Translating and the computer

The 14th annual Translating and the Computer conference, held at the CBI Conference Centre in London, on November 10-11, provided a diverse range of papers.

Report by Geoffrey Kingscott

It is no longer clear where this conference is trying to position itself. In earlier years there was a distinct pattern, with the first day being devoted to introducing translators to technology (low-tech), and the second day looking at the state of the art of machine translation (high-tech). These days there is no need for the low-tech introduction, while the high-tech role has been taken over by the MT Summit series. Judging from the programmes in recent years, the 1992 conference being no exception, the organisers now try to present papers which simply illustrate different aspects of current translation practice, even where, in subjects such as quality assurance or professional qualifications, there is no obvious link to the computer theme, and the emphasis is on UK rather than international activity. Another criticism might be that, while there is a commendable effort to attract some new speakers to intersperse with the old reliables, some of these new speakers do not seem to be fully aware of the nature of the audience they are addressing.

The audience at the T&C conference (often called the Aslib conference) is perhaps a more interesting phenomenon than the papers. It consists of an uneasy mixture of sophisticates (people who have been coming for years, know one another, have heard much of the material before, and are really there to renew contacts) and unsophisticates (people who have been sent by their firms who have heard of the conference, or are circling on the periphery of the subject, and are relative newcomers to the material).

This is not to say that there were not some interesting papers this year amidst the diversity. What is difficult to extract are any pointers to the way translation practice is developing. Quality assurance and professional qualifications are, it seems, inevitable subjects these days (similar papers were given at the ITI conference in May 1992). The new translation memory machines and translator workstations are major subjects of interest, and rightly so. Terminology is increasingly context-related ("Text is the natural habitat of a term" — Professor *K. Ahmad* of Surrey University) and corpus-based. Translation is increasingly being treated not as a separate activity but as part of the industrial documentation process ("The integration of all phases of the document production process ... is a prerequisite for both cost effectiveness and quality assurance" — *Gerhard*

Freibott, of Krupp). One of the biggest factors which can contribute to success with machine translation applications is control of preparation of the original documents ("You will then discover that any step taken to improve the quality of these documents also has a direct and positive effect on METAL-output.." — *Alain Paillet*, of Boehringer Ingelheim).

None of these points are new, though they are worth making. What one misses is any attempt to give an overview, or to look at the long perspective. The conference was also rather bland; a touch of acerbity would not have come amiss. I simply cannot believe that all the roses of language technology are totally free of blight.