

Cultural Factors and Records Terminology

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WHEN I was first asked to serve on the Committee on Terminology of the Society of American Archivists, I was pleased beyond words, for I felt that the committee dealt with an area urgently needing the Society's attention. My initial enthusiasm waned a little after a while, for purposefulness and goals appeared obscure. The committee has now, in my view, started out in a very progressive manner towards a goal that members of the Society should applaud and support wholeheartedly.

The area that I have been asked to discuss deals with the cultural framework of terminology. In short, how does the multiplicity of cultures in this continent affect the standardization, the use, and the understanding of terms in the fields of records management and archives. I propose to be completely parochial in my approach to this subject. My narrow approach will centre on language and its effect, but this will not become a discourse in philology.

Would any person take me to task if I said that I felt the North American continent had three main working languages? I think we can assume that most communication is in French, English, or Spanish, where communication is not within the narrow confines of a small community or sect. I propose to assume it anyway so that I can, I hope, make my points more clearly.

Those of you familiar with the problems of standardization of terminology within your own working area will immediately recognize the value of the achievement of Elsevier's *Lexicon of Archive Terminology*, which provides a six-language approach to a list of terms that have been agreed upon by archival "experts" in various countries where the languages covered are used. The word experts is quoted from the introduction to the *Lexicon* and is not necessarily the viewpoint of the Society of American Archivists on their status, though it is possible they deserve a better standing than some members of the Society would accord them. Personally, I abhor the use of the word expert—especially since it may seem synonymous with a lay person who is at least 10 miles from home.

Even before the preparation of a list of terms by the Committee on Terminology, it was very clear that the meaning and spelling of words in our professional vocabulary, just in the English language, was not constant, such as the spelling of *program* (*programme*) and the varied

The author, City Archivist of Toronto, Canada, read this paper on Oct. 8, 1969, during a discussion session on terminology at the 33d annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Madison, Wis.

pronunciation of other words such as *prōcess* and *prōcess*. I well remember from previous annual meetings of the Society of American Archivists discussions on the definition of the word *manuscript* as applied to manuscript collections. I have been called, among other things, the City Ark-i'-vist, the City Arkivvist, the *Archi*-vist, *Arch*-i'-vist. I am sure many of you have experienced the same thing. Now, with such simple examples as these from within professional ranks, we cannot fail to admit that there is a definite communication problem among us. By compounding the problem with translations in and out of languages, we have a communication problem of some magnitude. If we do nothing to alleviate the situation, it will not just stay the same, it will deteriorate. We will in fact, by not doing something positive, create a position fertile enough to spawn a professional parallel of the generation gap that is a source of such discord and acrimony today.

What can we do? Without equivocation, I say we can, in fact we must, solve the problem. I also feel that we have in the Society an admirable vehicle for producing a solution, if only we stop letting personal opinions become dogmas from which we cannot or will not escape. Let us allow the Society to set mandatory standards for terms and for consistency in spelling, definition, and use. If we cannot agree among ourselves, and we contemplate entry into a fuller field of education for members and newcomers to our professions, how can we expect to exert a standardizing influence on new blood? Where then do the newcomers turn for a concrete answer to so simple a matter? I rather suspect that bickering over acceptance of standards has promoted deterioration of respect for our profession. Positivity will promote respect. Further procrastination, sidestepping of issues, and discordant multivoiced opinion-making only serve to denigrate our image.

It seems to me that this Society has a golden opportunity in the area of standardization of terminology to show that it can become the loud, clear voice of its membership. We have had a tendency to shy away from letting the Society make decisions. Let us get the Society to set standards to which we will ourselves conform and not just pay lip service. Such standardization will create a multilanguage understanding of the use and meaning of terms.

I recall a problem that I experienced in the field of standardization of terms in Toronto. In the course of scheduling I made a point of asking five people in one departmental division their opinion on the retention value of their copy of a specific record. The question was asked on an individual basis without the knowledge of the others. In each case we had to see the record so that we could agree that this was the record that we were talking about. I found that the same record in the same division of the same department had five different names. None of these names agreed with the title that had first been given to me by the divisional head, and in fact all, as I pointed out, disagreed with the printed title. I think that was the first time I saw how deep seated the problem of

communication was. I began to realize that there was a difference between listening and hearing, and looking and seeing. I realized that you do not communicate unless the other person understands your message in the same way you understand it. It matters little what language is used if there is no basis for communication. This fact is quite obvious if you analyze Elsevier's format. I can only presume that the experts in each country must have had a list of terms passed to them in at least one language for which they were to produce an acceptable translation. What shortcomings does Elsevier have? Two main ones come to mind. First, the number of terms is woefully limited. Second, there is no obvious compulsion to use them.

May I just say how helpful standardization could be in my own country, Canada. We have two official languages. Elsevier was a move in the right direction but—and I repeat—its usefulness is diminished by its size. In addition it really has not delved into records management terminology to any extent. I feel sure that archivists and records management people working in Spanish-language-oriented areas of the North American Continent find Elsevier useful. How much more useful would an extended list of terms be to users of French, English, and Spanish.

What do we do next? The list of terms that this committee has prepared, with any necessary additions or deletions, should, in my opinion, have Society-approved definitions given to them. Translation into French and Spanish, the next step, should be the work of persons in our professions to whom those languages are the native tongue. The list should then be issued as a Society publication to which additions, which have undergone the same approval and translation, should be made regularly. It should complement Elsevier.

To really enter the language jungle we should then approach related associations and societies for any special guidance that they may be able to give concerning terminology peculiarly theirs but that intrudes into our professional spheres. This would assist recognition of our efforts by a much larger group of people and incidentally further the work of standardization. It would also provide lines of communication among groups that sometimes complement each other and sometimes overlap. This problem has the same urgency as the one prompting the statement that the United Nations is drowning in a sea of words. I think our professions are now treading water in that sea of words. Let us be responsible for providing one chance for them to survive by overcoming the undercurrents of misunderstanding.