. We do not know what makes a good post-editor or what makes a poor or unsatisfactory one; however, there was one suggestion that competence in the source language was important since post-editing appeared to demand strength in both languages at a high level.

3.    Mrs King was asked to elaborate on certain aspects of the EUROTRA project: the structure of dependency-grammar representations, the flexibility and freedom available to programmers and linguists in the design of analysis and transformation procedures, and the role of interface structures to ensure the successful operation of separately developed programs within the whole system.

4.    The need for MT systems to accommodate the imaginative and 'creative' aspects of translation was a problem which Professor Knowles related to the difficult decisions about how much meaning should be codified as static information in MT dictionaries and how much should be computed by dynamic processes at the time of analysis of individual texts.

5.    Practical issues of MT economics and effectiveness were raised in the discussion. On the question of how much translation work an organization would need to be doing before MT is a viable proposition it was suggested as a rough guideline a minimum level of at least two million words a year, although much depends on the subject range, the computer system and the organization structure. As for the amount of pre-editing essential for satisfactory results, particularly if texts are not written by people in their mother tongue, there were no easy answers. The factors to be taken into account include not only the subjects of texts and the abilities of the writers but also the intended uses of translations, the competence and knowledge of probable readers, the quality standards of the organization and whether pre-editing is done by the authors or by others. At the very least, the correction of punctuation is desirable before input to a MT system. It was suggested that the type of text translated was a major factor in determining whether results are adequate and readers are satisfied; in general, it was claimed

MT is more successful with 'objective' texts such as technical manuals than with 'subjective' texts such as newspaper articles. There was agreement that differences in text type are important but some doubts that the objective/subjective distinction is a valid one in a typology of texts.