

**Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga com'è, bisogna che tutto deva essere scritto in inglese**

**David Bade**

### **The splendid isolation of American library science**

In brief, splendid isolation, freedom from entanglements with European nations, was the dominant ideal to the end of the nineteenth century and was an integral part of the American ethos. (Morris Raphael Cohen and Felix S. Cohen. *American thought: a critical sketch*. New York, Free Press, 1954)

Looking at library science in the United States we are confronted with an ostrich, its head buried in English. Yet in its use of English, library science in the United States is little different from any other American science, and the situation apparently has roots that go back a long way. If “splendid isolation” was a dominant ideal in 19th century America, it seems to have survived into 21st century American academic if not economic life. Here in the United States we often hear that the language of science is English (or at least Broken English), and it seems that many scientists in Europe share that understanding—or at least they desire an American readership enough to write in English. For it is true that any scientist who writes in a language other than English will be ignored here. In this land rightly proud of its constitutional guarantees of academic and religious freedoms and a general freedom of speech, the online databases and bibliographical references accompanying articles in the major professional journals all tell a different and disturbing story: if it is not published in English, it does not exist. There may be freedom of speech here, but if you are not speaking in English, no one is listening. What does not exist has no right to a hearing.

Is this linguistic picture of contemporary American library science at all accurate or is it a misperception? One could treat this as an empirical question to be resolved by counting citations or surveying 17.4% of the faculty of 28% of the library schools in the United States, with a few European faculty thrown in for good measure. However I do not think there is any need to engage in a quantitative study of who cites publications in what language and how often, nor even a survey of faculty attitudes towards the literature beyond English, though that might make interesting reading. If you want you can pick up any journal published in English—even one published by IFLA—and count the references to non-English publications, repeating this for as many English language journals and journal issues as you like. This simple exercise ought to convince anyone of the accuracy of my portrayal. I do this often, but I do not keep count.

I do not keep count because I do not need to. It is quite clear that there is a literature of library science not in English—a substantial literature, a good literature and an irreplaceable literature—and the absence of attention to it by American librarians and library science researchers can only be explained by American attitudes and aptitudes. I do not need to measure any surrogates for American attitudes because I live with them, because I have been reading for years without

finding references to those who do not write in English but whom I have come to appreciate. I do not find non-English publications by following citations in articles by my American colleagues. I look for them. I look very hard. I read everything I can find that is not in English. And I am grateful for those European scholars who cite the non-English publications of their European colleagues. They have been my best guides.

Is English *the* language of library science or rather one among many? The answer to that question depends of course upon whom you ask: asked of a monolingual English speaking librarian or professor of library science, the answer is unequivocally yes, even when that person reads publications in translation. “If it is not in English it does not exist” is not so much a lie as an excuse—a convenient fiction—to mask an ethical refusal. Science-not-written-in-English does in fact exist, but many English speakers choose to ignore what they cannot or do not want to read, and blame instead the foreign authors for not writing in the only language the provincial American chooses to read.

What is the significance of this situation, of this linguistic attitude? Does it matter in which language we write and read? Should we accept the notion of one single language for library research and scholarship? If so, should we be promoting the learning and use of that language, and which language should that be? If not, how do we understand our current situation and what should we be doing in response to it? I have encountered five explanations of the current linguistic situation; I offer my own interpretations and responses.

### **Explanation number 1: English is the international language of science**

Is English currently the international language of science? Suppose we assume that it is. What does it mean? Does it mean that if anyone wishes to publish research on any topic it must be published in English? That is clearly not the case and *Biblioteche oggi* is sufficient proof of that. So whatever the reason may be for lack of attention to non-English publications by American librarians and professors, it is not that there is no research published in languages other than English.

