In machine translation we are looking for "Meaning In, Meaning Out". If poetry is what is lost in translation by ordinary means, and prose is that which is lost in adaptation for television, what is it that is lost in Machine Translation? All too often the answer is "sense", but we're getting better at that. I would like to see MT systems measured against more exciting criteria than merely preserving the meaning of sentences about plugged drains - drain plugs. I would like to see MT preserving style and humour. I would like - and I am not entirely flippant about this - to see the Machine Translation of jokes.

New theories and processes in Artificial Intelligence are often tried out on the game of chess. This is not because AI workers see the game of chess as the ultimate aim of what they are doing, but because chess constitutes, for many purposes, an isolatable and controlled universe with objective measures of success.

Why jokes for MT? Well, firstly because of their linguistic complexity. (Though remember, with Aquinas, that not everything that is more difficult is more meritorious).

The smallest unit of translation would have to be the whole joke itself, of whatever length, which may include dialogue, incomplete sentence fragments, linguistic caricatures in deviant orthography of racial, social or political stereotypes, and so on. (That means, in jokes the "other" guy talks odd). There are even puns, and very long word-plays which the best human translators may spend hours chewing a pencil over.

There are simple positions, and chess problems.

Secondly, because jokes cover a very wide universe of discourse. There are the wonderful tales of the Mulla Nasrudin which encapsulate philosophical thought and moral tuition in the form of jokes; there are children's surrealistic jokes of Zen incongruity ("What's yellow and dangerous? Shark-infested custard!"); there are
scatological jokes which no-one claims to
tell or hear in polite society, but which
everybody more-the-less knows. These are
jokes which bring in topicality and
locality for their interpretation, and so
on. But you are unlikely to need vast
term-banks: jokes about "ternary
incremental representation" or "loop
invariance within irrotational fields" are
unknown. Well, to me, at any rate.
There may be as many possible games of
chess as there are atoms in the universe,
but there are only six kinds of chess piece.

Thirdly, I think it would be even more fun
to work on. Much of what we translate is -
let's face it - dull. Stuff you find it
hard to put your heart into: indeed, the
kind of stuff you suspect no-one's heart
has ever been in. As well as fascinating
challenges in informatics and linguistics,
why should we not, as we research, have
interesting inputs and outputs as well? AI
researchers sometimes enjoy a game of
chess, though that might not have been the
primary aim of the research.

And finally, because humour touches
something so fundamental and deep-rooted in
our own, human, psychological make-up that the
study of it can only serve to humanize
the machines, and open up for them an
understanding of what we are - which we, of
course, will first have to discover. An
objective measure of the successful
translation of jokes would have to include
laughter. Dr. Howard Pollio, a psychologist
at the University of Tennessee, has been
quoted as saying:

The stimulus of a laugh is an
intellectual event, yet it
quickly goes on to block all else.
There are only two other phenomena
that so completely take over your
awareness - the orgasm, and the
sneeze.

Besides that, the simple elation of winning
a game of chess is insignificant indeed.

Hence I would like to institute a new
award. The award itself will have no
intrinsic value - merely kudos. It will be
awarded in several categories:

* for the best new computer joke,
* for the most elegant machine translation
  of a joke,
* for the most convincing evidence of an
automated appreciation of a joke, and - of course - for the funniest example of a machine mis-translation.

And there will be special awards for the introduction of the funniest corpus of test material.

You have heard of the Oscar; you have heard of the Emmy; I offer you the Roderick.

The Roderick is named after the small robotic hero of a pair of books by that brilliant author John Sladek. In the books “Roderick” and “Roderick at Random” - we follow a baby robot from its first awakenings, through its growing pains and education up to its adulthood - or should I say “machinehood”? John Sladek has obviously done his homework, and amongst the very funny and perceptive prose there are lots of “in” jokes on AI and computational linguistics. Sladek suggests that - maybe - robotics is the next step in our own, human, evolution; and that research into robotics is fuelled by our own impulse to procreate images of ourselves. Those of you who do not receive any of the Rodericks on offer tonight would be well advised to borrow and read a copy soon.

On this occasion the Rodericks will be awarded without ceremony, and purely at whim as we come across sufficiently entertaining examples. But next year - or whenever we decide to hold the next one of these conferences - we will be able to award them in their correct categories. Contributions, please, to the Editor of the Newsletter, Ulla Magnusson Murray.

I hope we shall be able to hold a series of these conferences. When “Translating and the Computer” started, the growth in interest could hardly have been anticipated. I would hope that following this conference - which I like to refer to as “MT64” - there will be an MT65, MT66, and so on, to complement “Translating and the Computer” from the computing side. And who better to host such conferences than the British Computer Society through its specialist groups, specifically the Natural Language Translation Specialist Group.

We know that Machine Translation is going to grow in importance. As we are all aware, MT is specifically one of the ingredients...
of the Japanese 5th Generation. Public awareness of the reality of MT needs to be fostered. A lot of wrong impressions still abound: it's all very well for me to inaugurate a prize for a humorous example of a machine mis-translation, but it is quite another thing for an otherwise excellently informed publication like "New Scientist" to quote the old joke about "out of sight; out of mind" being mis-translated as "invisible idiot" as if that were the best that MT can do. The message that must be got across is: there is a language crisis now, caused both by the information explosion and the increasing insistence by nations and peoples to be communicated with in their own languages, the increasing awareness that just as you should respect other people's religion and should not - if you are civilized - expect them arbitrarily to conform with yours - so you should respect the whole of their culture, of which language is a vital part.