Cranfield conference on machine translation

Over sixty participants from 13 countries attended the conference on "Methodology and Techniques of Machine Translation" at Cranfield Institute of Technology on February 13 to 15.

Subtitled "Processing from words to language" (see preview in Language Monthly no. 4, page 10), the conference was put on to increase awareness of MT in government and industry, and so to encourage funding of MT research and development.

Whereas the November "Translation and the Computer" conference of Aslib and the Translators Guild emphasised practical experience and the reactions of users, Cranfield was meant to concentrate on the computer processing side of MT. Another difference was that it approached the field more from the academic side, issuing a call for papers to university departments of mathematics and linguistics. However, there were also invited speakers, some from practical MT.

Not surprisingly, then, the 30 papers (by speakers from 10 countries) were a mixture. As far as "real-life" MT was concerned there was little of interest that had not been presented elsewhere, but there were papers in a variety of research areas, including the computer processing of text corpora and computer-assisted language learning.

Two systems were demonstrated: the Weidner MT system (through Ulla Magnusson-Murray of ITT, who has it at Harlow), and speech input and output equipment from Texas Instruments, the subject of an informative and forthright presentation by Raj Gunawardana.

unwisdoms

Two traditional pieces of MT unwisdoms put in appearances at intervals. One was "My system is better because it does so-and-so" - of a system which exists only on paper, so that the question, "How much of it have you implemented?" elicited a chuckle and the response, "Not a bit!"

The second was "MT will never do that", when speaking of a problem solved years before. Sadly, one researcher who had spent 24 years on a job was told that, had he known, he could have saved it through the European Commission's Systran and done 80% of it in two days. (The Commission later confirmed to Language Monthly that this could have been arranged.)

Translation - translation either way between English and Chinese. "Chinese has the most speakers, and English of course is the most used language." A problem, however, is said to arise with Chinese copies, not in the patent's sense of piracy of an invention, but literally: China would buy one copy of a translation, then photocopy that throughout the country.

Jiri Jelinek gave a very interesting presentation of Sheffield's AidTrans project for technical Japanese, based on three converging, interacting lines of action: an efficient automatic integrated dictionary, which they hope to demonstrate within two years; machine-aided translation, perhaps later MT; and a computerised course for teaching Japanese-English translation. Already they teach subject specialists with no Japanese to translate in their own subject area by the end of a seven-week course, now available throughout term time. Another teaching project which aroused much interest was that of Brian Farrington (Aberdeen University): an Apple-based program for checking learners' French sentences.

Meyoro Loei discussed the development of English-Spanish MT at the Pan American Health Organization in Washington. Three commercially available MT systems were also described: Logos by Glenn Randier, Alps by Deryle Lonsdale and Weidner by Mambou Ibrahim. Jun-ichi Nakamura (Kyoto) spoke on Grade, a GRAMmar DEScriber for MT.

The sad history of Montreal's TAUM-Aviation project was related by Elliott Macklovitch of the Canadian government's Translation Bureau. Run as a research project, it seems, it was judged as a development project, and therefore found wanting. (Having no "not-found-word" routines to cope with words not entered in its dictionaries, it tended to be thrown out when encountering common such words - something which is unacceptable in practice and which, we feel, could be one reason why it lost its funding.)

The final paper, by Birgit Rommel of the Zürich Translating and Interpreting School, suggested a new role for the translator, who should also be a qualified terminologist, lexicographer, post-editor and/or consultant.
Pictured relaxing in the bar at the Cranfield conference are, left to right: Professor K. Sellin of Copenhagen; Ian Kelly, chairman of the British Computer Society group; Loli Roling, European Commission; and Dr Peter Toma, Inventor of Systran.

Professor Frank Knowles of Aston University giving his paper.

Raj Gunawardana, Texas Instruments, demonstrating speech input and output technology (behind, half hidden, is Professor Mahamad H. Bakalla of Riyadh).