TALKING ARCHIVES: SOME BRIEF OBSERVATIONS FROM A LECTURE ABOUT IIAS ONLINE DICTIONARY
OF ARCHIVAL TERMINOLOGY ANTONIO MONTEDURO

165

Antonio Monteduro

TALKING ARCHIVES: SOME BRIEF OBSERVATIONS FROM A LECTURE ABOUT IIAS ONLINE DICTIONARY OF ARCHIVAL TERMINOLOGY

On the occasion of the 15th IIAS Archival School, held in Trieste on December 2021, the author lectured and held a workshop about the IIAS Online Dictionary of Archival Terminology (free consultation at the URL: http://www.iias-trieste-maribor.eu/attivita-2/dizionario-plurilingue-2/dictionary/?lang=en).

During the workshop, the discussion touched some interesting points, among which one of the most controversial was about talking (and writing) archives. In brief: which kind of language should we adopt when confronting archives users? Should we talk (and write, on websites) in a professional and technical way? Or should we, on the contrary, trying to adopt a more friendly and not so much professional language? The difference between the two options is not secondary, and both of them present pros and cons, identical and well balanced.

The problem arises at its maximum in particular when conceiving, making, managing, and implementing an archival website. Unfortunately, the times we are living, with the pandemic still running, advise against being in presence in a reading room; and should it be however possible sitting in presence in a consultation room, the time, and the quantity of documents to be asked for is now usually reduced. Hence, the ever-greater need of making available the documentation to the largest number of users via web, wherever should they be. The most important goal of an archivist should be giving access to users in a way that they are able to search, value and request the documents needed by themselves, by autonomously browsing a web site.

How should we, then, facilitate this research path to the users? How could we, metaphorically, take their hands and drive them through? A first answer could consist in creating very friendly and easy to manage web sites, using a plain and simple language avoiding any technical expression or phrase that could mislead the users. Of course, this is a very kind way of relating with users, but nonetheless, it can bring some problems, meanwhile. The greatest problem is the fact that, even though very kind, this way of setting up a web site is, in a sense, going to a deadlock, maybe making the users able to scroll up and down our website, but not being able to use this same knowledge in another IT context, for example on a different archival website. From a certain IT point of view "a user killed with kindness" ... And, of course, this kind of problem is also strictly connected with democracy: the wright to consultation (without prejudice to its counterpart, the right to privacy) is one of the most intricate and, in a sense, still not solved question in our modern world, and the debate about archives and democracy runs through not only our profession, but, more, through the life of many societies and countries.

So, one should conclude that a friendly language is not a good solution, or, at least, not a completely satisfying solution. But on the other hand, unfortunately, also using a professional language shows some difficulties. To begin with, archival terminology is a followers' language, and it would be quite difficult having it perfectly managed by a non-archivist. It is true, of course, that in our lives we get familiar with many professional words: more or less, we all can manage a mechanic's language, when carrying our car to have some problem fixed, and it is also true that nearly all of us can understand (even if not to the very details) IT language. But nonetheless, a very strict archival terminology

can be somehow difficult to manage to non-professional archival users. More, online research can be slowed down, or made even more difficult by the use of dictionaries; it would be maybe more useful having the dictionary not in a section apart from the pages to be browsed, and it would be better having the meaning of an item appearing when moving the cursor over it.

So, what now, then? Well, as usual, the right solution lies somewhere in between, a combination of both methods. The happy medium could be trying to balance professional and plain language: a solution could be using easy, understandable words, and in the meantime giving also professional items to be explained via definitions appearing in the text when moving the cursor over them. And definitions should be concise and clear, and not going in the depth of technical problems that, though very important for a professional, might look not understandable, or even misleading for a common user. And, what's more important: an immediate question-and-answer service should always be provided, in order to have users constantly driven through the archives according to their own needs and requirements (such a service is commonly used by banks, for example, or by public administrations).

All this leads to the two core aspects of the topic. The first, we should never underestimate ourselves: whatever the technological level used for archival research might be, the archivist is (and used to be, and forever will be) the most important and irreplaceable access point to an archive, and her/his help is (and used to be, and forever will be) the best tool to be given to an archive user, since she/he can completely understand and help user's needs.

Of course, such a question-and-answer service entails that an archivist should always be available to users; and here we come directly to the second core point of the topic. The very best situation for an archive should be not just having archivists ready to fulfil users' needs, but to have a whole team of professionals ready to work in synergy: archivists, paleographists, historians, lawyers, fundraisers, advertisers, IT technicians, and whichever professional needed, with the archivist sitting among them not like a boss but as a kind of a *primus inter pares*, giving the right guidelines to the implementation of archival services to make the archive more and more useful to users.

Utopia? Possibly, and maybe just a dream. But only dreaming of a better future can lead to the fulfilment of a better future.

No typology.