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Joint Meeting of the Bureau of the International Advisory Committee  
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Committee for Documentation and Terminology in Pure and Applied Science (IACDT)

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THE PLANNING OF UNESCO POLICY REGARDING TERMINOLOGY AND TRANSLATING

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(Item 6 of the Provisional Agenda)

Object

1. The purpose of this note is to advance three related propositions; namely:
  - 1.1 that Unesco ought to give a lead to the world in the promotion of measures for the overcoming of language barriers, especially as regards technical terminology;
  - 1.2 that the Director-General will need advice on the planning of Unesco programmes in this direction;
  - 1.3 that the establishment of a Terminology and Linguistics Subcommittee under the proposed successor committee to the IACB and IACDT would be a convenient way of providing such advice.

The importance of language barriers

2. In the opening chapter of Scientific and technical translating and other aspects of the language problem (Unesco, second edition 1958) reasons are given for supposing that at least 50 per cent of all scientific and technical literature is in languages which over half the world's scientists and technologists cannot read. The situation in other disciplines was not analyzed but may well be similar. As discussed from a practical angle in later chapters of this report, there are three ways, and three only, by which the consequent loss to human enlightenment and progress can be reduced;
  - 2.1 by making translations;
  - 2.2 by increasing the proportions of scientists able to read about their own subjects in foreign languages;
  - 2.3 by encouraging the publication of scientific literature in widespread rather than in little known languages and a preference for the use of internationally recognizable words or symbols, or, going further, by promoting some easily learned language, whether natural or artificial, as an international medium.

The importance of terminology

3. Technical terms are to language what the contents of a builder's yard are to architecture. Within any given language, improvement of terminology means promoting the ideal that the meaning and scope of every technical term ought to be clearly associated in the minds of every writer and every reader with one exactly defined concept and one only. On the international plane it means, further, promoting the ideal that the patterns of technical terminology in all languages ought to correspond exactly with one another and that it ought to be easy, by reference to a dictionary, to find for every expression in language X an expression in language Y which has precisely the same meaning and implications, no more and no less.
4. These desiderata are valid in all disciplines but in practice they are seldom closely approached, even in technical science, much less so in social and political science, and are never fully attained. A main reason for the shortfall is that even where a term has a central meaning which is more or less generally agreed this meaning is apt to be surrounded by a penumbra of vagueness which overlaps the penumbras of other terms. Ambiguity is increased by the existence of homonyms, of synonyms and still more of near synonyms. Even within a single language, these factors prevent words from being used as the tools of precision they ideally should be. Where translation is involved the distortion of the message which an author wishes to convey becomes still worse because not even the central meanings of the words in the two languages which the translator equates with one another in his mind, or finds equated to one another in ordinary dictionaries, really coincide.
5. Ultimately, these imperfections derive from the fact that language, including technical terms, is a spontaneous growth which cannot be pre-planned and can only to a limited extent be regulated. The scientist who advances our understanding of phenomena by putting forward a new concept or framing a new theory, the engineer who invents a new device, cannot be expected, before he starts writing and talking about it, to apply to a committee of etymologists for instructions what to call it. Necessarily, he himself gives his brain-child a name, which may be a good one or a bad one. He does this in his own language, and sooner or later he or more probably someone else gives it names in other languages which may or may not be understood in the same sense as the original. Unpredictably, in accordance with the subtle genius of each language, some terms for new things and ideas become popular and are assimilated into the language whilst some are rejected and fall out of use - other terms, perhaps with different meanings and almost certainly with different penumbras of meaning, spontaneously gaining currency in their place. The earlier expressions do not, however, quite die out but continue to haunt the world and insidiously to cause confusion even among specialist users.
6. In principle the remedy for this state of affairs lies in the standardization of terms in each language on the basis of definitions which have been accurately translated into all languages and agreed upon by representatives of the subject specialists who are native users of each language. But it is impossible to standardize what is not yet there. Therefore, the right moment to scrutinize new technical terms and attempt to establish agreed definitions of their meanings is after they have spontaneously begun to propagate themselves but before they have been doing so long enough to become firmly rooted. Methods for doing this, and also the principles advocated by

a committee of the International Organization for Standardization for the definition and standardization of technical terms are discussed in the final chapter of the above-mentioned Unesco report under the heading "Terminology and lexicography".

