

# Low cost MT

## Geoffrey Kingscott looks at PC-Translator

Ralph Dessau, who is marketing PC-Translator in Europe, gets upset at people who dismiss this low-price computer-assisted translation system because it lacks the sophistication of other systems which are many times more expensive.

*His attitude is that after the more sophisticated system has performed all its advanced linguistic analysis exercises, it will still get hung up on idiomatic phrases. His system, at the core of which is its extended phrase dictionary, can be effective at a fraction of the cost, he claims.*

For many years now I have followed closely the development of machine translation, but I have done so from the point of view of a practising translator. I take comparatively little interest in how the program goes about its tasks; what interests me is how well does the system translate, how well does it translate, how easy is it to use, how adaptable, how cost-effective in a given situation.

I cannot therefore state with certainty how PC-Translator is programmed, but it seems to me from the demonstration given me by Mr Dessau that the program consists of a few fairly simple algorithms — generating plurals from the singular form, and adverbs from adjectives, for example — catering for the obvious patterns in a language, with little or no attempt to do any sophisticated parsing analysis, but that the main strength is the phrase dictionary.

The user enters the phrases, of almost any length, and the system then translates the phrases, starting with the longest string entered. Thus if you had entered "The drunken car park attendant", "car park attendant", "car park", "car" and "park" as separate phrases, the system would translate the

longer phrases as a whole before moving down to the shorter phrases. This is obviously useful.

It has occurred to me in the past, as it no doubt has to others, that where you have the source text on screen, and text with a lot of repetition, the Search and Replace facility on a standard word processing program could be used to generate some crude automatic translation. I have tried it, but the results have never justified the effort. So I can see the advantage of what is in fact automatic Search and Replace, searching the longest string first.

Ralph Dessau's company is called *Linguistic Products*, and his translation software works with ASCII files and with texts produced on the Wordstar 2000 word processing program, with a windowing capability.

The various language pair packages cost \$985 each, with two packages costing \$1,485, which makes them affordable to the professional individual translator. The language pairs available so far are English/Spanish, Spanish/English, French/English, English/Danish, Danish/English, English/Swedish and Swedish/English.

Are they useful or cost-effective? This is very difficult to say from a demonstration, but I think the answer, as so often with computer translation, is Yes, but only if you have a quite specific requirement. To be fair, Ralph Dessau agrees with this latter statement and says that the system was developed for precisely such applications. If you translate all the time virtually the same type of material, with constant phrase repetition, then this system could work for you. The price is astonishingly low, and the system does seem reasonably simple to run.

Where I take issue with the suppliers is that I think their publicity claims too much. It is not made suffi-

ciently clear that prior inputting of phrases for your own type of text is going to be required, and the sales angle is that it is a computer-aided translation system rather than, what I think it is, a computer aid to translation.

I put this point to Ralph Dessau, and made a careful note of his reply.

In order to handle these applications, users have to enter their specific terminology which nobody else can provide. The customers understand this but we also try to make this point very clear to potential buyers. In any event these are the customers we want and can help, because they know there is no shortcut. The terminologies have to be incorporated as individual words or phrases for the program to work correctly. Once this is done, they have the assurance of total adherence to established and approved terminology without ambiguity.

He added that there was already in the program an existing vocabulary base, of between 60,000 and 70,000 words and terms.

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