

# Biggest ever *ata* Conference

The 30th annual conference of the American Translators Association (ATA), held at the Holiday Inn, Arlington, Virginia (across the river from Washington) in October, attracted over 800 participants, which makes it the largest ever translation conference held in the United States.

There were over 150 speakers, and for most of the five days of the conference seven sessions were proceeding in parallel. While the way the sessions were organised made it possible to follow lectures given in only one particular theme, most participants did seem to move around between subjects.

Themes dealt with in more than one paper included The freelance translator (use of, marketing of, relations with, etc.), Japanese translation, Reference material for translators, Interpreting, Teaching of translation and interpreting, Sign languages for the deaf, Translation theory, Literary translation (a lot of papers in this field), Drama translation, Portuguese translation (a popular subject this year), Scientific and technical translation (with titles such as "Fundamentals of chromatography and spectroscopy for translators" or "Molecular genetics"), Electronic communications (notable for the missionary-like enthusiasm of those converted already to FLEFO, an electronic bulletin board — i.e. a means of exchanging information, or even gossip, on screen — for foreign languages enthusiasts), Terminology tools, Desktop publishing and Machine translation.

In machine translation the proponents of commercial systems such as ALPS and Systran described their products and outlined recent developments. Considerable interest was shown in the presentation of the comparatively new Globalink system, which has a price structure making it

attractive to freelance translators. There was also a thoughtful paper by Leonard Schaefer on the criteria to be applied if one is thinking of buying a PC-based machine translation system.

The first-ever, and therefore eagerly awaited, paper on user reaction to the Tovna system was given by Jacqueline Gardès, of the World Bank, Washington (too current to be included in the printed proceedings) — she and her colleagues are favourably impressed. They had, she said, been "spotting" machine translation systems since 1978, but Tovna was the first which had met their requirements. A nine-month experiment, with the provision by Tovna of hardware, software, training and support was commenced in March 1989, and this original test programme had been extended by one year.

Another major contribution to machine translation studies was given by Canadian Claude Bédard, who described a new approach being pioneered by BSO, Utrecht, in the development of their DLT machine translation system. This approach, called the Bilingual Knowledge Bank (BKB), has been evolved from the Lexical Knowledge Bank used in earlier DLT development. It is a way of dealing with one of the thorniest of MT problems, that of choosing between multiple possible target-languages equivalents of a source text term. BKB is an attempt to use corpus-based implicit knowledge rather than explicit pre-defined knowledge. If this works (and structuring would be highly complex) it could represent a major breakthrough in MT. As Mr Bédard, speaking in the session on new developments in MT, told the audience:

The BKB is a hypertextual, multi-level data structure where lexical, syntactic and conceptual information, whether contrastive or languages-specific, are all accessible at any time. This fascinating reservoir of knowledge is a

radical departure from conventional data structures for MT.

The impact of machine translation in the training of future generations of translators was touched on by several speakers, and was the central theme of the paper given in the main translator training session by Professor Ingrid Meyer, of the University of Ottawa. The changing nature of computer studies for translators, and the need for courses to adapt, was one of her themes. For example, on the one hand, students are now more computer-literate than used to be the case and basic information no longer has to be imparted (the phrase "remedial work" was used for the computer-illiterate who still needed such information), while on the other she considered it important to educate students not only in today's systems, but in systems they might be called on to use in the future.

As mentioned above, the growing body of American translators translating had a number of papers to listen to, some of them quite specialised, but there were two papers of particular interest to the beginner or the would-be translator from Japanese, by Ron Granich (a general introduction to Japanese and its translation problems), and Atsushi Tomii (hints for novice translators).

In recent years the ATA conference has been getting steadily more international, and this trend was enhanced at the 1989 conference, since it followed immediately a joint conference between the ATA and the Canadian and Mexican translators' associations, and also a meeting of the council of the Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs (FIT).

The Canadian contingent, about 30 in number, was particularly strong, and included many of the leading figures in Canadian translation.

In such a vast country as the United States, the ATA conference has a particularly important role to play; it is a unique occasion for even

the leaders of the profession to get together. So there were many ATA committee meetings, both official and unofficial — former ATA president, Ben Teague, for example, got together a small group of “future-lookers” in his room one evening for a brainstorming session about where the translation profession is going.

A talking point among the “inner circle” of the ATA membership was the non-appearance of the October issue of the association’s journal *The ATA Chronicle*. The cancellation of the October issue was apparently an

administrative decision by ATA president *Karl Kummer*, taken after there had been articles critical of some aspects of ATA board policy in the September issue. In a privately circulated memorandum the retiring editor of the *Chronicle* (his term of office was due to end with the October issue), *Ted Crump*, attacked the cancellation decision and defended the right to publish controversial articles.

As to the charge that this editor repeatedly failed to allow response [to criticism] in the same issue: Of course! I soon learned that every time I brought attention to a controver-

sial item prior to publication it got squelched! If you have found the *Chronicle* to be more of an open forum of late, it’s because I took the liberty — published first and asked questions later, hoping that a free press would catch on.....

...The suppression of information and lack of straightforwardness in a profession which is so dependent on information is both an anomaly and an obscenity.

The preceding North American congress had a number of sessions, each with a paper in English, French and Spanish, the official languages of the three countries involved.