ASLIB - TG CONFERENCE
"TRANSLATING AND THE COMPUTER 4"
- TERM BANKS FOR TOMORROW'S WORLD

The conference was made up of a number of sessions with separate subjects, each having its own chairman, under the overall chairmanship of Barbara Snell. In her opening remarks, Barbara pointed out that although this was the fourth conference in the series examining the relationship between translating and the computer, it was the first in the UK and the first to address itself specifically to the important problem of terminology standardisation and term bank developments.

Thoughts on the first day's proceedings by Robin Inches

The first session, chaired and introduced by the Assistant Director of BSI's Information Services, took us right to the heart of the matter, examining the need for standards, the mechanisms for producing them and the problems of doing so. In recognition of BSI's experience in the field, we heard about its operating pattern and the dilemma so often encountered, that those who need the standard cannot create it and those best placed to create it scarcely need it. However we were left with the message that, since a need for terminology standardisation pretty obviously existed, we the translators, who would benefit, should apply the pressure for the formation (inevitably!) of committees to get on with the work and the finding of the funds to pay for it.

We then heard from the CAA about a specialist field where this work is well under way - communication between aircraft and ground control. Obviously impressive progress has been made; I am in no way trying to belittle this when I mention that the number of languages primarily involved (four) is relatively small and the knowledge that lives are at stake must increase the pressure towards agreement.

This session concluded with a progress report on the TermNet work on the development of computerised terminology. Looking to the future, the reporter from INFOTERM saw the term bank covering a limited range of concepts as offering most promise - subject to the necessary cooperation internationally. TermNet had created a programme for cooperation in collecting, recording, processing and disseminating terminological data. What they needed now was help with carrying it out.

The second session concentrated on terminology compilation in practice. We heard about this work in the postal and telecommunications field, where the compilation of internationally-agreed special glossaries started in the twenties. We were also given an idea of the complexities of the process. We learnt that the Institute of Welding farsightedly had set up a Terminology Commission as soon as the Institute was formed shortly after World War II, and were given a description of this Commission's working and product. Of particular interest to me as an engineer was that drawings were used instead of definitions. Obviously this is not practical in all cases but, where applicable, I think it is a good idea. The next part of the session gave us a lighthearted look at ice terminology standardisation by the Scott Polar Research Institute. A whole new set of problems arose for them when submarine crews started to look at sea ice from underneath!

Lastly in this session we were told something of the mammoth task of bringing Hebrew up to date after a 1700-year dormancy period ending about 100 years ago. Under the control of an "Academy of the Hebrew Language" with a clear set of rules and priorities, good progress had been made. Some 60,000 terms and their English equivalents had been computerised and other language equivalents were being added. 70-80% of the words could be categorised as "native". Not surprisingly, the work had aroused considerable interest in places like Cornwall and Wales.

The morning ended with questions to a panel. The question "Computer terminal or dictionary?" received the (not unexpected') answer "It all depends . . .". However in the end I was left with the impression that the factors involved were not only variable but together tended in the direction of making the terminal something even freelances should consider - perhaps in geographical and/or subject cooperatives initially. Certainly worth watching. In the light of the Hebrew success, I asked if there was a case for an "Academy for the protection/refinement of the English language" but the vote went against me. However, the answer to the query whether translators were wanted on bodies like terminology standardisation committees was a firm "Yes".

After lunch (very good and almost too ample') we resumed to consider the relationship between translators and terminologists. From the Copenhagen School of Economics and Business Administration we heard that terminology training patterns were not yet fully defined. Indeed, some basic theory is still in dispute owing to its being such a relatively young discipline. That, plus a lack of guidelines concerning background training, aggravated training problems. However it was already clear that some "oriented" training was required for term bank work and we were given some ideas about this.

How the Commission of the European Community deals with this problem was brought out by the next speaker. The existence of a powerful and busy team of translators there permits terminologist training "in house" and "on the job" and desirable background/personal characteristics for candidates have been identified.

We then looked at things the other way. Could competence in terminology which, according to the next speaker, the modern translator must anyway have, provide a short cut to the expertise in a technical (in the broadest sense of the word) field which is accepted as an important asset? The conclusion was that concept-oriented training might do so for field languages with a one-to-one denotative function (e.g. that for engineering), but where the language was culture specific, such as that for national legal systems, specialist training could not be by-passed. (Are you with me? It takes a bit of working out').

