Sietec Listens to Metal Users

By Klaus Schubert

It is hard to keep track of all conferences, workshops and meetings discussing the needs and goals of enhanced MT development. For developers, however, one type of discussion may be of special interest: an encounter with genuine users.

On 13 and 14 October 1994, the Metal user group (MAUS) met in Munich. MAUS comprises some thirty companies and institutes with Metal installations (of at present forty-five customers on Sietec's official list). Traditionally, the annual meeting is divided into two sections, a user discussion and a meeting with Sietec's development and marketing people

This year, MAUS's list of requests (and demands) for subsequent development of Metal was dominated by practical needs. Priority number one is the improvement of the language pair modules currently in use, in particular their disambiguation capacity and the possibilities for steering the choices in the lexical and syntactic transfer. The next priorities are converters to and from current word processing and publishing software. These converters are of little use to the customers unless upgraded closely in step with the new versions of corresponding software packages. Sietec's customers are in most urgent need of improvements of the existing functionality; only then do the MAUS partners hope for additional enhancements, such as a fully integrated translation memory, client-server architecture, and the like. As for new language pairs, there is a tangible demand for various pairs with English as a source language. If Sietec's customers are to stick to it as their one and only machine translation supplier, the offerings need to be both broadened and deepened very soon. The competition is stirring, as the MAUS partners are most clearly aware.

Sietec gave a series of highly intriguing presentations concerning its plans for the next version, Metal 3.1. A Windows-based PC client was demonstrated, which Metal users viewed with great interest, although not all of them have fully recovered from Sietec's 1992 platform migration (from Symbolics plus Siemens MX to Sun). In any event, a networked PC solution with a single Unix-based translation server is certainly much more realistic than the hopes of the 1980s that Unix workstations would take over from the PC as everyone's desktop machine.