Translating and the Computer XI

One of the major institutions of the translation world is the annual Translating and the Computer conference, organised by the UK information science organisation, Aslib, in collaboration with the Institute of Translation and Interpreting. The 11th in the series was held in November 1989 at the Sedgewick Centre, London.

The conference has always reflected trends and developments, and its nature seems to be subtly changing again.

In its early years it was characterised by its "low-tech" day — which introduced many translators to word processors and personal computers — and a "high-tech" day, which explored the latest developments in machine translation.

Now that familiarity with personal computers is well-nigh universal among translators, the tendency in recent years has been to explore software tools. This year took the process further, and the first part of the conference was largely concerned with peripheral activities, covering subjects such as computer tools, software translation, databanks, copyright, desktop publishing, CD-ROM technology, optical character recognition, and the latest news in dictation systems.

Machine translation as such was dealt with in only two papers. In the first *Ronald Fournier* and *Larry Rogers* described their experience of setting up a new translation company (Lexi-tech, Moncton, Canada, see *Language International* 1.3) to handle major projects, using machine translation software. In the second *Patrick Little*, of Philips, Germany, described their 15 months of experience with the Siemens' METAL machine translation system.

The uncompromising business- and computer-oriented approach of Fournier and Rogers sent a *frisson* through the conference. Would-be translators were given an aptitude test to see if they were geared to working in an automated environment; "It is a sin in our company to even think of doing it manually", Fournier said, and hinted that anyone who disagreed would very quickly be shown the door. To a question about translation creativity, he replied starkly that he thought the original author was the one who was creative. But the *frisson* changed to an evident relaxation in the atmosphere when Larry Rogers gave the output figures: productivity had increased from something like 500 words a day per translator to 2000 words a day, since he seemed not to realise this was well below the average output for the human translator working in a commercial environment.

The conference's concentration on peripherals and applications appeared to make this a low-key event, without any of the future-gazing which has characterised some of the best in the series. However, the final paper, in which *Henry Thompson*, of the University of Edinburgh, described, in a frank and entertaining presentation, the state of the art of speech recognition and speech synthesis, ensured that the conference ended on a high note.

He described graphically the difficulties of dealing with the identification of word division connected speech, rather than deliberately disconnected speech where each word is articulated separately: "There are no space bars in the phonemic alphabet", he remarked. He contrasted the Japanese approach, as exemplified in their Interpretative Telephony Project, where an ambitious end result might or might not be achieved, but by the very size of the project many insights and side-products might be generated, with the Western approach, of taking one step at a time: "Little steps for little feet".