

CHANGING ATTITUDES IN THE TRANSLATION MARKET

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The past year has seen significant shifts in attitudes to machine translation, both in the market in general and in the translating profession. Many more people are beginning to take machine translation seriously - not only translators, but funding agencies, end users and managers.

One sign of change is the number of approaches from venture capital investors. Another is that even the United States government seems to be recovering from the ALPAC Report, so widely discredited is it. They had begun to fund MT again three years ago, when the development of ENGSPAN at the Pan American Health Organization was backed by the Agency for International Development, part of the State Department. This was not, however, the National Science Foundation (NSF), whose predecessors had set up the ALPAC Committee. As late as last July the NSF were still saying that it was not US government policy to fund machine translation research, because "we had this report in 1966"; they were funding only one project and one conference, at Colgate University, Hamilton (NY). Yet that event, only weeks later, seems to have convinced them of machine translation's value, and it is to be repeated in 1987 (at the University of Texas in Austin).

The fact that machine translation is respectable again even in America could be linked with an increasing tendency to accept that MT belongs with artificial intelligence. To quote from the Cognos Report to the Canadian government in 1985:

"This review of Machine Translation, Natural Language Processing and Artificial Intelligence hinges around the perception of a transformative technology at a stage of explosive development. The combination of scientific advance, rapidly accelerating funding, and the enormous potential for increases in productivity ...(my emphasis) has led to intensive worldwide efforts to achieve technical leadership and a competitive edge".

Cognos recommended that Canada resume research in machine translation.

Another sign of the vitality of the field is the apparent expansion of the market for publications on machine translation. The British report "Natural Language Computing: the commercial applications" was (unlike the Cognos Report) entirely commercial, and costs nearly \$400. The MT news in "Language Monthly" is highly valued. Among other things, this journal is documenting a small but significant milestone in the history of MT, by re-interviewing four of the first users of a system - this being perhaps the first time that four original users have still been using any system a year and a half later. In the non-specialist press, articles on MT are now frequent; they are found even in in-flight magazines, and in October both American Airways and British Airways carried features. In a few weeks, moreover, there will be a new journal, "Computers and Translation", with research reports as well as news of practical MT.

Symposia on the subject have also become more common, and are being held (often by translators) even in countries which have shown little interest before. In the USA last August, not one but two events were so successful that they are to be repeated in 1987: besides the government-sponsored conference in Hamilton, there was a week-long institute on Machine Translation at Georgetown University, with participants from translation, computer science and applied, computational and theoretical linguistics. October saw a cluster of machine translation events in three continents in a single week. The annual "Translating & the Computer" conference again drew a wide variety of participants to London in November, this time from 23 countries.

What of changes among translators? Almost as soon as I began to work in the field, it became apparent that the translators most dismissive of MT were usually those with absolutely no experience of it. Those who try to get to grips with MT very soon - often in half a day - recognise two things. First, this strange thing might work after all. Secondly, it is unlikely to work well enough to threaten them.

They do not become uncritical, nor should they; but they begin to see possibilities as well as limitations. With more and more translators taking a serious interest in MT, this shift in attitudes seems to be occurring on a larger scale than before. It also affects many future translators: students, it seems, increasingly expect MT in their courses, regarding it as an inevitable part of their future working life.

A particularly significant example of this shift in attitudes comes from a new professional body for translators (the Institute of Translation), which is being founded in Britain with the support of the three existing translator groups. This itself is relevant, illustrating as it does the drive towards ever greater professionalism among practitioners of translation. Still more significant from our point of view, however, is the fact that this new Institute is aiming from the start to win the support and involvement of people working in machine translation. None of the steering committee actually works in the field, but two of the existing groups (the Translators Guild and Aslib Technical Translation Group) have for eight years been running the "Translating & the Computer" conferences, and are therefore much more aware of machine translation than most. Whatever the background, such a positive attitude among the founders of a professional body for translators is surely to be welcomed.

We have indeed come a long way. Difficult though it is to imagine it now, it was seriously argued a few years ago that Systran was beyond redemption, could not be improved. The Commission actually awarded Margaret Masterman (Cambridge Language Research Unit) a contract to determine Systran's improbability. All too many people would have agreed with a typing error which then made a brief, but pleasing, appearance in my office:

"Systran's improbability".

Yet in these few years Systran has advanced from improbability to this world conference.

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