#### Actions taken within Unesco

7. Apart from stimulating the actions of other agencies through the issue of this report, Unesco itself has made, and continues to make, various contributions to improvement.
8. Most of its own publications have to be translated into several languages and its conferences have to be provided with interpreters by the Languages Division in the Documents and Publications Service of the Secretariat, which in doing so has built up a fund of expert knowledge and, as a by-product from this, has compiled, but not published, some terminological lists. The Head of that service and some of his colleagues have formed a small, unofficial group for studying the possibilities of translation by machine, and he himself is presenting a paper on this for discussion at the Congress of the International Federation of Translators in July 1959. The present writer, when a staff member in the Department of Natural Sciences engaged in compiling the above mentioned report, contributed also to the proceedings of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) Technical Committee 37 (Terminology: principles and co-ordination) and to those of the terminological sub-committee of ISO/TC 85 (Nuclear energy). He attended meetings of the Documentation and Dictionaries Committee of the Union des Associations techniques internationales (UATI) to advise on the production (with financial assistance from Unesco under contract) of multilingual dictionaries by the member organizations of that Union containing equivalent technical terms for their respective branches of engineering. Likewise he attended meetings of other non-governmental organizations or gave advisory interviews to their representatives regarding such work in many other technical fields - this being reciprocal advantage since the principles and problems that arise in lexicographical work are essentially the same in all subjects and often it is possible to learn from one what is useful to another.
9. The Department of Natural Sciences produced in 1951 the first edition and is now completing the enlarged fourth edition of the Bibliography of interlingual scientific and technical dictionaries of which over 6,000 copies have been sold. Complementary to this, it arranged for the compilation under contract of the Bibliography of monolingual scientific and technical glossaries (Vol. 1: National Standards. Vol. 2: Miscellaneous sources) by the Austrian engineer, Dr. E. Wüster, who had founded ISO/TC 37 above mentioned.
10. The Departments of Education and of Social Sciences also have done some terminological work. The Department of Cultural Activities is responsible for the Unesco programmes of translating great works and of studying the relations between East and West. It helped to constitute, and it administers Unesco's financial assistance to, the International Federation of Translators (FIT). Through its Libraries Division it sponsored the production of the Vocabularium Bibliothecarii.

Unesco stimuli to actions through other bodies

11. One of the main objects sought through the publication of Scientific and technical translating was to stimulate action by interested organizations both national and international, outside Unesco. The report has been well received and there are gratifying signs of this object being realized in various directions. For instance, it was quoted in hearings before a sub-committee of the United States Senate. In March 1958 Aslib (the Association of Special Libraries and Information Bureaux) supported by the Institute of Linguists, both in London, organized a one-day conference which was directly inspired by it. Several of the national organizations of translators which are affiliated to FIT have reviewed it favourably in their journals. In May 1958 that Federation, jointly with the High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community, organized in Luxembourg a three-day conference attended by representatives of various inter-governmental and supra-national institutions, industrial administrations and linguistic training organizations, which passed the following resolution:

"Conscious of the necessity of having available lists indicating sources of practical references and unified glossaries recording and classifying verified equivalents of terms used in conferences and other international activities,

wishing to facilitate the work of translators and to avoid, on the administrative level, wasteful duplication of effort such as results from all unco-ordinated activities devoted to the task, which is a corollary of international communication of all kinds,

[the representatives] recommend that the administrative services of the interested organizations should take all steps to organize between themselves and in collaboration with the International Federation of Translators, the organizations of international translators and interpreters and the training establishments, the co-ordination of all lexicographical work and the centralization, exchange and distribution of the documents so produced".

12. Scientific and technical translating has appended to it a "Recapitulation of proposals discussed in this report regarding which further expressions of opinion are invited". The following two of these 13 proposals are to be further considered with a view to positive action at the Second International Congress of Translators being organized by the FIT in Bad Godesberg from 27 - 30 July 1959:

12.1 "Encouragement to the formation in other countries of registers of specialist translators similar to that which exists in the United Kingdom, and to the linking of these internationally."

12.2 "Co-operation between Unesco and suitable national bodies in attesting the possession of suitable experience and qualifications to undertake translating in specialized technical fields."

13. Another of the listed proposals, which is under consideration by the Council of FIT, relates to "Assistance in the establishment of 'terminological bureaux' both internationally for particular subject fields and locally for particular languages." This links up with an idea which has been adumbrated by Dr. Wuster and with what was recommended at the meeting in Luxembourg.

The need for an advisory sub-committee

14. Yet another of the 13 proposals relates to the "Calling of a conference of representatives from countries using minor languages to afford them an opportunity of agreeing which major language is preferable as a medium for giving their own scientific publications international currency." This was suggested by an Israeli scientist whose point in doing so was that in their own countries the hands of those who advocate the use, for scientific purposes, of a language more widespread than their own, would be strengthened if the choice of that language were made by an impartial body. It is an example of the kind of action which only Unesco is in a position to take.
15. This remark applies, in greater or less degree, to most of the remaining nine proposals made in the report and it would apply equally to others that might be made. Language questions are ipso facto international and ought to be regarded as central in Unesco's general obligation to assist in removing barriers to understanding among the peoples of the world. There is, in fact, no other organization in existence which is capable of taking the lead in these matters. Various national committees for terminology in particular languages, and the international ones for the terminology and lexicography of particular subjects, as detailed in the Unesco report, are doing good work. So are, in various particular directions, the International Organization for Standardization, the International Federation of Translators and the International Federation for Documentation. International language movements such as Esperanto and Interlingua, and the pioneers of mechanical translation, may or may not have useful contributions to make. It is desirable that Unesco should, in accordance with its sound usual principle, act wherever possible through such bodies as these rather than itself directly; but none of them - they would be the first to agree - is in a position to lead and co-ordinate the others.
16. Although, as outlined above, various departments of Unesco are promoting terminological improvements in their respective disciplines, there is at present no organ of Unesco expressly designed to co-ordinate them or to advise the Director-General on the development of Unesco policy and the allocation of Unesco funds for all these purposes. There is no longer even an individual staff member expressly qualified for and charged with this function.
17. For all these reasons, and because questions of terminology, translating and inter-linguistics are closely related to those of documentation in general, it is suggested that the successor committee to the IACB and IACDT should have a sub-committee to deal specifically with such matters.
18. It is desirable that the sub-committee should include a representative from the Languages Division in the Documents and Publications Service of the Unesco Secretariat, with the same voting power as the other members.