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A translation policy for the ICA in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: why English and French are not enough

*Summary: this paper introduces the new translation policy for ICA publications, documents and products and explains how members can both provide valuable input to and benefit from it. It describes the current haphazard approach to provision of material in languages other than French and English and argues that as an international, multicultural body ICA needs to improve on this. By so doing, it concludes, ICA will offer a better service to existing members who are not French or English speakers and encourage new members to join ICA. If, as a profession, we seek to preserve the identity of our respective cultures then the best way to do so is to provide our members with the tools to do so in their own language.*

As we all know, ICA is an international organisation with over 1400 members in 198 countries. They work in a variety of public and private bodies, have been trained in different systems and, of course, speak and communicate in a variety of languages. At the moment, there is no official language for ICA, although the Constitution states that the working languages 'shall be French and English'. All major bodies within ICA, committees and sections are expected to communicate, write their minutes and reports of their meetings and conduct their correspondence in these two languages. ICA is based in Paris, staff have either English or French as their mother tongue, and all are highly competent in the other working language.

I was appointed Translations and Publications Adviser for ICA with a brief to look at current language provision and make recommendations for the future. I have considerable experience of working both within professional archival associations and within ICA itself, having been Secretary and then president of SPA (the Section for Professional Associations) between 1996 and 2004. I speak French and Spanish as well as English: all of this has made me aware of the importance of language provision within an international organization.

The first point I had to consider was whether we should simply continue with the status quo so I considered whether French and English were enough for a multilingual organisation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? The quick and easy response is yes. French and English alone have served

us well for over 50 years. We could adopt the line seemingly advocated by the American (and thus English speaking) political satirist PJ O'Rourke—and I will return to the question of the differences within one language as it is spoken in different countries later in this talk—in which he says:

‘There’s no such thing as a foreign language. The world is filled with people who grunt and squeak instead of speaking sensibly. French may be an exception’<sup>1</sup>

If we take the O'Rourke approach this would mean that English and French are all we need, and we do not need to worry about other languages. Needless to say, I (and I hope all ICA members) reject O'Rourke's view, though it should be stressed that he is well known as a polemicist with some rather trenchant, and, one hopes, tongue in cheek views of other nationalities and their languages. His views on language as a whole may be formed by his views on those who speak them. Even those peoples whose languages he finds acceptable—English and French—are not exempt from his vitriol. The English, he thinks, ‘warm their beers, chill their baths and boil all their food, including bread’; the French ‘eat snails and slugs and cheese that smells of peoples’ feet’ and the Scots (I am one, and offer this comment to redress the balance) are ‘a nation whose fumbled attempts at speaking the English language has been a source of amusement for 5 centuries’ I do not have the courage to repeat his views of Australians. So let us firmly turn our back on such a narrow view and consider what we, as a multilingual international body could and should be doing for our global membership.

If, as suggested by Rita Mae Brown, ‘Language is the road map of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going’<sup>2</sup> then it is surely the means by which we preserve the identity of our respective cultures. ICA can help its members to do so, by providing them with the appropriate tools in their own language.

In this short presentation I will introduce the new translation policy for ICA publications, documents and products and explain how members can both provide valuable input to and benefit from, this new policy. I will describe the current, somewhat ad-hoc approach to the

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<sup>1</sup> O'Rourke, PJ: Modern Manners, 1983

<sup>2</sup> ([www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/language.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/language.html)), accessed 24 July 2012)

provision of material in languages other than French and English and argue that ICA, as a multilingual international body needs to be pro-active in seeking to improve this in order that we may offer a better service to existing members who are not native English or French speakers and to encourage new members to join. Finally I will outline the steps we propose to take over the next four years in the first instance.

### The current situation

Let us first examine the current situation. ICA produces a great deal of material which can be divided into three main groups which are: governance documents and management tools; fundamental reference documents; and documents covering professional matters. If we now take each category separately, we can see the full range of material produced by ICA.

