INTRODUCTION

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        "Why did we buy a machine translation system? Well, I
expect management thought if it's computer-based, it must work!" The
irreverent suspicion of a posteditor at this conference contrasts
with the realism of a computer specialist([1]) : "If anyone says you
just feed your stuff into a computer, press a button and get out what
you want, don't believe him"; and, equally pertinent here, "You can
tell the pioneers by the arrows in their backs." Yet both were
committed to the use of computers.

        Translation by computer is now a reality, with perhaps 20
machine translation (MT) systems in regular practical use around the
world. How good is it? What are its limitations? Above all, what
it is like to work with? These were the questions which this con-
ference sought to answer. With this emphasis on MT in practice
rather than theory, it was the first international event to concent-
rate on the people who work with the "practical" (as opposed to
research) MT systems.

        The themes were handled in four sessions. TRANSLATION IN
TRANSITION set the scene and introduced two of the systems (Meteo,
successfully used since 1977, and Weidner, relatively cheap and sold
as a machine aid). A more searching look at ASPECTS OF EDITING used
Systran as an example, while also including more general papers on
ergonomics and costs. The core session was a discussion on THE
POSTEDITORS' EXPERIENCE by 7 editors, with 5 brief but meaty papers.
Finally, in marked contrast, an academic look at what MT is not
likely to do, and so at where future research and marketing should be
directed: SPECULATION: THE LIMITS OF INNOVATION.

        Seventeen papers are too many to list here, and their over-
all standard is too high for me to pick out a few. Instead,
abstracts are supplied.

        The table overleaf([2]), however, may help readers to
appreciate the differences (and on occasion disagreements) between the
various approaches. At first sight the 6 user organisations may have
had 3 machine translation systems - Meteo, Weidner and Systran - but
these become 6 if, knowing the great size and power of the MT
dictionaries, we regard each Systran setup as a separate entity (and
far more than 6 if we choose to count every language pair). And the
conference also considered Eurotra, the detailed technical specifi-
cations for a system some years in the future. Further details of
all the systems, of course, will be found in the papers and
discussion reports.

USERS AND SYSTEMS	RESTRICTIONS ON INPUT
Canadian Federal Government METEO English-French	Field highly restricted; language controlled artificially only by existing standards for weather bulletins
Mitel Corporation WEIDNER English-French/Spanish/German Spanish-English	Limited only by subject field
Xerox Corporation SYSTRAN English-French/Spanish/Italian	Very narrow range of subjects; language controlled artificially by writing rules
General Motors of Canada SYSTRAN English-French/Spanish	Limited only by subject field
US Air Force SYSTRAN Russian-English	Unrestricted - scientific and technical
Commission of the European Communities SYSTRAN English-French/Italian French-English	Unrestricted - exceptional range of subjects (Pilot experiment)
Commission of the European Communities EUROTRA Up to 72 language pairs	As Commission SYSTRAN

The Commission of the European Communities differs from the other users represented in that it bought MT not for immediate use but for development. The "Commission heavy mob" (their epithet) therefore apologised for their relative inexperience in postediting. However, the Commission is the only MT user in my experience to demand high quality MT of such a variety of natural-language texts (administrative, political, scientific, technical, both for publication and for internal use), and as a result it has initiated many improvements. A current Commission study[3], in fact, concerns two of the recurrent themes of the conference: how little we know about what posteditors actually do, and how MT quality depends on the type of text translated. The Commission is also responsible for much of the recent change in attitudes to and of translators (4), of which this conference is a sign.

The conference originated over two years before in my recommendation for an MT workshop at the triennial congress of the Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs (FIT) in Warsaw in May 1981. Ian Pigott had suggested that for once we seek out translator/post-editors rather than only systems experts and theorists. Ultimately FIT, with the difficulties in Poland, had no papers by posteditors (though it did, for the first time, include MT in the opening session for technical translators). But meanwhile the time had ripened, and the Translators' Guild floated the idea again, this time rapidly producing results: 200 people from 18 countries.

The user's main objectives as stated at the conference ranged from "intelligibility" (US Air Force) through "acceptability, speed, volume" (Xerox) to "perfection, or at least accuracy". As usual, it is a question of "horses for courses", a specific translation type for a specific purpose. Such considerations are not new, but they are perhaps examined more carefully now than before. In particular, the "information translation", that Cinderella of translation, is beginning to be taken seriously. She will never be princess, but she may be promoted to ugly sister. This debate on the meaning of words like "translation" and "acceptable" will be with us for some time, as is only proper. It might be over sooner, however, If the term "machine translation", which invites comparison with human translation, were dropped in favour of "machine pre-translation"

Another problem in MT, as in some other fields, is that some systems actually used are not in the literature. Research systems are much written about, partly in order to get funds for more research Working systems are not, whether because of the need to protect trade secrets or simply the fact that people are too busy getting the systems on the road and keeping them there. Little has been written on Meteo since it started working in 1977, there is little on Systran, and virtually nothing on Weidner, which was left out of one table of existing systems on the grounds that too little was known about it. Systems which have never been used in the "real world", on the other hand, are well represented in the literature. Part of the point of this conference was to redress the balance.

We would not, after all, want a repeat of the mid-60's credibility gap between the confidence of the researchers and the disbelief of the public. Then there were no users to speak of, and the US government's ALPAC report could consign machine translation to limbo. This time, as Yorick Wilks noted in his closing remarks, MT has reached a kind of maturity. Enough systems have now been in extended practical use for the participants at MT conferences to have changed from casual academics to people in suits.

On behalf of the steering committee I would like to thank all those who contributed to the conference, particularly the speakers and chairmen, the Commission of the European Communities (for their generous sponsorship) and, not least, the very active audience. On behalf of the Translators' Guild, moreover, I would like to acknowledge a special debt to Aslib, above all for the organisational skill which since 1978 has turned one event on Translating and the Computer[5] into a series.

The fourth conference in that series will be on term banks, in the autumn of 1982. The fifth will then return to machine translation at the end of 1983, on the very eve of Orwell's fateful year. His Newspeak was designed to trap man's mind in a straight jacket, precisely by robbing him of freedom in the use of language, his greatest tool. Our concern then, to judge by the determined humanism of the speakers at this 1981 conference, will more than ever be to uphold that freedom and to mould the computer - that new tool - to serve our human needs .

REFERENCES

(1)   Gabriel Baum at: Microcomputer technology - Its impact on
        authors and publishers (Society of Authors seminar, 26
        November 1980).

(2)   Suggested by Dr Francesco Rossi.

(3)   Lawson, V. Interim Report on EEC study contract TH-47
           (Methodology study on text typology, typology of machine
           translation errors and ergonomic analysis) (Commission of
           the European Communities, Luxembourg, 1981).

(4)   See Machine translation and people, elsewhere in this
           volume.

(5)   Snell, B.M. (ed.) Proceedings of Aslib seminar Translating
           and the computer (North-Holland, Amsterdam, 1979).