

SEMANTOGRAPHY SERIES NO. 137

UNESCO'S FUTILE ATTEMPTS AT A SCIENTIFIC ABSTRACTING

SERVICE AND SEMANTOGRAPHY

On the 30th December, 1951 a Symposium on "Operation Knowledge" was held in Philadelphia as part of the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. At this Symposium Prof. O.L. Reiser of the University of Pittsburgh spoke about "Unified Symbolism for World Understanding in Science" including Semantography (See Semantography Series No. 52, 149, 150). The next speaker on the list was Prof. Elmer Hutchisson of the Case Institute of Technology of Cleveland, Ohio. His theme was: "The International Physics Abstracting Service."

This was important news for me, as I have worked towards a plan of an international abstracting service for all sciences. I have in mind small index cards with the research results in not more than 100 words and an explanatory title written in the language of the University and in the symbols of Semantography. These cards should be exchanged between universities and should be available to anyone who subscribes to them. In the shortest terms, I have outlined the idea in my leaflet (Series No. 43) to my lecture (Series No. 44) before the Geological Society of Sydney University. There I said :

12. A UNIVERSAL SCIENCE ABSTRACT

without publishers, without printers, and even without money, can be put into operation by a few enthusiastic students in a few Universities (See Bliss's detailed proposals in his paper before the Physical Society of the University of Sydney). Reports about research in Geology, Chemistry, Medicine, etc. etc. going on at a University could be given half-yearly on small mimeographed filing cards, carrying the title and research result in 100 words - and in pictographs. Reports from Anglo-American Universities would carry the pictographs and the English words beneath; in French Universities it would be French beneath the pictographs, in Danish Universities it would be Danish, etc. etc. Anyone knowing English or French or Danish need not bother about the symbols. Others would learn them in order to read the abstract in their language be it Portuguese or Afrikaans. Soon Universities in small countries would add a line in English beneath the line in their language. The grammar of Semantography is the "grammar" of the physical event (Agent acts on Object). Putting English or French words beneath the symbols may sometimes result in some awkward English or French sentences, but here at last is a medium to guide a word-for-word translation, free of idiomatic expressions. As an additional advantage this would enable the reader to learn the corresponding scientific or non-scientific words in English or other languages.

In the lecture itself (see the text in Series No. 44) I have shown a sample of such a complete index card and have given more details. Further details are to be found in the lecture to the Physical Society of Sydney University (Series No. 38), also in the lecture before the students of the University of Technology (Series No. 41).

It was therefore important for me to get in touch with Prof. Hutchisson. I hoped that he will be impressed and perhaps include a reference to my work in his forthcoming lecture. I sent therefore relevant material to Prof. Reiser, asking him to be good enough to inform Prof. Hutchisson about my work for an international abstracting service. I was wary not to approach him directly. I had suffered enough humiliation from professors who did not even acknowledge the material sent to them.

Prof. Reiser obliged, and later on sent me the letter of Prof. Hutchisson. In this letter Hutchisson acknowledged the material from me. He said however: "I am not sure that I can go along with him all the way on "Semantography", although he does seem to be an active and interested chap." He attached a reprint from the journal "Science" (see below) and he promised to send me a copy of his paper to be read at the Symposium.

Somehow encouraged by this letter, I decided to write a personal letter to Hutchisson and to send him some more material on Semantography for an international abstract. I wrote :

Elmer Hutchisson, Esq.,
Acting President
Case Institute of Technology
University Circle,
CLEVELAND. 6, Ohio.

Sydney 26th November 1951

Dear Professor Hutchisson,

Some weeks ago I received from Professor Reiser your Article INTERNATIONAL PHYSICS ABSTRACTING SERVICE reprinted from SCIENCE. Many thanks to you and Prof. Reiser. I have studied with great interest, because I have many years of scientific library research behind me and know the difficulties.

Professor Reiser informed me too, that you seem to be favourably disposed towards my work and that you will send me a copy of the outline of your paper for the AAAS symposium. This was good news and it stimulated me to sit down and write an exposee on the abstracting problem and Semantography. My idea was to ask you, kindly to distribute it to the members of Icsu, Iupap and Unesco.