### **Explanation number 2. Research published in the English language is good enough, comprehensive enough in scope, and so vast in its quantity that we can safely assume there is nothing “out there” in some other language that we cannot ignore. If it is important, if it is worth reading it either is or soon will be available in English.**

Anyone who looks at the non-English literature of library science can see that this is no explanation at all but merely a poor excuse for shallow literature searching. Limiting myself just to what I have found of interest in the field of library science, I can list many writers who have published little if any in English and yet have been immensely valuable for my understanding of libraries and information technologies: Isabelle Boydens in Belgium, Peter Janich and Uwe Jochum in Germany, Joëlle Le Marec, Yves Jeanneret and Emmanuël Souchier in France, Mirosław Górny and Jacek Wojciechowski in Poland, Carlo Revelli and Alberto Salarelli in Italy, Rosa Nehmy and Isis Paim in Brazil, Željko Vučković in Serbia, Valentino Morales López in Mexico—to name just a few. The crucial point is that what I found in the non-English

publications of these writers *cannot be found anywhere in English*. There is an engagement with Anglo-American scholarship *and a response*, this latter rarely taken into account in the Anglo-American world. And of course there are also unique ideas and perspectives that are not responses to American challenges but arise from a different knowledge, experience and point of view. It is these latter that are of the utmost importance to me.

**Explanation number 3: The whole world looks to American science as the leader, so why should those who are expected to be the leaders follow anyone else?**

This is actually—honest to God I will swear on any Holy Book you put before me—the explanation offered by a professor in one of my graduate seminars in 1983. The seminar was on 20th century theories of poetics (!!!) and the professor offered the above explanation in answer to a question about the absence of Heidegger in the syllabus. (I wrote my paper on the influence of a young Japanese artist named Yoko Ono on the American composer John Cage.)

Personal horror stories aside, is there any substance to this claim? Yes, in fact there is: much of the world does look to the United States (and the English speaking world at large) because of the wealth of ideas, the quality of research, the wide distribution of that research and the successes and reputation of American science and technological developments of the past. Yet the fact that librarians and others around the world are interested in research published in the United States does not mean that a reciprocal interest is unwarranted or unnecessary—quite the contrary, as I indicated in my comments on Explanation number 2 above.

I am in the habit of searching an EBSCO database or browsing E-LIS (this being a multilingual gold mine in comparison to the extremely anglocentric EBSCO database of library science literature) when I want to catch up on the field at an international level, but I often feel that I am nearly alone in my desire to attend to ideas not expressed in English. In the current issue of *Library Resources & Technical Services* (April 2012) there is a review of the literature on cataloging and classification for 2009-1010. Like all other reviews of the literature published in American library science journals, “only English-language literature is reviewed” but the author does acknowledge (apologize?) that “not all of the literature covered is U.S.-based.”<sup>1</sup> If Americans wish to continue thinking of themselves as those to whom alone the world looks to for leadership, they need at least to keep one eye upon what the rest of the world is publishing to see if indeed there is not some professor at the Sorbonne or a librarian in Bandung, Brno, Dakar, Kaunas, Ljubljana or even Hamelin running away with the field behind our American backs.

**Explanation number 4. Keyword searching**

This is indeed an important aspect of our current situation. Search by English language keyword and you can expect English language results. Set your Google parameters to English results only and you will get even more isolated from the wonderful diversity of the world’s voices. This technical explanation, important as it is for our time (and likely to become even more important

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<sup>1</sup> Sue Ann Gardner, “Cresting toward the sea change: literature review of cataloging and classification 2009-10” *Library Resources & Technical Services* v. 56 nr.2 April 2012, p.64.

with the development of greater customization as a feature of more and more systems) cannot account for the phenomenon as I encountered it during my student days, nor even in the 1990's as a not so young librarian. The early dominance of English in the world of information technology is itself related to a long history of American disinterest in the world beyond English. Keyword searching arose among a group of monolingual Americans, and its successes in America for too long diverted attention away from efforts to seriously consider constructing information systems for a multilingual world.

### **Explanation number 5. Attitude: hubris and willful ignorance**

I understand our current linguistic situation to be rooted in attitudes and orientations, our ethical relations with the world. Since we think of ourselves as the greatest nation on earth, the home of the free where everywhere else people are in chains, it should come as no surprise that we are not disposed to learning anything from the rest of the world. If we go elsewhere it is to teach, to engage in research, or to "liberate" the less fortunate; we do not go to listen and learn in another language unless we want to install ourselves there to take your money.

