

AN EXAMPLE OF MULTILINGUALISM AT COLUMBIA

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My experience with multilingualism at Columbia, like Topsy “just grewed”. The position of Middle East Bibliographer at Columbia University Libraries was created for me in 1969. My duties then were to process all of the ARABIC books that had come in over the years on PL480. I selected the books for cataloging and assigned destinations. Later we hired a copy cataloger for Arabic and I then revised her work.

A year or so later, we hired a Hebrew Bibliographer to process the HEBREW books we had also received on PL 480. Although this person was extremely knowledgeable, she had not worked in libraries before and made several procedural mistakes. To remedy this, they made her my assistant so that I could review her work. After two years, she left Columbia and was not replaced. Instead her duties were added to mine and I got my first hyphenated title: Middle East and Hebraica Bibliographer. Along with Hebrew books coming from Israel, we also received some in YIDDISH. As my Hebrew was practically non-existent, I had to have a student assistant, who knew Hebrew but not Yiddish, read the title and I would assign a destination based on my knowledge of German. When PL 480 ended in Israel, we set up separate Hebrew and Yiddish approval plans, to avoid having to do selection from lists, etc.

At about the same time, we set up an approval plan for TURKISH books. These all came to me for processing, destinations, etc. However, I knew no Turkish so I had to study Turkish at Columbia. My modern Turkish became fairly good, but Ottoman books remained a problem. Our original Turkish approval plan declined over the years and in the 90s I changed over to a new dealer who was much more aggressive and doubled our receipt of books. We also began to receive Turkish books published elsewhere, such as in the Balkans.

It was the same story for PERSIAN. On PL 480, we received various books in Persian from India and Pakistan which I was able to process (they all came with some sort of preliminary record). But then we started an approval plan with a dealer in Iran for Iranian books. These I had to process based mainly on my knowledge of Arabic. It was several years before I found time to study Persian at Columbia and could better understand what I was doing.

Among the many Perisan books that came from Iran, we also had some books in AZERBAIJANI in Arabic script. I had to try and process these with my knowledge of Turkish and Arabic. In a like fashion, I bought some books in TURKMEN published in Iraq in Arabic script. These also were a processing problem.

Among the books received on PL480 which I was required to process, there were also books in PUSHTO. These came from Pakistan, but we also managed to purchase books in Pushto and DARI from Afghanistan. With the revolution in Afghanistan, we completely stopped receiving books from there. However, we continued getting Pushto books from Pakistan and I continued processing them until Columbia hired a South Asian assistant who could handle Arabic script materials,

While the Library of Congress was still issuing cards, I arranged with our Cataloging Dept. to be sent all of the Near East and Hebrew cards. Then we would use these cards for cataloging the Arabic, Persian, Hebrew and Yiddish books. As LC considered ARMENIAN a Near Eastern language, I also was given all of the Armenian cards. At that time all of our Armenian books were ordered through our Slavic Bibliographer who was responsible for Soviet Armenia. However, after the books were received, I took over processing them. We had a part-time Original Cataloger for Armenian and also used a student assistant to check for LC cards and copy-catalog them. As we had special funding for Armenian Studies, I gradually expanded our coverage from just Soviet Armenia to the United States, Lebanon and other countries. Also our new Turkish approval dealer began to supply Armenian books published in Turkey.

During the 80's, we had a major change in responsibility for all of the Area Bibliographers. Previously we had been responsible only for materials from our areas. Now we became responsible for all materials from and about our area. This meant that I suddenly became responsible for the selection of all materials in ENGLISH, FRENCH, GERMAN, ITALIAN and SPANISH dealing with the Middle East or Jewish Studies. Luckily the ordering and processing of Western Language materials was handled by the Acquisitions Dept. and not by me.

In the early 90s, I had a graduate student come and complain that we had no books in KURDISH. Actually we did have some, but none he could use. Over the years our Slavic Bibliographer had acquired a few Kurdish books (in Cyrillic alphabet) published in the Soviet Union. Also a handful in Arabic script had come on PL 480, and a few more on our Iranian approval plan. To meet the student's request, I began in a small way to

order Kurdish books from Europe (mostly France and Sweden). Also as Turkey was liberalized, we began to receive Kurdish books on our Turkish approval plan. The books published in Turkey were uniformly in the Latin alphabet, while those published in Europe were either in Latin or Arabic script depending on the dialect.

In 1994, I decided to visit Malta for my vacation. Naturally I visited the main bookstore in Valletta, Malta. I knew that we had one Maltese faculty member at Columbia but that we had few books from Malta and virtually none in Maltese, so I decided to acquire what was available about Malta and especially a representative collection of MALTESE literature. Maltese, although written in Latin alphabet, has at least 40% of the vocabulary derived from Arabic and I was therefore able to create records for the books I acquired. During three subsequent visits, I have built up a respectable collection.

Finally in 1999, Columbia received a series of small grants to set up an endowment in Assyrian studies. Although the endowment is not yet producing revenue, I have started purchasing books dealing with the Assyrians. These books have been in English, Arabic and SYRIAC. This last language has its own alphabet which I am not able to read, but luckily most books have added titles so that they can be searched and processed. Books for which copy cannot be found will be contracted out for original cataloging.

In my 33 years at Columbia, I have gone from being responsible for only Arabic books to being responsible for books in more than 13 languages and 5 alphabets. I believe this a true case of multilingualism.