When the draft was finished my heart sank. I remembered my bitter experiences. Professor Carleton Washburne of New York and Professor Joseph Lauwerys of London have both approached the Director General and Deputy Director General of Unesco urging them to take an interest in my work. There were many letters, but no result whatever. Other approaches to other scientific bodies had the same effect.

As it is I am at the end of my tether - materially and mentally. Great scholars have found words of great praise for my work. Bertrand Russell wrote that financial assistance given to it, means "performing an important service to Mankind". Yet, I couldn't get a single penny or cent. For more than 9 years I have spent my savings and earnings on this idea, have hand-printed my 3 large volumes on SEMANTOGRAPHY. I should be put to work solely on this idea. Instead - I am forced to waste away the best years of my life in a factory, just to make ends meet.

This is the question I put to the Scientists of the World: MEN WHO PIONEER UNUSUAL IDEAS OF GREAT BENEFIT TO MANKIND - MUST THEY EVEN TODAY, AS IN THE PAST, WASTE AWAY THEIR LIVES WITHOUT HELP? There are grants-in-aid galore, but not for an outsider with an outsider idea, no matter how good.

Can you help me, and in doing so following Bertrand Russell's appeal? You have surely connections with Foundations, who would help a new idea along. You may know of private wealthy citizen, who would thus connect their name to this "One Writing for One World". Prevent another pioneer go down the sink, as they had to in the past.

Your lecture in the Symposium follows that of Professor Reiser, who will give an account of my work. Would you be kind enough to say a few good words, and would you kindly urge the AAAS to take an interest in my work and myself and help.

I enclose a few leaflets, and send by separate mail (air) 2 lectures which I gave at the University of Technology and the University of Sydney. All this printed material is a desperate spendthrift action to draw the attention of the scientists to my work. I enclose also an Order Form.

Should you not want to order my 3-volume work right away, you can have it on approval from my friend and agent Mr. Fritz Treuer, P.O.B. 167 YELLOW SPRINGS, Ohio. I remain with thanks for your kind help in anticipation.

Encl. Russell Letter Facsimile
Lecture THE NEW MEDIUM OF TECHNOLOGY
Lecture SEMANTOGRAPHY FOR GEOLOGISTS
Industrial Emergency Signs
Metcalfe & Wolsky Letter

Yours sincerely,

C.K. Bliss

A coloured leaflet designed for a Unesco Conference.
References to an Universal Science Abstract.

And it happened again. Hutchisson ignored my personal letter, did not acknowledge the material sent, did not take advantage of my offer to have my 3 books gratis for perusal. He left me madder than ever. To-day 4 years later, when writing this report, I am still smarting under the treatment meted out to me by Hutchisson and his kind.

The reader of my various issues is aware that I have corresponded with Unesco and that I have a number of times stressed the idea of an international science abstract through Semantography. I shall make an issue in my Semantography Series of my correspondence with Unesco and with its various Director-Generals. Herebelow I shall give the text of Hutchisson's article in Science. However, in order to abreact my bitter disappointment with Hutchisson, Unesco and the rest, I shall register my own comments to the information given in this article in notes interspersed between the article which is written herebelow :

"Reprinted from Science, November 24, 1950, Vol. 112, No. 2917, page 635.

INTERNATIONAL PHYSICS ABSTRACTING SERVICE

Elmer Hutchisson

Case Institute of Technology, Cleveland, Ohio"

with interspersed comments by C. K. Bliss, B. Sc.

"In June, 1949, Unesco called an international conference on the abstracting of scientific literature."

Of course, an international conference must be called. The Unesco officials must be given another opportunity to spend the money allotted to Unesco in hopping around the world from one conference to the other. On these conference nothing is achieved. Most resolutions invariably call for more conferences ad infinitum. It would have been much simpler to ask for written recommendations which should contain a clear plan in a short outline. All these recommendations could have been collected in a brochure and sent to the important scholars, librarians etc. working in this field asking them to make a first selection. This would have been a simple and inexpensive idea. But no, the officials of Unesco wanted to have their trip, and this goes also with all the professors invited to such a conference. Why, it's wonderful to have a few weeks off with all expenses paid, to see new countries and get away for a while from the students, the universities, the wives, etc. etc. And so a conference on abstracting of scientific literature was called. What happened there?

"Among the many recommendations included in the final report of this conference was one which suggested that, if possible, a single international physics abstracting journal be established."

