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Session 1:

Chairman's introduction

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It gives me great satisfaction to see so many participants today, many of whom have come a long way. People don't attend conferences just for fun, especially in these times of financial stringency. Your presence here confirms that these Translating and the Computer conferences, designed to bridge the gap between translators and computer specialists, are fulfilling a need.

One of the most pleasing aspects of looking at the list of participants is seeing the same names cropping up year after year. It was pointed out after last year's conference that we seemed to have planned the programme on the assumption that participants had attended all our previous conferences. Was this why we had not included papers on certain term banks which had been given coverage earlier in the series? Frankly, the answer to this was 'Yes'. In fact, one third of the participants that year had been to at least one previous event in the series, and a number had been to all four. So while saying how delighted I am to see those of you who are today attending your first Translating and the Computer conference, may I extend an extra warm welcome to the regulars.

It was in the summer of 1976 that the first offspring was conceived of the apparently improbable union of a translator and a computer. Perhaps stud-book parlance - 'by a translator and out of a computer' - offers a better metaphor than making the translator the dam and the machine the sire! We felt that translators were dangerously ignorant of what was happening in the world of computers as we entered the office technology era. Until that time translators had tended to regard these machines as something to do with figures and accounts, but having no relevance to words.

The sooner translators came to realise that computerised electronic equipment could be turned to their advantage, the better. We also thought that computer people knew all too little of what was really involved in the practical process of translation and the ways we handle words, although they were always ready to tackle the fascinating task of computerising the translator's job.

We had a fairly basic programme for our first Translating and the Computer in 1978. The main idea was to show that we did have common ground. The mixture worked; the blood lines of our progeny were right.

The second conference, Machine Aids for Translators, took place two years later, on the essentially practical theme of aspects of modern office technology which were of particular relevance to the translator: aids which would enable him to make use of the electronic age while exploiting the unique capability of his mind. This was a good basic workhorse of a conference.

The next year, 1981, saw Practical Experience of Machine Translation. As the name suggests, it showed the other side of the coin, catering for the high fliers who had been concerning themselves with machine translation in its varied practical aspects. Human translators were most interested to see what progress had been made in the three years since the first conference.

Last year Term Banks for Tomorrow's World offered yet another angle, a more specialised view of one particular aspect of the words used by translators and the prospects for their being handled by machine. It was the first open gathering in this country to look seriously at term banks, and ranged widely over the terminology field.

For today's event it seemed timely to update two distinct facets of our theme Translating and the Computer which had been treated separately in previous conferences. There have been great advances since 1980 in the types and range of equipment readily available to and used by translators, and machine translation has certainly not been standing still. The Translators' Guild and the Aslib Technical Translation Group hope you will enjoy what looks a very promising programme.

Is it too soon to ask, what of 1984? That date loaded with sinister portent sounded so far away when foreshadowed by George Orwell in 1949. Now the nearness of the year in which human beings were to be dominated by the machine is something of which we are all only too aware.

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