By now we were ready for our tea-break. Suitably refreshed, we then rounded off the day by looking at various aspects of language and terminology. The first speaker from the University of Birmingham suggested that, to reduce the problems of standardising technical terms, certain subjects might be given a "reference language". Next, abroad to hear about the special problems of computer-processing Japanese characters (there are over 2000 of these - nobody seems to know exactly how many), and about the expanding scope of Malay which 25 years ago scarcely encompassed secondary-school-book standards. 250,000 new terms had already been coined and were now computer-stored. A further 350,000 are due to be added by 1985. Then followed a brief insight into how a unified Arabic scientific terminology is being created out of a multinational chaos which went unchecked until about 15 years ago. For the time being, the Siemens data bank is being used for storage. Lastly, a report from India about the formulation of technical terminologies first in Hindi, then in other regional languages (Bengali, Telugu) and finally in a Pan-Indian form without any noticeable preferences. A term bank was clearly needed here.

Looking back on a very full day - particularly for someone like me who had never before done anything like this' - I am left with the following overall impressions:

1. So far, the computer's relationship with translation has been determined predominantly by what the computer experts understand about the problems associated with translating.

2. There is a general feeling of substantial unrealised potential, particularly in the future, parallelled by a feeling of uncertainty about how to realise it, except in some rather special cases.

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3. Wider use of term banks obviously represents one way forward, but trans-
   lators and terminologists must be prepared to be more actively involved in
   developing this, to help the computer experts find the right line.

4. Standardisation of terminology - a job for translators and terminologists - is an
   important pre-condition for the wider use of term banks.

Thoughts on the second day's proceedings by Geoff Samuelsson-Brown

Aspects highlighted in the first address of Session 5, Creating term banks, were the
development of a common command language and the difficulty in defining soft-
ware. The speaker defined hardware and software as follows, "If you can lean on
it, it's hardware - if not it's software". A light-hearted view which later provoked
serious thought. Software in itself is not really clever since it only does what it is
told. Identification of programs is relatively easy but not so for term banks since
there is no ideal software at the moment for terminology data banks. One of the
suggested advantages of having a term bank was so that if a large translation were
divided among several translators they could have access to a common term bank
and thereby ensure consistency in the use of terminology. The work could be
previewed before commencement and the terms could be cautiously determined.
Large manufacturers can afford purpose-built software and such software is often
restricted to a particular make of computer. The most significant problems seem
to be the absence of standardisation in software, the obsolescence in hardware,
communication with a common system and insufficient information from the user to
the software compilers. (Oh! for standard software, complete compatibility between
machines, no problems of machine communication - or telecommunications!).

Research in conjunction with technical universities was the introductory note from
the next speaker. The electronic office and its development, from local networks
to complex office facilities, seemed so far away in many respects. One of the
interesting items illustrated in an informative series of transparencies was a multi-
page screen allowing a host of different facilities including graphics and "in and out
trays" which were controlled by a "mouse" (used as a kind of cursor) - I felt like a
child in an enormous electronics toyshop! In addition to the "input" work station
the printing facility offered by this electronic office included a considerable range
of fonts (did I hear 140?) and type sizes. (Hands up those of you still using a
portable typewriter!). Again the problem of standardisation raised its enquiring
head.

The third speaker, from the World Bank in Washington, considered the problem·
encountered when setting up a term bank of getting access to computer service·
and what to do when you get them. The initial problems are of course consider
able if you consider all the work required for compilation. The implications o
term research and the need for uniformity were stressed. There is a risk o
duplication if terms are not in a central bank. The speaker considered the advan
tages of word processing for documentation and compiling glossaries. Translator
seem to have a low priority in the eyes of software manufacturers - budgetar\
restrictions etc. etc., but the problems were being appreciated and the outlool
seemed promising.

These thoughts were echoed at the end of the session since the problems of smal
users were raised from the floor. (Why no agreement between manufacturers, poo
quality of line communications, why do software discs have to be initialised?). Th\
panel felt that the problems were not confined to the small users and the advic
offered was to look for the manufacturer who can offer what you want!

In the next session, "Dictionary or database", the question "Online or hard copy?
produced both answers and questions. A speaker from the OUP outlined th
increasingly complex structure of dictionary compiling, the problems of interactiv

systems and the complexity of search and retrieval systems. There is a place for both online and hardcopy systems because of the varying grades of technology but there is an increasing demand for online facilities. One fundamental problem highlighted by the speaker was that most lexicographers are basically humanists and therefore need the specialised help of scientists. There is also the salient question of defining what the user wants. Other aspects discussed included the consideration of native and non-native users and methods of classification other than alphabetical.

The second speaker in the session, who came from Longmans, considered the more practical aspects of dictionary compilation and the way word processing can ease the considerable task of arriving at a final draft, particularly the flexibility offered by machine readable text.