Well, not a bad idea. But was such a journal established? Not at all. There were the publishers of the already existing scientific journals. Such a new journal means a dangerous competition. Everyone would subscribe to the new international journal. And so, no doubt, the henchmen of the publishers, the editors of the scientific journals set out to thwart the plan completely. As the article goes on :

"The members of the conference realized, however, that it would be unwise to set up such a new journal without first attempting to modify existing abstract journals so as to make them more international in scope."

They did not say that they are going to make the existing abstract journals more international in scope. They will only "attempt" this. This means for the initiated that the attempt is but only another lease of life for the existing journals, their income, etc. And how is such an "Attempt" to be carried out? Don't you guess? Why, a new Conference! But mind you, let's go slow. Let's subdivide our efforts, let's have conferences for all the different sciences. First for physics.

"To carry out the specific recommendations of this conference with respect to physics, a Unesco subject committee in this field was established. This committee consists of :

Paul Bourgeois	}	International Council of Scientific Unions
G. A. Boutry		
J. H. Awbery		
Elmer Hutchisson		
S. Whitehead	}	The Committee of Management of Science Abstracts
A. C. Menzies		
Jean Wyart	}	Centre de Documentation du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
G. Kersaint		
J.B. Reid (Unesco)		
Ronald Fraser (Unesco/Icsu Liaison Officer)		

The first meeting of this committee was held in London, September 26 and 27, 1950."

And now imagine the cost to the taxpayers of the various countries from which all those experts have to travel to come to London. And what did they find out? Listen to the deep wisdom reflected by the deliberations as to how to make a journal "really international".

"To be really international a physics abstracting journal would need to carry either abstracts of which some would be in one language and some in another, or duplicate abstracts in more than one language."

One and another language? Not more? Would abstracts in 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 languages make a journal "really international"? What about the scientific workers of Denmark, Sweden, Poland, Hungary, Portugal, not to speak of countries in other parts of the world but Europe? They speak their own language, teach in these languages at the universities and have scientific journals in their languages?

But even the idea of printing a journal in two different languages has great disadvantages, as the committee found out. It is amazing that they did not think of it before.

"If one of the existing journals were modified to include abstracts partly in one language and partly in another, it is quite clear that the usefulness of this journal would be greatly decreased, especially among younger students who have not yet acquired facility with foreign languages. If abstracts were duplicated in several languages, each subscriber would receive material he would not use, and each individual's cost would be considerably increased."

But one simple idea apparently missed all the brains of the members. Well, let the abstracts be printed in say 5 or 10 of the most important languages of the world. Every subscriber should subscribe only to the abstract in his language. This would be simple. He need not pay for a mass of paper printed in languages he does not understand. But such a plan means only one thing : abandonment of all the existing journals or at least by-passing them by creating a new really international journal with editions in a number of different languages every edition a true translated copy of all the others. This plan of course cannot be agreeable to the publishers of the existing journals, as it directly threatens their livelihood. And so a way was found to leave everything as it was before. It seems crazy, but here it is :

"In view of this situation the committee decided that a preferable idea would be to plan an international abstracting "service" rather than a single international journal. In this international service there would be several editions, each in a separate language and, wherever possible, existing journals would constitute the official editions. For example, PHYSICS ABSTRACTS could be considered the English edition, and the BULLETIN ANALYTIQUE would constitute the French edition."

If this idea is pursued in its full consequences, then the English PHYSICS ABSTRACTS and the French BULLETIN ANALYTIQUE would have to contain exactly the same text, the same articles, the same abstracts and not a single sentence could differ in meaning in both languages. But this again would mean that a new and common editorship and printer and publishership would have to be established - an impossible thought for the vested interests who made money by these journals. And so it was said :

"Under this proposal each journal would retain a measure of its own individuality and yet be part of the international plan."

But what do they mean by retaining "a measure of its own individuality"? Nothing more and less than the journals would differ, differ in their articles, and in their abstracts, in their policies, and (this has not been said) in their advertising policies, which after all, or first before all, was the main reason for the publishers and printers to call these journals into being. In short, nothing would have changed fundamentally.

