Multilingual IT

Multilingual aspects of information technology, by P.A. Bennett, R.L. Johnson, John McNaught, Jeanette Pugh, J.C. Sager and Harold L. Somers, published by Gower Publishing, 1986, ix + 146 pages, £17.50.

Review by Gray Sutherland

Multilingual aspects of information technology is a collection of introductory papers by members of the Centre for Computational Linguistics at UMIST on various language related aspects of computer science. It is divided into four main chapters devoted in turn to computerised lexicography, terminological data banks, machine translation, and natural language interaction with information systems, and an introduction that

deals with linguistics, lexicography, computer science and computational linguistics. Together, the papers offer the reader a considerable amount of information in a compact volume. The historical content of the papers in particular makes the book a useful reference source, while the discussion of current areas of interest and research, and the hopeful pointers to future developments, give a rare glimpse of the dedication, enthusiasm and excitement of those active in the field.

At the same time, however, the authors claim that their book can be used as an introduction by workers and students in both computer science and languages, as well as by the general reader, and here *Multilingual aspects of information technology* runs into difficulty. The contributors are so familiar with the areas of their research that they assume, rather naively, that their readership shares their expertise. While computer scientists in general and those active in Artificial Intelligence research in particular may feel at home with the terminology and style employed in the book, the same cannot necessarily be assumed of those of us who are language professionals. This implicit bias is borne out in the Preface, which states: "For students of modern languages and linguistics, it is a guide to areas which *should* be ... claiming their attention, while computer science students *will* find that it opens their eyes..." (reviewer's italics). No doubt the latter will find it useful; the former find themselves admonished to keep in touch. And with what?

This reviewer was startled by the extravagance of some of the claims made; disappointed in the virtual absence of multilingual, as opposed to unilingual, aspects; and infuriated by the density of the jargon used. What, pray, is the general reader supposed to understand by such expressions as "non-deterministic finite-state transducer formalism" (p.91)? Special language is properly used by experts for experts. Verbiage of this degree of convolution can only deter and dismay those who, perhaps anachronistically, still regard the English language as a rich and subtle vehicle for thought and communication.

If *Multilingual aspects of information technology* is to be an introduction intended for computer scientists, then so be it; but then let it not masquerade as everyman's guide.

A final note: it is a sad reflection on British publishing today that a book emanating from so distinguished an institution and appearing over so prestigious an imprint should be produced on paper so coarse as to recall the Wartime Economy Standard, and be so riddled with typographical and spacing errors. As for the presence of hand-written (and poorly written, at that) parsing markers (e.g. p. 116), the less said the better.