8. Book Reviews

Machine translation, past, present, future
W.J. Hutchins
1986 382 pages Ellis Horwood £39.95

This book sets out to be as complete a history of Machine Translation as it is possible to give in a book that is not too large to lift. Its purpose is accomplished admirably. John Hutchins has brought to this study the wealth of meticulously researched detail proper to the technological side of the discipline (thus fully informing the reader), the objective impartiality proper to the historian (whereby he can both sympathetically and accurately describe all the various MT systems without unfairly biasing the reader's judgement between systems based on conflicting theoretical foundations), and the wit to lead the reader safely through the surrounding minefields of linguistic philosophy. Though the subject matter is at times difficult, and the exposition always detailed, the clarity and organization of the text make the reading a positive pleasure. It has a wide range of potential readership: the intelligent layman seeking to become informed about MT could read it; it would serve admirably at undergraduate level to impress upon new students of computer science the complications of fitting computers to the solution of large, ill-defined problems in the real world; and it delineates numerous problems in sufficient detail to incite post-graduate study, with a bibliography adequate for shelf-full of theses.

The book is not only a history, however. As its title implies it describes current MT systems also both those in commercial and productive use, and those still being researched, or in early stages of development. It is these latter that fulfil the "Future" promise in the title, as there is here no contentious crystal-gazing.

If you have room for only one book on Machine Translation then it has to be this one. Normally I would dislike spending this much on a book: in this case I would judge it money well spent.

Ian Kelly