
Machine Translation

A Technology Assessment

(An Introduction, an Evaluation and a Study of Market Position Present and Future)

by Richard W. Balfour, BMT Consultants (Acomb Court, 23 Lansdowne Way, London SW8 1HH), 1986. 160 pages. Price: £ 295 (US\$ 480).

Publishers BMT Consultants claim this report can help both current and potential MT users make their cost-effective utmost of a technology through which “hundreds of companies are already doubling the productivity of their translation departments.” The report has already been lauded in other publications for its accuracy, presentation and readability, though at £ 295 (US\$ 480) you might prefer just to thumb through it and commit one or two gems of cost-effectiveness to memory. Does it deserve the praise? Is it worth the money? Tony Whitecomb, himself an MT software developer, gives his assessment.

Reviewed by Tony Whitecomb

As literature, you might find it grey – but the price is pure gold and the marketing formula textbook hype. Take a well-documented study on an exciting industrial development, give it the right flavor (“Market Position”), set up your own company (“Consultants”) and build up an adequate mailing list (not such a problem these days, what with all the conferences around). A few tricks of the sales trade (“Money-Back Guarantee”) can only help, even in high-tech circles. And after all, don’t impressive price tags create high expectations? It’s the price that stings the most, but it has to be conceded that Balfour’s report is worth the money, provided it lands in the right hands – those of decision makers. It certainly speaks the language of the executive rather than the scholar or linguist. It provides an excellent, lucid introduction for the layman and exhaustively explains all the important criteria for the use of MT: neutral-style documents, a constant turnover of similar products, the need for terminology management, the training of translators, etc.

The report’s emphasis is on economic viability and practical MT use in a business or industrial environment. It includes a translation market survey based on questionnaires returned by 40 large British companies and institutions. As to specific MT systems, four of those commercially available receive most of the attention: Weidner, ALPS, Logos and Systran. Some 45 pages are dedicated to the evaluation of English/French translations of real-life texts performed by the Weidner MICROCAT early in 1986.

The report is generally well-documented and well-structured (taking into account that the copy I received is needlessly thick owing to one-side copying and an erroneous double insertion of 15 pages). It is not very accurate in certain definitions (homonymy, ambiguity) and contains many small errors and occasionally incorrect information (TAUM-METEO does not operate 24 hours a day!), but these are compensated for by the straightforward approach to the subject.

A down-to-earth approach implies technological conservatism. In fact, the word “technology” would have been better left out of the title. Only one page provides an outline of the latest in MT high tech – on speeding up by parallel processing and eventual support of simultaneous telephone translations in real time (Balfour says this is at least 15 years away, and he may well be right).

The spirit of Balfour’s MT assessment is characterized by his first concluding remark: “Machine translation is an advanced bilingual extension of word-processing.” A cold shower for next generation MT system developers? Perhaps!

Tony Whitecomb is the nom de plume of a software developer involved in natural language understanding and machine translation.