Whatever the real explanation for the current linguistic situation may be, it is in any case necessary to examine some of the more complex aspects of the languages of science in the 21st century. Where does language learning and teaching fit in? Translation? The semantic web and other promised or promising multilingual technical solutions? Library education and employment?

### **Language Learning**

In my cold war era youth language learning was important to the United States government, its intelligence agencies and its armed forces, and therefore language teaching and learning were a part of nearly every degree program in every university (I am not sure this is the case anymore; the University of Chicago currently requires only one year of foreign language). Surely every American librarian my age had to have four years of high school or two years of college language instruction. The trouble is, few of us ever had a need in our everyday life or in our professional activities for any language other than English. When languages are not used, they are lost. Perhaps this explains in part the failure of Americans to engage non-English scholarship: they were never interested enough in the world beyond their home to use the language of elsewhere, and whatever they may have learned in their youth, they lost it long ago. Do we have an influx of immigrants? Teach them English—why learn their language? Does the library need to catalog something in Albanian or Dutch? Search OCLC and take what you find. Is there something important in my field that was not published in English? Get a grant to have it translated. Yet there are problems with translations, and getting grants to fund them is the least of them.

### **Translation**

A decade ago I purchased Paul Virilio's *Un paysage d'événements* but before I sat down to read it, the English translation appeared in the book store.<sup>2</sup> I noted that the English version was a much slimmer volume and compared it to my French edition. With no statement to inform the reader of the English version, six out of eighteen chapters of Virilio's French had disappeared. I read the French version and finally understood why many of the friends and teachers of my youth had urged me to always consult the original text, relying on translations only when I could not read the original.

Getting grants to fund translation can be difficult enough; getting good and complete translations even more difficult. But none of this even gets a chance to happen if no one is aware of what the rest of the world is writing, much less evaluating it for possible translation. The greatest obstacle to getting translations made is finding someone who will push such projects forward. We definitely need more translation into English, but I do not believe that translations will ever change the attitudes which I regard as the crucial factor, and in fact more translations may simply reinforce the intransigence of those who believe everything worth reading is or will be available in English. Translation is not enough.

### **Linguistic limitations of bibliographic tools and technical systems**

Another revelation came to me after reading a paper by Isabelle Boydens and Seth van Hooland published in the *Journal of Documentation* in 2011.<sup>3</sup> Looking for more by Boydens I discovered to my astonishment and dismay that her 1999 monograph was in only one library in the United States, and none of her dozens of published papers were in EBSCO's databases. The lesson I took from this incident was that I would have to look for good work myself since our bibliographic information systems suffer from severely distorted coverage of non-English publications.

Similarly one can look at the coverage of OCLC and Google Books. If either of these tools are to become the *de facto* catalogs and online libraries for students and researchers, their linguistic limitations, not only in their coverage and searching systems but in their algorithms for ordering the display and ranking by relevance need to be carefully scrutinized. Fortunately English speaker-readers can read Jeanneney's recent book related to this problem since it has been translated into English.

Jean-Noël Jeanneney is horrified when he imagines how our children might come to see the world: Will future generations think no great books have been written in a language other than English? And even worse: Will they see history only through American eyes?

The president of the French national library has made himself the frontman in what he sees as a struggle to save cultural diversity. In the postmodern world, the battleground is

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Virilio, *Un paysage d'événements*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1996. English translation: *A landscape of events*. Cambridge: MIT, 2000. Translated by Julie Rose.

<sup>3</sup> Isabelle Boydens and Seth van Hooland, "Hermeneutics applied to the quality of empirical databases", *Journal of Documentation*, v 67, issue 2, 2011 p. 279-289.

the internet. Here, search engines determine what tomorrow's generations will click on, learn and think. (*Financial Times*, quoted from the University of Chicago Press website)

### **Differences that make a difference**

Personal experience has been the catalyst for much of my research and my attitudes, and here I will offer yet another tale from life: my discovery of the writings of the Italian librarian Carlo Revelli. Revelli is one of those librarians who does not write in English but who has been fortunate enough to have two of his books reviewed in the American library literature. As I read his work it slowly dawned on me that his approach to cataloging was profoundly different from any that I had previously encountered. I quickly turned to a number of treatises on cataloging to see if I had merely missed something in my earlier reading, but no, everywhere the difference was pronounced. I had learned something in Italian that did not exist in English. Yet it was not the case that I learned from my encounter with Revelli that I could probably experience the shock of the different in every language I chose to read. Rather it was that expectation of finding something valuable that led me to his books in the first place. And that is what I would like to see in America: an expectation that reading the world beyond English would be more than worthwhile, that it would be a continual revelation.

