

Introduction

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Where two or three translators are gathered together, the talk these days is often of technology; where two or three hundred are gathered together for the 'Translating and the Computer' conference, the talk is mainly of the new technology.

The change that strikes me, and, I expect, other observers, between the early conferences in the series and the most recent ones, is that then – ten years ago – the computer was a mainframe, large organisations had them, and they were attended to by people who had been initiated into the rites and who acted as intermediaries between ordinary mortals and The Machine. Now every other fourteen-year-old is perfectly familiar with computers, either at home or in school, and quite a few parents can grasp them too ... In the remote past of ten years ago, machine translation was something which individual freelance translators, and many staff translators as well, felt they had to know about, without necessarily believing it might impinge on their lives. In 1985, whether or not we approve of its advent, machine-assisted translation is a reality, even to the extent of being used as a teaching tool for the training of students, as Patrick Corness's paper shows.

Readers of these proceedings will soon realise that even the 'first day' papers, where the attention of the conference is focused on the translator as individual, virtually all make some reference to computers, information technology, call it what you like. Everyone is having to come to terms with the new technology, and the first day's three case studies illustrate how this has been done by some. It is indeed gratifying to see that translators are eagerly seizing the opportunities offered. It is certain that those who attend the conference, or would like to, are keen to know what technology

can do to help them do their work better, or more easily, or both.

Now that many translators, whether freelance or staff translators, have word-processing facilities, or at the very least an electronic typewriter, they are turning their attention to other developments which could make their lives easier. Quite a few, such as Josette Guédès, now have communications facilities; others, like Commodore Croft, can work while on the move, using portable equipment. What people are now looking for is a collapse in the price barrier for other items, comparable to the way the price of pocket calculators, for instance, has tumbled, followed by home computers and now word processors. Which firm will be the first to launch a really reasonable and efficient small photocopier? Readers will no doubt turn eagerly to Julie Harnett's paper on optical character recognition equipment, but it seems that this is still well beyond the reach of most individuals and quite a lot of firms too. On the other hand, it looks as though the translator surrounded by a mass of information which has to be sorted and organised need despair no longer; software packages for just this purpose have been developed and are now available. Machine translation is, however, still only a reality for large organisations with a high throughput – but this was the case with the earliest computers, so who knows what may happen next?

Perhaps this – I have in front of me a newspaper cutting (source unknown): 'Britain and Japan have agreed to develop jointly an automatic translation telephone which would act as an interpreter between callers, according to an unconfirmed report in the Japanese daily *Nihon Keizei Shimbun*'. Can this be true, I wonder? And would it really help communications in general? I am inclined to think that translators, and interpreters too, need not start to get worried yet. Having said that, maybe one of the papers at the eighth conference, planned for November 1986, will be on the subject of progress in this field!

In the meantime, I should like to take this opportunity of expressing my thanks to all concerned with the conference – my fellow planning committee members, the Aslib conference organisation staff, the CBI, the speakers and all those who chaired or reported on the various sessions. Thanks to the participants, too, for continuing to support this series of conferences in such large numbers. It makes all the efforts well worthwhile.