Now, was anything decided on this conference? I mean a decision to order the editors and publishers of those 2 journals to get together and to start from a specific date to print the same text in different languages? Heavens no! It was only a recommendation. And by now the average newspaper reader knows what recommendations are for, made at conferences. They have no value whatever. Nothing has been decided upon, nothing is going to be changed. Enough that the members of the conference can conclude their speeches and go sight seeing, making some round trip to round up another futile conference in which taxpayers money has been wasted. And so the committee recommended :

"The committee recommended further that this service be established under the general sponsorship of either the International Conference of Scientific Unions (Icsu) or the International Union of Pure and Applied Physics (Iupap)."

Well, this means some more travel for the employees of Icsu and Iupap (as if one would not be enough). And to this come the busybodies of Unesco. They must be there too, mustn't they?

But what about the other languages? After all, English and French is not enough. But the wise men have an answer to this. Not that they have decided anything. This time they have not even made a recommendation. They only hope :

"With such sponsorship it is hoped that possibly the PHYSIKALISCHE BERICHTE could be brought into the same international scheme, and if a Spanish or Russian abstracting journal were started, they might also follow the same pattern."

Just realize the significance of such vague words as "it is hoped" that "possibly" "could be brought", and "if" a Spanish or Russian journal "were started", they "might also follow", etc. Apparently it is unknown to those experts that Spanish scientific journals carry abstracts and so do Russian journals and so do scientific journals in any other language. What is an abstract? A short note about some research, instead of a long article. Every journal carry such short notes, giving at the same time data where more information can be obtained.

Let us then realize the utter waste of time and money committed by this committee of experts. Nothing has been decided upon. Everything will go on as it went on before. But all the members of the committee had a good time, no doubt. And to round it up and to show to themselves how important their deliberations were, they let off a string of words as to the great improvements their coming

together will bring about :

"The definite improvements which it is hoped may be achieved through this proposal are:

1. The inclusion of an author's abstract prepared essentially in accordance with the Royal Society rules with each original research paper."

This is an old story. Most scientific articles carry a summary for readers who can spare a few minutes only on the article and want to know what the researcher has found out.

"2. The sending of the author's abstract in page-proof stage by air mail to the abstract editor in the corresponding language - i.e., physics journals in English would send abstracts to Physics Abstracts, journals in the French language to the Bulletin Analytique, etc."

This is done already. After all, how do the abstract journal which exist at present get their abstracts? Of course, it has to be by airmail. This is the new slant, the terrific improvement. As if airmail has not been used before the Conference met.

"3. Abstract editors would, by mutual agreement, exchange abstracts thus decreasing lag in publication time of abstracts and assisting each abstract journal in obtaining wider coverage."

No! The wisdom of this platitude is terrific.

"4. Increased cooperation among abstract editors to obtain the most efficient classification and indexing methods."

This is wishful thinking, or even less, just some words to fill more space.

"5. Increased international cooperation through the sponsorship of this abstract service by Icsu or Iupap."

And this means of course more travels by the Icsu and Iupap guys. The world is open and glorious. And imagine, nothing has to be changed. Everything remains as before, except ah yes, increased cooperation, that means increased get-together, first class of course,

"The recommendations of this Unesco committee are to be transmitted to Icsu and, if adopted, a mechanism will be set up to put the international abstracting service into operation."

Now, mind you, the recommendations might not be adopted at all, in which case nothing can be done except calling a new conference. And this is the easiest thing to do. New considerations may crop up which need further investigation, which means further travels and further conferences. But if they do adopt the recommendation, what happens then?

Nothing new. The existing journals will go on as before, retaining "their own individuality" (and of course their subscribers and advertisers). And to make sure that the publishers and their henchmen should not be worried Hutchisson makes it quite clear to them that they need not be afraid. Everything will be all right. Everything will be as it was before.

"Pending this action the editors of PHYSICS ABSTRACTS and the BULLETIN ANALYTIQUE are collaborating to facilitate their editorial work and to improve the efficiency of their journals without, at this time, changing their internal structure."

Do not be afraid Gentlemen of the scientific Press! There is not the slightest threat to your income. Besides there are more golden opportunities for coming together again and again in Paris, or London, or Rio de Janeiro, or New York, or New Delhi to discuss the matter again and again and enjoy the scenery and the expense accounts. Onward Unesco Soldiers, fight fearlessly for Humanity, first class of course and berth reservations made beforehand!

The end.