I N T R O D U C T I O N

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Readers of these Proceedings may be interested in the background of the Seminar and what brought about the "unholy alliance" of translators and computer scientists, referred to by Jan Sager, chairman of the morning session.

In May 1977 two independent international events took place:

The Third European Congress on Information Systems and Networks was held in Luxembourg; its title "Overcoming the Language Barrier", indicated the theme of multilingual comprehension. In giving her impression of this very comprehensive congress to the Aslib Technical Translation Group (TTG), Catriona Picken regretted that there had not been more translators present to witness the developments in applying information systems to languages.

A few days later the International Translators Federation (FIT), celebrated its 8th triennial congress in Montreal. Terminology banks, computer assisted translation and automated translation appeared on the agenda as usual, but it was the proximity of the TAUM project (Traduction Automatique de l'Université de Montréal) which translates Canadian weather forecasts, that brought the subject right into the area of practical consideration; as Veronica Lawson reported to the Translators Guild (TG) on her return to London.

Also in the practical field, the European Commission (EC) was actively considering translation by computer and had recently launched its three year action plan, under the heading "Bringing Order out of Babel".

Nearer home still, the company in which I am employed as a translator, Rank Xerox Ltd., was continuing to show enthusiasm for translating its foreign language service manuals by machine. It seemed to me therefore, that the time had come for translators to take their heads out of their dictionaries and look at what had been happening in the computer world since we dismissed the prospect of machine translation a decade ago. While translators had been exchanging their manual typewriters for electric models and gasping with dismay at the cost of every new edition of a dictionary, computer scientists had not been idle.

The machine translation projects of the early sixties, their over-confident forecasts followed by widely publicised disappointments, had lulled translators into believing that computers were unsuited to handling languages - figures, not words we felt were computer fodder. Not surprisingly, computer programmers did not hold this view. Learning from their mistakes, with ever increasing sophistication of hardware, and software reaching into more and more fields of human activity, it was understandable that programmers should regard machine translation as a nut to be cracked, not how but when.

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If translators are to coexist with computers, we must become actively involved in directing their uses, let us be the masters and they the tools. If we are unaware of, or fail in this respect, we have only ourselves to blame if ultimately, we are the slaves of computers, compilers of word lists and one-to-one (l-l) glossaries, constrained to write in words and forms that machines understand, Procrustean mutilators of human texts into computer format with - as a special treat - the opportunity of making an ever-diminishing number of corrections to the machine output, till the day when the system has learned so much of what we ever knew that we can go home.

The initial purpose of this Seminar was to alert fellow translators in the Aslib TTG and the TG to this prospect and to encourage contact with computer people. We felt that some of the scientists whose primary interest lay in expanding the sphere of computer activity, including machine translation, might be unaware of certain basic aspects of translating. Perhaps they did not appreciate that it is "ideas" not "words" that we transpose from one language and culture to another. Maybe we could help to clarify their objectives and in return, learn what computers could do for us. We were fortunate in being able to enlist the cooperation of Aslib's Informatics Group in our project.

Many of us had been aware for some years that the Siemens TEAM system has been producing practical, compact, specialist, bilingual dictionaries and a number of translators are cooperating in using and adding to that data bank; EURODICAUTOM operates in the EC languages and appropriate areas of vocabulary; the Bundes-sprachenamt has its files and fiches; there are discs, floppy and otherwise, visual display units (VDUs), microfiche readers and TV screens linked by no more expensive a line than your own telephone - all potential tools for the translator; typewriters are on the market with tape or card storage which can reproduce on a VDU or in hard copy form (good old paper!); revision is simple and a whole week's output can be immaculately retyped in a matter of minutes at the push of a button. These machines are called Word Processors, but aren't we all just that?

Practising translators ought to be aware of these developments and conscious of their own potential as a market for producers of such equipment. The most obvious customers are large organisations with translation departments, but there is even greater scope in companies which have only one or two translators. "Give me access to a data bank and a word processor and I will not need an assistant," the lone staff translator could say. We might cry, "Beware the consideration which regards being in charge of staff as a step up the promotional ladder, while doing a job quickly and efficiently is the unrewarded norm," but that is another story.

The freelance translator working far from centres of information is the ideal user of computer aids. It may be more fun to phone your friends for a chat about this or that neologism, but it will be quicker to call your data bank for an answer. Your typist may be better company than your word processor, but may not prove such a friend in need. Let no one think however, that benevolent institutions or fairy godmothers will compile a data bank - it might not be much use if they did. It is up to translators to share their terminology and expertise with the rest of the world. What use is a term if no one else knows it? What is the good of a brilliant equivalent if it is your own private secret? If you are the only person who uses an expression, however apt, who is out of step? Language, at least English, is that which is used by people, so unless translators are prepared to input their personal glossaries into data banks this unique source of information may remain the stillborn contents of the proverbial shoe box. It is interesting that EURODICAUTOM has scope in its system for the name of the author of a term. This should encourage us to be prepared to acknowledge our terminology findings and proud to share our card indexes and vocabularies with the rest of the world.

Margaret Masterman asked at the Seminar if we could not have a universal data bank with 50 million words (this is after all, only a quarter of a million each for 200 subjects). Peter Arthern's reply was sobering: Existing data banks are not standardised and organisations are producing their own custom-built banks. His analogy of the different gauges that grew up with the railway companies sounds horribly probable. Do we never learn?

Can we not look to a body such as the EC to produce a data bank containing information from all appropriate existing dictionaries and other sources? It could be provided with incentives, in the form of access, for translators offering useful input to the file (vetted by expert terminologists before inclusion). Might this overcome petty jealousies of individuals who are reluctant to share their expertise? EURODICAUTOM already houses a number of data banks for different users but once established, it should be possible to run our "Universal Bank" on a commercial, cost-effective basis.

It is all a question of communication. We certainly achieved that at the Seminar. We talked – in our seats, during the refreshment breaks, in the evening over drinks and dinner, and when the City of London licensing laws drove us out, the residual rump of the participants, still composed of both disciplines, continued communicating animatedly in High Holborn late into the evening. That in itself, was a measure of the day's success.

But, one could ask, how well do translators get on with machines? I suggest we must try harder to regard these new tools as those who live in the country do their cars: expensive necessities enabling them to extend their activities to include otherwise totally impossible achievements. As Willem Dijkhuis, chairman of the afternoon's proceedings, said of translating and the computer, "It's a question of man/machine interface." Only let the face be human.