How computers affect the translation process

Zurich conference looks at the state of play

The impact of language engineering developments on the translation process was the theme of the third Equivalences conference in Zurich. The conference, held at the University of Zurich's institute for information technology, was organised by the Swiss translators' association ASSTI (*Association Suisse des Traducteurs, Terminologues et Interprétes*) and attracted 300 participants.

They heard every aspect of translation tools explored. As ASSTI president Hannelore Lee -Jahnke explained, it had become essential to examine how the new technology will affect translators' working practices, and how it will effect translation quality.

The theme of the effect on working practices was taken up by the opening speaker, Dr Ursula Hasler Roumois, of the Zurich Interpreter School, who explored to what extent the way computers operated affected, and interacted with, the mental processes of the translator. She emphasised the importance of developing micro-strategies to tackle the problem. The very quantity of information now available could lead to uncertainty. An important characteristic of the computer was speed, and because we lived in a society which thought speed was smart, this had an effect on translation.

Dr Ulrich Heid, of Stuttgart University's Institute for Machine Translation, described a project he and colleagues are currently working on, establishing a multilingual database of automotive terms for Mercedes Benz, the process of data extraction from documentation, traditionally the most time-consuming aspect of terminology, being automated as far as possible.

Professor Dieter Huber, of the University of Mainz at Germersheim, after summarising developments in machine translation and translation tools during the last 50 years, then dealt specifically with how language technology could be adapted to provide instant assistance in the booths for conference interpreters. The second interpreter, the one not currently speaking, could access key terminology or other information online. While there would always be the problems of time pressures, lack of booth space, and the sheer stress of the interpreter's work, new technologies did mean that conference interpreters no longer had to work unsupported.

Dr Uwe Reinke, of the University of Saarbrücken, looked at ways of integrating automatic translation and translation memory systems in a translator's work station. An ASSTI survey had revealed, he said, that, perhaps surprisingly, most translators still received work in paper form. Only 20% received their work mostly in a machine-readable form. The suitability of machine translation or translation technology applications, he said, depended less on the organisation of the translator process, and more on text types, the degree of repetition, and text production cycles. He spoke about the interaction with documentation authors and the importance of the quality of the source text which could be favourably influenced by guidelines to authors (*Schreibanweisung*) and Controlled Language. Dr Reinke also touched on changes in the translation working environment, which could range from traditional translation (in-house, agency, freelance) to project teams, parallel text production and multilingual text generation.

A number of speakers, among them Professor Michael Hess (University of Zurich) and Professor Susan Armstrong (University of Geneva School of Translation and Interpreting) attempted something like taxonomies of aspects of translation technology, which provided useful elucidation. Other speakers, including Hannelore Lee-Jahnke and Dr Gary Massey (Zurich Interpreter School), spoke of the effects of the new technology on translator training, the former showing how students could be taught to use the wealth of reference information available on the Internet, the latter reviewing how institutions were resolving the problem of a traditional classroom environment and the need for computer-oriented translation practice. Computer-based instruction could bridge the gap between process-based translation and product-based translation, which were normally considered different approaches.

UK freelance Roger Fletcher explained how he used speech recognition for translation, and US freelance Stephen Sachs showed how the Termium CD-ROM could be a major tool for the translator working between French and English.

Paul Kaeser emphasised the importance of workflow integration in multilingual documentation, so that technical author and translator could see

themselves as part of the overall process. Such integration was essential to comply with the shorter workflow times now being demanded. It could produce better and faster results if properly thought through, and if both technical author and translator worked with appropriate tools, such as structured terminology databases, authoring and design tools, translation memory, etc.

Deborah Fry gave a definition of localisation: "the process of adapting a product - often but not always software application or hardware component - to meet the language, culture and other requirements of a specific environment or market (a 'locale')". She showed how it was quite different from internationalisation - designing and implementing a product for localisation.

Localisation differs from translation by having, in addition to the linguistic dimension, a technical dimension and a content dimension.

Localisation, she said, was a fast-growing industry. A major question for many localisation suppliers was whether to acquire or be acquired. In 1996 some $250m of external capital flowed into the localisation industry. She drew a contrast with the muddling-through attitudes and business ignorance which characterised much of the traditional translation sector.

Terminology, which one speaker described as the 'motor of translation' was a major preoccupation of the conference. Professor Klaus-Dirk Schmitz, of the Cologne technical college (*Fachhochschule Köln*) explained the various types of terminology management systems and the parameters and principles to be observed in constructing a termbase.

Professor Louis Truffaut emphasised the importance of continuing training for translators. He also spoke about the importance of getting better recognition for translators, who were *acteurs sociaux*.

Appropriately, after so many presentations of the technology, one of the final papers dealt with the evaluation of translation technology products. Professor Margaret King, of the Institute for Semantic and Cognitive Studies (ISSCO), Geneva, described the work done to date by the Expert Advisory Group on Language Engineering Standards (EAGLES). She introduced the audience to much of the specialist terminology of language technology evaluation, such as 'product attributes', 'metrics' and 'external validity'. ■