

**Report to the 25th General Assembly
FIG Congress in Washington, 19-26 April 2002**

**TASK FORCE ON CULTURES AND LANGUAGES IN FIG
INTERIM REPORT TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2002**

Completed after the Task Force meeting 24th April 2002. Prepared by Prof. Michel Kasser

1. Some considerations for the language problems in FIG

1.1. The languages spoken in the world

Although there are more than 3000 languages spoken on Earth, only a very limited number of them are spoken in more than one country, either as the normal language, or as the normal foreign language. This situation is due to the various colonisation historical activities (probably as old as the mankind itself). But within all the colonisation waves that struck all parts of the world, only the most recent ones (the ones of the last millennium: Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Russian, English, French) have still a widely visible effect. For example within the millennium before the last one, the Greek withdrew, and the Roman transformed itself into many other languages, such as Romanian, Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and no direct tracks are still visible. Colonial languages have spread either in parallel to the local national existing historical languages as tools allowing trade and exchanges, or as the only possible link between a large quantity of small dialects, but in any case they have been imposed by the colonising country.

Today, the German seems to be generally understood (national language or well known foreign language) in around 10 countries (central Europe), French in around 30 ones (mostly in Africa), Spanish in around 20 ones (mostly in South and Central America), Arabic in around 25 ones (mostly in North Africa and Middle East), Russian in around 15 countries (formerly the USSR), and English in around 60. Exact quotations are difficult and would be useless, as within the ~ 200 countries of the world, some have a very small size and population, and it is difficult to compare them with entities as large as e. g. the USA. Nevertheless, no other language than these 6 ones may be considered as largely international, even if other ones (e. g. Chinese or Hindi) are spoken by a much larger number of people, but within one or two countries at best.

1.2. Position of English. International scientific associations

In most scientific international associations, English is already the basic communication language since the World War II, that destroyed Europe and pushed ahead the USA. And thus, in many countries of the world, a basic English level is predominantly taught to students as a foreign language. On one hand this situation is excellent: scientific people have a basic and official requirement to communicate widely the results of their researches, and thus a common language is essential. And the basic English enjoys a very simple grammar and then its access is comparably very easy. But on another hand, the situation is more complex, as if the written English is more or less stable, the spoken English has an extremely variable pronunciation, which means that it may be sometimes nearly impossible for people from one English Speaking Country (ESC) to another to understand each other. A similar situation

prevails for the Chinese and the Arabic, just as non limiting examples of a phenomenon that looks normal when a language spreads over a very wide area.

Within scientific associations, this difficulty exists: non-ESC scientists (researchers, professors, engineers) have often an elocution not as fluent as ESC ones, they generally speak slowly, and so they are often easy to understand by the other members. For ESC people, the situation is satisfying for people trained to speak slowly, as it is the case for most professors for example, but it proves to be extremely difficult for some other ones, speaking fast, using erudite wording and (as the normal English regrettably allows it) accentuating only a few syllables, thus making the understanding quite hazardous for non-ESC people (and sometimes to ESC ones too...). One should remember at this step of the discussion that when somebody speaks in its native language, it is extremely difficult for him to change his speech, even if he is conscious of his faults, as the way of speech is completely automatic since the very first years for each human being.

Another problem that may arise within the scientific associations, but which is generally overcome by the very nature itself of these associations: there is a competitive advantage for the access to managing responsibilities for ESC people, as they have no linguistic problem during the discussions. But in such scientific circles, people are generally strongly trained to master English, whatever their native country, since several decades. This is due to the simplification that arose in international publications from the fact that they use only one language, and because high level scientific training requires many strong intellectual inputs from the students, an additional language being by far not the most difficult, especially if it is understood as the basic means to communicate with the international community. Here, the English used is then quite different from the one used by, say, a man in the street in Liverpool or Austin. Here, the ESC people are selected by their scientific knowledge, and to belong to that community they may accept this specificity. This is more or less the same case that they meet when giving lectures to students, where they understand easily that, the goal being to be understood, they have to select their wording and to adapt their elocution.

1.3. Present situation in FIG concerning the use of English

FIG is an international association, but it is not a scientific one. It aims at giving the opportunity to surveyors to discuss their problems and exchange technical information. In non-ESC, the surveyors like most "normal" citizens generally do not understand English, to the exception of the youngest ones where a basic level of English is more often acquired at school and in University: but the practising level is low, as the opportunities to use it are not frequent in the professional life. Surveyors are "screwed" to their land much more than any other engineer, and are not concerned by international business as much as them. The examples of the recent years have shown it clearly, FIG meetings in non-ESC, purely in English, would lead to complete flops and thus are unacceptable by national bodies. And meetings in ESC, purely in English, have a modest attendance: from other ESC countries, attendance is normal, and from non-ESC, the attendance is highly depleted in surveyors, and most of the attendees are from university. We may note also that for the non-ESC, today the national representatives are often selected first for their ability to speak English, and not for the representativeness within their national body of surveyors.

