Translating and the computer

Barbara Snell opening the conference

"THE world's leading forum on machine translation, both in the calibre of the people present and the interest that is shown", was how Ralph Hawes, vice-president of the LOGOS Corporation, described the Translating and the Computer conference series, the fifth of which was held last month.

Nearly 300 delegates attended the conference, titled "Tools for the Trade" held at the London Press Centre, on November 10 and 11 making it by far the most successful of the series so far. The conference is organised by Aslib with the co-operation of the Translators' Guild.

Delegates heard papers which described the latest state of the art not only in machine and machine-aided translation but also in technical aids for the translator.

Julie Harnett, of *Office Equipment News*, started the conference off with an overview of office equipment and systems, from electronic typewriters to local area networks, placing particular emphasis on those which were introducing new features.

She was followed by three manufacturers' representatives describing their firms' products, Horace Mitchell of IBM,

Chris Wheeler of Wang, and Graham Hook of ICL.

The importance in word processing systems of what the trade apparently call WYSIWYG ("what you see is what you get") was one of the points made by Mr Mitchell.

In the afternoon three translation practitioners talked about their experience with electronic equipment, and John Hayes, in a deliberately controversial paper, presented an alternative view of how to manage without it.

The second day was devoted to machine translation, with the overview being presented by Ian Pigott, followed by a number of speakers describing their systems.

Merle Tenney, of Automated Language Processing Systems (ALPS), divided all equipment available into four categories: writing aids, translation aids, interactive translation, and automatic translation. Interactive translation he defined as one providing a complete translation, sentence to which the human translator reacts.

He expressed surprise that his firm's work had little commercial competition. "It is nice to stand apart from the pack, but I am amazed that no-one else has tried to challenge our system".

"Some people seem to think that anything less than full machine translation is not worth doing", he added later.

He also criticised the "father-knows-best" attitude of many developers of systems who ignored the views of translators in their projects.

Muriel Vasconcellos described the various improvements made over the years to a translation system working between Spanish and English at the Pan-American Health Organisation.

When the system, which includes on-line dictionaries as well as text translation, was first applied to a major project in early 1980 the cost of translation fell by over 60 per cent, the number of staff days applied to translation was reduced to 45 per cent, and translation production rose by three of four times that previously achieved, she claimed.

Ralph Hawes described the development of the LOGOS translation system. His company, he said, had had since its

a section of the packed audience listening to the first session

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foundation a single goal, "workable machine translation".

He detailed the parameters required for a successful commercial system, including multi-media input, format fidelity, semantic power, which includes the transfer of nuances – there are 94 possible translations of one verbal phrase, dictionary enhancement, the ability to expand responsiveness to customer needs, and cost-effectiveness.

Peter Walker, of the European Communities, produced a wealth of figures about the translation work of the Communities. Among these were figures showing the average time between receipt of a document and the availability of a usable translation.

An average document of 25 pages took 19 days when exclusively human translation was involved, compared to three to four days for machine translation. He listed the advantages of using MT as being economy of time, the production of a text ready for distribution, and easy revisability.

He speculated about the possibility of grading translations, and training for staff who are reluctant to adapt to the new

Peter Walker of the European Communities was a key speaker on the second day.

system.

Among the urgent needs, he said, was the need to set out ground rules for machine compatibility. He concluded that the development of machine translation was vital to the future of the Community.

Elizabeth Wagner, of the European Communities, spoke about the rapid post-editing of Systran MT output, a service introduced to give a quick service of imperfect but intelligible quality to users who needed information quickly.

To the audience's amusement, at one point she compared the work of re-arranging words quickly to playing Scrabble.

Henrietta Pons, in a highly professional presentation, spoke about the Weidner Corporation's experience in running a bureau service using their own computer-aided translation system.

The French TITUS IV system, originally designed for writing abstracts under controlled syntax, was described by Alan Streiff.

In reply to a question from Ian Pigott, who asked how many authors were prepared to adapt to the TITUS format, he replied that authors did have to adapt. Three centres in France were using Titus, one to write abstracts for their data base. Some German statisticians at GID were evaluating the system.

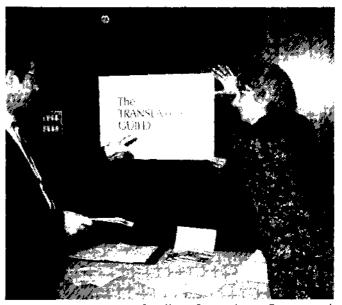The full proceedings of the conference will be published in 1984.

At the end of the conference tributes were paid to Elizabeth Lowry-Corry, Aslib conference organiser, who had made the arrangements for all the conferences in the series and who is now retiring.

Horace Mitchell demonstrating the IBM display-writer during the coffee break

ALPS was one of a number of
machine-aided translation systems
being demonstrated

Geoffrey Samuelsson-Brown and
Dimity Beaumont setting up the
Translator's Guild Stand