- Governance documents and management tools. These include the Constitution, the Strategic Directions paper (currently covering the years 2008-2018), the Business Plan (based on the Strategic Directions paper and regularly revised), and papers for the Annual Meeting, the Executive Board, committees and sections. All are usually available in English and French.
- Fundamental reference documents. These include the Code of Ethics (available in 22 languages); the Universal Declaration of Archives (available in 25 languages) and ICA position statements such as that on copyright. In terms of numbers of translations, the Code of Ethics and the UDA have been the most successful of all ICA products. Both products came from the Section for Professional Associations (SPA) and the translations were provided by member associations, as they clearly saw these documents as being valuable to the work they do for their members.
- The third category is much wider, and concerns documents covering professional matters, such as standards, toolkits, training packs, publications and other professional information such as the website. Here I think it is fair to say that language provision tends to reflect the composition of the group that produced the original work, rather than a translation having been made as the result of a conscious policy decision that this particular language was important. For example if we consider the group of professional standards drawn up by ICA, we find that

ISAD(G) (General International Standard for Archival Description), ISDIAH (International Standard for describing institutions with archival holdings), ISDF (International Standard for describing functions) and ISAAR(CPF) (International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families) are available in a variety of languages , including—although not for all— Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Serbian and Welsh. This is, of course, highly commendable and obviously of great use to colleagues working in those countries and while I do not mean to imply that such languages are unimportant, my slight concern is that such an ad-hoc approach to language provision might reasonably lead to member expectations that all ICA publications and products are available in all languages, which is clearly not the case.

To summarise, and according to the website, ICA products and publications are available in 31 languages overall (Arabic, Basque, Catalan, Chinese, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, French, Galician, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Icelandic, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Maltese, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish, Welsh). This is, as you will agree, a good range of mainstream and minority languages. Most, though not all, are available in English and French. While this wide range of languages is commendable and a credit to those individuals and organisations who have provided the translations, there are still some gaps. The Constitution (a fundamental document for the organisation) is still only available in English and French; ISAD (G) does not exist in Arabic, Chinese or Russian.

However, given the budgetary restraints facing ICA which make it impossible to translate every document into as wide a range of languages as we would ideally like to do, it was clearly important that the new translations policy should, from the outset, establish priorities. We have to accept that we cannot do everything.

## Priorities

- The first of these priorities concerns the choice of languages for translations. It was decided that all **key** ICA documents would be translated into the 6 principal UNESCO languages. These are Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish.
  
- The second priority was to identify and clarify what we mean by key documents. These are the documents which describe the organisation and management of ICA and its constituent bodies; those fundamental reference documents which are clear statements of ICA values and those which cover professional matters of importance and relevance to the international archival community. These would be:
  1. The Constitution
  2. The Strategic Directions paper (although not the Business Plan which changes regularly)
  3. Management Tools such as meeting papers and minutes for ICA governing bodies
  4. Fundamental reference documents
  5. Documents covering professional matters

As a first step we aim to ensure that these are available in the 6 UNESCO languages by 2016. While this might sound daunting, it should be remembered that much of this work has already been done, especially for fundamental reference documents and those covering professional matters, such as standards.

### **Who is going to do this?**

But we have to be practical and think about who is going to do all this work. I have already mentioned the budgetary restraints within ICA which do not allow for any more than 2 working languages. There is provision within the Constitution which does allow for additional languages to be added but at the expense of the language

group requesting this. I stress that there is no specific budget for translation work. Even to provide, for example, agendas, reports and papers for meetings in the two current working languages can place an enormous burden on an already overstretched Secretariat. Occasional sums of money can be found for translations to be done by a professional agency, but this is not something that can be relied on and we must look to our own resources.

As with much other ICA business we must seek volunteers, through our regional branches, our sections and our individual members. We already have a small group of volunteer translators who responded to an initial call made on the ICA website, but we must build on this and proceed in a more proactive manner. So what steps should we take?

We must:

- Pro-actively seek new volunteer translators, via the website and the listserv
- Work with regional branches and sections to find potential translators
- Examine ways in which incentives (not financial) could be offered to translators for their work. Could such work be included in a CPD (Continuous Professional Development) portfolio, where such systems are in place? Can we offer free individual membership of ICA?
- Seek ways in which translations could be offered as a service in kind.