We may note also that for basic surveyors, there are at least three difficulties to attend FIG meetings: If they are liberal professionals, they have to choose between to work (and thus to earn money) and go to the meetings (and thus to miss opportunities of income); The meetings

are expensive, and sometimes too expensive; Non-ESC attendees are quite often unable to understand (and at least fear to do so) the lectures and participate to any general discussions. This last consideration is the key one, and it is the only one that nobody may escape: this is the basic reason for such a low participation from non-ESC surveyors. What use is FIG if surveyors feel no longer concerned? The linguistic problem must be considered as a very important one to solve, before any other one: the FIG without surveyors would be completely useless, as the university people have already their scientific associations (IAG, ISPRS, ICA,...), and except for Commission 2, have little to do within FIG, especially if they cannot meet there a large majority of surveyors and analyse their problems. The surveyors of different countries experience often different problems, which makes all the value of their discussions, but ESC surveyors, coming in a vast majority from former English colonies, cannot represent a complete sampling of the various types of national professional bodies and cadastral systems, them both being extremely linked.

2. Propositions of linguistic policy

FIG may propose different solutions to improve the present situation, which in many aspects is not acceptable. Arguments have been shown in Melbourne 94 and Brighton 98 to explain that the direct translations were too expensive for the FIG, but simultaneously we have not noticed any visible movement to limit the travel expenses of the bureau, whose standards are traditionally high. The limitation from 3 to 1 language has been pushed ahead basically to simplify the work of the bureau, to limit the expenses, probably also by reference to scientific international associations, and perhaps also because we have had 3 successive bureaux from ESC (Australia, UK and USA). Instead of suppressing 2 languages, the successive Bureaux should have promoted 2 or 3 more ones. The size of the problem is larger than such logistical aspects, and the question is : is the goal of the FIG to support surveyors, or not ? We propose here the base of an affordable charter for FIG regarding linguistic policy.

2.1. Linguistic groups

The creation of e. g. 5 linguistic groups should be encouraged (Spanish, German, French, Arabic, Russian). Each of them, and any other one that could arise, will be organised on a voluntary basis to select the texts considered as important, translate them and put them on the FIG Web site. They may be set up using at least the networks of universities, where students may easily participate to this translation effort as a part of their linguistic studies. This possibility would not be opened without the facilities offered by Internet. The groups could largely follow the model of Internet chats, with a chairman elected for a limited period (1 year ?). The chairman would transfer to the FIG office the results of the translation work, and the FIG secretary would transfer to him any material to be translated with enough delay to allow the work to be correctly done. In each FIG congress, a specific meeting of each linguistic group should be planned, chaired at first by the FIG President, up to the election of the first chair. This would show clearly the importance of this linguistic problem and encourage the groups to work. All official publications, paper abstracts, documents of the bureau for the general assembly must be proposed to translation through these linguistic networks (abstracts, official publications) or sometimes, but only in very limited cases, by commercial translators (some bureau documents, where things must go fast).

2.2. FIG congresses and symposiums.

It is now classical to consider that each FIG congress must be simultaneously translated so that at least the local and if possible neighbouring countries languages, plus the English, may be used, as in Prague 2000 or Seoul 2001. For other languages, any speaker should have the possibility to present his paper in his own language, but in this case he should do the effort to

present his slides translated into English, and he should be encouraged to find a colleague able to provide the translation into English, along with his oral presentation. This is an easily workable solution, as seen in Hanoi 2001, involving no expenses, and which allows fully the discussion with the floor.

2.3. Chairs

For each official position within FIG (chair-persons, bureau members, etc...) a check should be performed before any candidature is accepted and proposed to the votes, to verify that the candidate is able to speak in English with the following features: slowly, with a systematic accentuation of all syllables, avoiding carefully uncommon words. ESC speakers often follow these rules, and sometimes not : in this latter case, one should avoid to propose these positions to them. For non-ESC people, to speak English is not a simple thing, and there are no reasons why any ESC speaker could escape the difficulty to speak so as to be intelligible for anybody...

3. Work plan for the next years

It is now proposed to investigate much more in detail 6 typical communication situations within FIG:

- between basic surveyors,
- between basic surveyors and delegates of FIG,
- between delegates and commission officers,
- between the executive board and the general assembly,
- between the general assembly and basic surveyors,
- between the chairman + the speaker and basic surveyors attending a technical presentation.

For each of these 6 situations, we will look for and try to propose some affordable solutions, susceptible to provide a real improvement to the present linguistic difficulties without any unrealistic new expenses. This will lead to the redaction of recommendations that should be ready for the 2004 Working Week.

Michel Kasser

Email: michel.kasser@ign.fr