

Machine Translation

P a s t , P r e s e n t a n d F u t u r e
W . J . H u t c h i n s , 1 9 8 6

The title itself is as succinct a description as this book could possibly be given. It is a survey of Machine Translation (MT), a term which Hutchins defines as "the general name for any system which uses an electronic computer to transform a text in one language into some kind of text in another natural language."

For me, this unnecessarily restrictive definition betrays the book's only major weakness. Instead of describing actual research into various types of automatic translation, past and present, Hutchins limits himself to the results of this research. Without attempting to shed light on their precise structures and workings, the book outlines a number of Machine Translation systems which have grown out of research projects conducted in both universities and commercial organisations.

This does not mean that Hutchins fails to achieve what he sets out to do. Indeed, he succeeds in identifying the principal problem areas and strategies within MT research. This he is obliged to do if he is to contrast the various projects with one another and present them according to period and approach. He also deals, where necessary, with various other fields of research which have had a significant influence on MT research or in which points of contact can be identified.

Despite his wide knowledge of the MT field, Hutchins seems to have no actual first-hand experience of current research. He works presently at the University of East Anglia as a librarian, for which he was academically trained. This at least gives him the advantage of impartiality. He handles his subject objectively, very rarely favouring any particular approach or project over others. He acquits himself, in fact, as a very well informed layman.

This may be why some of his descriptions of projects look like indiscriminate reproductions of second-hand information, names and terms mentioned. Hutchins is to be complimented on the clarity of his presentation and structure, without which the book would have been unreadable.