While it may seem blatantly obvious to say so, I am going to remind you nevertheless that translating texts is not simply a matter of providing a word for word translation. Over the years I have done a good deal of translation work for ICA and through time I have, I hope, improved and honed my skills. But the ability to speak another language does not necessarily result in a good quality translation. Potential translators need to have a clear methodology to guide them; they need to have the necessary language skills (fluency and accuracy) as well as the professional expertise, understanding and vocabulary necessary to make the given text comprehensible. A poor translation can be counter-productive.

By way of illustration, let me point out one of the challenges. I mentioned at the beginning of this talk that there can be differences between the same languages as spoken in different countries: English as spoken in the UK as opposed to that of the USA; French and Québécois French; Spanish and Latin American Spanish are the obvious examples. George Bernard Shaw observed that ‘England and the USA are two nations divided by a common language’<sup>3</sup> and my personal experience when drafting the original Code of Ethics between 1995 and 1996 allow me to confirm this. Before we could even begin to put the text into French, I had to work with an American colleague to ensure that we were both happy with the wording and that there were no discrepancies which could lead to misunderstandings. The most difficult part of any translation is ensuring that members of the same language group agree on wording before beginning to put the text into another language. It is, therefore, vital that we provide translators with tools to assist them. These will consist of:

- An Archival Terminology Database which is currently under development. This will bring together existing dictionaries and glossaries, is designed as a Wiki and currently has entries in 16 languages
- An ICA glossary. Those of us who work in ICA know that we use acronyms a great deal. We know what PCOM is, what FIDA does and how ISAD (G) can help us in our professional work. But this need to be clearly explained in all our publications and translators may not be immediately familiar with our internal terminology. I should mention here that the glossary has been compiled by Christine Martinez and Esther Cruces, and that I have already found it very useful.
- A dedicated workspace for translators will be established on the ICA website
- Practical workshops on translation will be designed and offered to potential volunteers.

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<sup>3</sup> ([www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/language.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/language.html), accessed 24 July 2012)

### Quality of translation

Of course, it is not enough to do the translation. We must ensure that submitted translations are done to a high quality; that they are fluent and accurate and can be stamped as an 'official ICA Translation'. We propose to do this by:

- Establishing a small working group which will set and check language tests for potential translators. Members of the group will be responsible for ensuring that the test results are both fluent and accurate.
- Establishing regional quality control centres to check the fluency and accuracy of translated texts. These should ideally be based in National Archives or Archives Schools. Once through this process texts will be stamped as an 'official ICA translation', which will serve as a guarantee of quality.

In this paper, I have made many references to the 6 UNESCO languages. I should stress that I see this as the minimum. The policy does not preclude other translations of our material being provided and submitted by interested language groups, and indeed I would like to take the opportunity to encourage such work. I should also mention that we are already looking at ways to extend provision of key documents in other major language groups, outwith the UNESCO top 6: German, Portuguese, Japanese come to mind, although objective criteria—population size, the number of countries in which a language is spoken for example—need to be established for languages outside the UNESCO top 6. But we must first complete phase one.

But in order to achieve this, I and ICA need your support and co-operation: either as translators, or in establishing regional quality control centres. Preliminary discussions are underway with branches and sections and we have begun to put together a wider pool of volunteer translators. But we need more, so please contact me if you wish to be involved.

I do wish translation could be made easier. If only I could offer the simple solution proffered by the late Douglas Adams in his brilliant humorous novel 'The Hitchhikers

Guide to the Galaxy'<sup>4</sup>. In this, all language difficulties are solved and the human protagonist is able to understand other, non-human races, after inserting a Babel fish in his ear. The explanation of how this works is, at one and the same time technical, impossible and yet rather worryingly believable. To those unfamiliar with this work, I recommend it highly. Adams notes that 'if you stick a Babel fish in your ear you can instantly understand anything said to you in any form of language'. Sadly, I cannot offer you a Babel fish, or anything like it, but I can offer you the opportunity to get involved in helping ICA to become a truly multilingual organisation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If, as a profession, we seek to preserve the identity of our respective cultures, then surely the best way to do so is to provide our members with the tools to do so in their own language.

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<sup>4</sup> Adams, Douglas: The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy, 1978