"Without a ROOT, your information system won't flourish" was a caption on a leaflet distributed during coffee break. This was not just an advertising freebee but an example page of the BSI ROOT Thesaurus which was explained by the next speaker. The thesaurus guides users in the use of common terminology and gives examples of other terms related to the concept. Not least of all, it provides a source of inspiration - probably the reason why most translators consult a source of reference. Standardisation is naturally an important theme in the thesaurus and the intention is that it should be used by all standardisation associations. The thesaurus is in two parts and it is interesting to note that the second part is entirely machine produced. There are plans to put ROOT online as a database in 2-3 years time. One future development being considered is the definition of all terms in the thesaurus - a daunting task.

The final speaker in the morning's session spoke of the difficulties in the production of Japanese/Western language dictionaries.Dictionaries tend also to be designed for indigenous users in Japan and, where trade is advanced, the dictionaries are poor. Other problems highlighted were limited resources for projects, the low level of training in Japanese in the UK and the difficulties in producing phonetic systems.

Comments were then invited from the floor. This prompted questions on subject structure and international agreement through ISO. It was felt that though this might work for BSI, it might not necessarily work for others.

Using the theme, 'Terminology to suit your pocket' in Terminology on the market, the first speaker of the session highlighted the difficulties experienced by individual freelances in relation to larger users and reported on the use of independent terminology centres. The intention is that the fiche services of these centres should be available to translators and that searches would be carried out free of charge. The centre discussed in the presentation at the Marie Haps Institut was currently the smallest in Belgium and kept production costs down by using the simplest office machinery. Future considerations include the possible use of word processors and links with professional organisations.

Most translators compile reference lists and glossaries to some extent. Though these are usually very individual and personal, they could be of considerable benefit to others. The next speaker gave a bright and informative paper on the problems and rewards of producing a glossary for sale. Though there was a natural bias towards accountancy terminology since the speaker was an accountant, the remarks were very pertinent and considered fundamental matters such as, "Can the translation be misunderstood?", "Is a literal translation a correct translation?". The criterion to consider is whether there is a market for the glossary although the matter of personal satisfaction is also a considerable incentive.

The first of the two different LEXIS systems was explained by the next speaker. This system comprised full text retrieval and was specialised inasmuch as it dealt

with the text of law reports and statutes. In essence, searching is carried out in much the same way as one would search a database by entering a word (in this case an arbitrary text word instead of the usual thesaurus keyword). The references are narrowed down by progressive addition of words to arrive at a specific case example. The cost of manual searching in hard copy is considerable and time consuming and thus the speed at which the LEXIS system operates has proved to be extremely economical. Though specialised, this system gave a good illustration of the commercial application of term banks.

Questions from the floor at the end of the session highlighted the difficulties of transferring languages across national frontiers. A good example is that German and French accounting terms are not necessarily applicable in German- and French-speaking parts of Switzerland.

The final session, Term banks today and tomorrow, was depleted by the non-arrival of one speaker who was to have spoken on The Canadian Experience. This gap was made up by an impromptu talk by an earlier speaker on EURODICAUTOM and the remarks of the session chairman, a Project Officer at the British Library R & D Department. The latter made the comment that terminology as such is not too interesting to librarians since they are not the main users of term banks. They do benefit from its use however.

The next scheduled speaker considered aspects of term bank operation at Sweden's Centre for Technical Nomenclature. He spoke of first generation definition and users and how term banks can now be diversified. The important aspects of the paper to my mind were the focus on the user and his needs, data processing education in schools, the need for uncomplicated systems, contributions which could be made by users and cooperation with centres of expertise. A clear analysis of procedures and problems were communicated by the balanced use of graphical presentation.

The final speaker of the session reported on the life cycle of LEXical Information System (the second LEXIS of the conference). We were taken through the phases of its development as an aid for the translator by providing him with the necessary vocabulary for his work.

My thoughts at the end of the conference were dominated by the necessity to make known to manufacturers of software and hardware the needs of the translator. Lack of communication between manufacturers and users results in manufacturers producing what they think we need. If we don't lean on them and make them aware of our requirements, how on earth can they adapt? Ideally, pressure should come from professional organisations which represent their members. It is therefore the intention to consider this matter in more detail within the Translators' Guild.

One vital aspect of conference is the ad hoc exchange of views outside the formal proceedings. I found this contact very rewarding since I met people with whom I could share topics of conversation and those who could widen my views and pass on the benefit of their experience.

[The conference papers will be published by ASLIB, edited by Barbara Snell. TGNL readers will be advised when it is available.]