A Response to the Comments

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It is a rare honour indeed to be invited not only to write something outspoken and controversial, but also to have the last word in reply to peer group reactions. I will try not to misuse this privilege.

Let me begin with two apologies – or excuses. First, I need to point out that the original article was first drafted for the 1990 TMI Conference in Austin, Texas. The fact that some parts of the article have dated so quickly is a testament to the vitality of our field, but I think it should be noted that the intervening three years have seen an exceptional growth in innovative activity: the emergence in particular of an entirely new paradigm – I am referring to various corpus-based and example-based techniques, more about which later – could scarcely have been foreseen; nor, I think, could the sudden resurgence of interest in MT by the U.S. Government, and the first large-scale funding of MT in that country for 25 years or so, an event which, as Maghi King mischievously puts it, “uncover[ed] a strong but previously concealed interest in the topic in a surprisingly large number of research workers”.

The second excuse relates more specifically to Yorick Wilks’ observation that I appeared to believe that UMIST was the only place where innovative research was being carried out, and my omission of several ‘hybrid’ projects. Again remembering when the article was first written, the omissions could be considered unfortunate, and if I was writing the article now, they would be unforgiveable. And the bias towards UMIST only reflected the available information at the time of writing. If you look at what was available in the public domain in 1989/90, you will see what I mean. I could not agree more with Pierre Isabelle’s final comment about multilingual text generation, and this is reflected in some of my more recent efforts (e.g. Somers 1992).

It was of course very pleasing to see so many commentators basically agreeing with me, though I think the editors’ purposes are better served by those who took issue. To those on whose comments I will make no further reply, thank you for your support! But now let me address more directly some of those who disagreed with my views.
John White comments: "The advent of the notion of a user environment ... has led to word processing tools ... that the ALPAC writers could not have envisioned." But look at p.30 and at Appendix 17 of the ALPAC report: it precisely recommends that the focus of attention in MT research be moved towards providing machine aids for translation and information retrieval. In discussions of the ALPAC report, its positive recommendations (which include funding for general Computational Linguistics research) are often overlooked.

In attempting to summarize my points, Laurent Bourbeau makes two errors: "Since the ALPAC report there is still no commercial second generation MT system on the market..." I would not have said this, because Metal is a counter-example. "Since the ALPAC report, no commercial first generation system has evolved significantly as regards translation quality." This is certainly not true. Systran has evolved tremendously, and the point I would make – and which is often repeated by Wilks among many others – is that using largely first generation techniques, Systran has shown as much or more improvement than any second generation system, and Systran is still the system you have to beat.

King mentions that MT was included in the proposals for the Japanese Fifth Generation research. The irony is that MT was not eventually included in the programme, though the reasons for this may be that MT research in Japan was progressing quite nicely thank you anyway, and so did not need additional support from MITI at that time.

Isabelle claims "It is clearly false that G1 systems are selling well. Few translation services remain committed to any MT system for longer than a couple of years." I am sorry, but that is not the impression I get from attending conferences like the ASLIB/BCS Translating and the Computer series, or even the MT Summit. He goes on to say that second generation systems are easier to customize. But since customization is almost always essentially lexical, I don’t see much difference between the two generations. Later he restates that the first generation systems are "not doing well at all", and this failure is largely "a direct consequence of their inadequate linguistic models". I don’t agree with the first premise, and the second view, while certainly the argument that is always cited against first generation system design (cf. for example Hutchins & Somers, 1992:73!) is, it seems to me, questionable. I think we should not, in retrospect, confuse the linguistic sophistication which replaces local word-reordering with structural analysis on the one hand, and use of linguistic theory, which is a commitment to a certain type of representation and process on the other.