Just today I ran across an essay by Georg Arnestad in the Norwegian journal *Bok og Bibliotek*. Here are Arnestad's concluding remarks:

In the "Library of Babel," as Jorge Luis Borges describes it in his famous short story, all the world's knowledge was collected. But access to it was impossible. In the commercially operated public library without books as the Danish researchers describe it, it's even worse: You can access everything. But there isn't anything.<sup>4</sup>

Doesn't that make you want to read the rest of Arnestad's article, as well as the article on the future library described by the Danish librarians? That Danish-Norwegian debate was not published in English, and probably never will be; yet now is the time to read it, not after the library in which nothing exists has signed an exclusive contract with ALA or IFLA. How many American readers will look for this Norwegian debate? How many will read it? How many can?

### **Monolingual libraries in a multilingual world**

Perhaps the most important experience for me has been to observe over the course of many years how inattention to the actual linguistic situation of science and scholarship—and hence of libraries—distorts library policies in ways detrimental to the development and use of the literature produced beyond the confines of English. Americans do not read the foreign language materials, and libraries like to withdraw funding from unused collections—you can guess the result. And with diminished acquisition of non-English materials, the need to employ librarians with non-English linguistic abilities decreases. And with the unemployment possibilities for

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<sup>4</sup> Georg Arnestad, "Biblioteket i Babel", *Bok og Bibliotek* 2012 nr. 1, p.65.

linguistically competent librarians, it is unlikely that library schools will attract or teach to those for whom the world beyond English matters. You have to be able to write in HTML in order to get in library school, but if you cannot read Dante in Italian, it does not matter. There are no jobs that require Italian, and if one should arise, the library will hire somebody who knows Spanish instead and expect them to just do their best with the Italian dimensions of the job descriptions... and in all likelihood add Scandinavian and African studies to their responsibilities should the need for a librarian in those areas arise later. Better yet, drop these difficult language materials and let students use the internet. There is an irresponsible idea whose time has come!

**In conclusion: English only, Babel or Pentecost?**

We have, it seems, at least three options. The first, which has been the situation against which I have set myself, is a world in which all communication not in English can be ignored, and ignorance of anything not published in English can be excused. This is the situation in the United States today. This alternative is nothing other than a justification for dismissing the rest of the world. For anyone who acknowledges the existence of the world, it is untenable.

The second option, Babel, is the world in which there are no Carlo Revellis, no George Steiners, no Ramon Lulls, and of course no David Bades. It is a world in which everyone writes and reads only in their mother tongue and ignores the rest of the world. It is the world in which everyone ignores everyone who does not speak and write the same language. It is an option open only to nationalists and fascists. For anyone who delights in the differences the world makes, it is untenable.

The third option is like Pentecost, where everyone speaks in their own language and in spite of that every voice gets heard and every language is understood. Yet not exactly like Pentecost, because we cannot rely on the third member of the Trinity to do the work for us since he is not everywhere welcome. The task of communication and understanding is up to us—and all of us—because Carlo Revelli cannot do it alone. As an American I am trying to follow the Italians who are leading in these efforts with *Osservatorio internazionale* and E-LIS. I read what I can and write what I can, even though I can write well only in English.

And why write this lament devoid of any empirical foundation nor even dressed up in statistical authority? If no one writes of these matters then library scientists will have nothing to count and therefore declare that the problem does not exist. So I have written to add my voice to those voices already on record in order that science will have something to study. But alas! I am publishing it in Italy and in Italian, so no American librarians or professors will ever read it. For of course anything worth reading would be published in English. Capisce?