

LANGUAGES AND CULTURES IN FIG

– Discussion Paper for the Breakout Session in Seoul

Contribution of Prof. Michel Kasser, France (5-11-2000)

1. Elements of analysis for the problems due to the languages

For the Non English Speaking Countries (NESC), today the national representants are selected first for their ability to speak English, and not for the representativity of their national surveyors.

For the basic surveyors, there are at least 3 reasons not to attend FIG meetings : (1) 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 bear direct expenses and miss opportunities to work) ; (2) The meetings are expensive, and for many countries they are far too expensive ; (3) In NESC they are now unable to understand the lectures and participate to the discussions. For western NESC (1) may be solved, (2) is not a key point, but (3) is considered unbearable. For developing NESC, (2) could be solved by a policy of selecting first such countries for the meetings, but (3) is still unbearable...

In any NESC the obligation of using English drives to increase considerably the proportion of attendants from universities (that are trained to use English), and to lower correspondingly the proportion of surveyors. Even if university people are welcome in such meetings, we observe a perversion of FIG where the proportion of surveyors is far too low, because NESC surveyors no longer attend. Why do the university people attend FIG meetings ? (1) to meet other educators of their speciality, (2) to meet foreign surveyors and (3) to participate to their mission of diffusion of sciences and techniques. Today, the (2) is on the way to become impossible, which will increase the natural trend of university people to stay together and not feel involved in the basic technical problems.

What use is FIG if surveyors feel no longer concerned ? The linguistic problem must be considered as the first to solve, far before the structures or the permanent office : the FIG without surveyors would be completely useless, as the university people have already their scientific associations (IAG, ISPRS, ICO,...). The expenses for translation, even if they are important, must be considered as having priority over any other ones. The 3 English speaking successive Bureaux may probably not be aware of this priority, but for the NESC (a large majority of countries), it is a key issue.

2. Propositions to explore

To encourage the creation of linguistic groups (at least 4 : Spanish, German, French, Arabic, and more if possible) organised on a voluntary basis to select the texts considered as important, translate them and put them on the FIG web site, using mainly the networks of universities.

Each FIG congress must be simultaneously translated into the local language and, if possible, into the language of neighbouring countries.

All official publications, paper abstracts, documents of the bureau for the general assembly must be translated, either through the linguistic networks (abstracts, official publications ?) or by paying commercial translators (bureau documents, where things must go fast).

For each official position within FIG (chair-persons, bureau members, etc...) a discrete but efficient 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. Native English speakers sometimes follow these rules (this is e.g. common for professors), and sometimes not : in this latter case, they must be excluded from these positions. For NESC people, to speak English is not a simple thing, and there are no reasons why any native English speaker could escape the difficulty to speak so as to be intelligible for anybody from NESC.

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.

Bernard Bour and Hagen Graeff
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