In the Agora

'Conquering Kings Their Titles Take From the Foes They Captive Make'[1]

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Background

The stimulus for this paper was a simple event. At one particular session of the 1997 Conference of the Society in Adelaide, several of the invited speakers mispronounced a word truly central to the lexicon of archivists, namely: 'archivist'. Instead of the accepted or professional norm of pronouncing the second syllable as an 'E', an 'I' was used by speakers. The effect of this solecism on some in the audience was apparent. There was some head shaking, muttering, and comment made at the next tea break. The mispronunciation of the 'A' word has been suffered at other conferences and no doubt will be suffered again, and it happens all the time. The question that occurred to me at the Conference was: why is this so? This, in turn, gave rise to: what does it mean? Does it mean anything at all? The result of my subsequent musings is this paper. While it is somewhat light-hearted, I would stress the underlying seriousness of the issues discussed.

Pronunciation issues

The initial issue to consider is why we know the correct (that is the accepted) pronunciation in the first place. For the most part, the proper pronunciation of a particular word is something we learn through hearing the word spoken. The process is reasonably reliable: when we hear a new word and grasp its meaning, then we mentally record it along with its correct pronunciation.[2] Alternatively, we guess at the right sound from looking at its written form in a book or wherever it is that we come across it. Often the guess is based on its similarity to a word with which we are familiar. But we have all got the pronunciation of a word wrongly at some time or another (and sometimes embarrassingly so) by following such processes. The embarrassment of realising the mistake is bad enough with normal or common vocabulary. The problems posed by pronunciation - and meaning of particular words - are much more difficult when dealing with the specialist vocabulary of a profession or occupational group.

The use of a specialist vocabulary or complex terminology is one of the hallmarks of a defined profession or occupation. Besides aiding the performance of their professional function, it also assists members to identify other members of the particular profession and to communicate with each other. In simple terms: to 'bond'. The effect of sophisticated terminology is also to exclude non-members of a profession from participating in professional issues. For example, take the terms 'record' and 'fonds'.

The first is used in specialist ways by those in the records and information related fields as well as being understood by the wider public along similar lines. Use of the second term could be said to be restricted to professional archivists. In a conversational context, the non-archivist may be comfortable discussing records related issues. But they could well become confused by the multiple meanings of 'records' as discussion became deeper and positively perplexed by 'fonds' whenever it was introduced. The dilemma (if it could be called that) is that archivists cannot be inclusive and exclusive simultaneously. The vocabulary and pronunciation helps set you apart - including its mystification for others - as a discrete group or profession. In other words, if it was all that simple and clear for everyone would archivists constitute a profession at all?

In any event, allowing for the fact that we often guess at pronunciation, given the pronunciation of 'archives', it is reasonable to guess (although incorrectly) at the correct pronunciation of 'archivist'? On the basis of pronunciation and usage of the terms, I would conjecture that many of those in fields or professions parallel or related in some distant way to the archival field have come into contact with *archives* in some way. They have (rightly or wrongly) a conception about the nature and meaning of archives. But such persons have never come into contact with *archivists*. At least a contact that is sufficient to develop a proper appreciation or understanding of what it is that the archivist does.

The basic assumption or belief of archivists is that archives require archivists to function properly - and professional archivists at that. Perhaps putting it somewhat simplistically, I suggest archivists have over the years successfully marketed to the community generally the concept of archives and the value of archives. But archivists have not succeeded in communicating the requirement that a professional expertise is essential to manage the archival function. For if they had done so then the community would know the correct pronunciation of archivist, would it not?

It would be fair to say that the more powerful a profession then the greater the degree of control it exercises over its particular speciality or field. The most obvious ones in regard to possessing such power are the medical and legal professions. Similarly, the more powerful a profession then the more its rights of control are recognised by other professions and conceded by the community generally. As for terminology, it can be observed that the more a profession is recognised then the more it has if not exclusive use then first use of nominated terms. This can be seen by a simple associative test with various professions such as surveyors and surveying, dentists and dentistry, and so forth. The obvious question this gives rise to is: how high is the power factor and the connection between 'archives' and 'archivist'. Most importantly in this context is the connection recognised, understood, and conceded by other professions - particularly those in the information fields? And what are the implications for archivists?

The question that must first be addressed is, however, the extent to which the qualified archivist is in fact professional. For example, is the qualified archivist a professional along the lines of, or equal to, the qualified accountant, solicitor, or surveyor. A detailed consideration of the matter is outside the scope of this paper.

However, there is a large body of academic and general work on the nature of the professions and what constitutes a separate profession.[3] A look at the archival function from a perspective outside the archival field could perhaps provide some form of objectivity on this point

I would quote for consideration the processes of professionalism as described by Eliot Friedson:

> Professionalization might be defined as a process by which an organized occupation, usually but not always by virtue of making a claim to special esoteric competence and to concern for the quality of its work and its benefits to society, obtains the exclusive right to perform a particular type of work, control training for, and access to it, and control the right of determining and evaluating the way the work is performed.[4]

He then goes on to say:

> when an occupation has become fully professionalized, even if its work characteristically goes on in an organization, management can control the resources connected with the work, but cannot control most of what workers do and how they do it.[5]

I do not see either statement as controversial in principle. In my view, while the position of the archivist in relation to the first statement may in part be debatable, I would suggest that few archivists, if any, are in the happy position described in the second.

Another factor or marker of the profession is its relationship to its own internal specialities. In the higher professions, the creation and management of specialities are processes that are to a great extent rigidly controlled. Those who are specialists within one of the higher professions are generally recognised as such because they undertake either specialist studies (as in law) or specialist study and formal admission (as in medicine). In the archival field, by contrast, you are very much what you say you are. For example, titles such as 'sound archivist' or 'audio-visual archivist' - or even 'archivist' itself for that matter - are taken by their user. They are not granted to their user after undertaking nominated training or by their meeting a testable standard.

In summary, if a profession cannot exercise control over who enters it, or regulate the activities of those within it, then it is not a profession in the sense expected by the wider community. Control may only extend to determining admission to professional associations not the admission to employment. I believe archivists are essentially posited in such a grey area: they are in something more than an occupational group but collectively constitute something less than a profession. Therein lies the problem or danger.

Pronunciation is only one aspect of terminology: there is the question at large of its impact. The natural tendency is for professional groups to think that there are various walls or boundaries that separate different professional groups. It is by means of such boundaries that professions establish ownership of an area. One such way is via exclusive use or basic ownership by a group of particular terms or concepts. A consideration of the point is, I believe, revealing about terminological matters. In addition, it says something about from where archivists have come as a profession and where they are likely going as a profession. In perhaps a test of archivists' proprietary rights to particular terminology, do they own or control their most fundamental terms? For example, do archivists really own 'archivist' and 'archives'?

The adoption of terminology by the computing industry from the archival and records related fields is something with which those in such fields are familiar. This process has been going on since at least the 1960s. Perhaps the most familiar of such borrowings are file, record, and archive. There has also been development of more recent neologisms such as 'archiving'. An interesting discussion of the impact of borrowings by the information and computing fields is provided by Richard Cox.[6] He is particularly pithy on what he sees as a debasement process at work ('bastardized usage') and the underlying professional implications for those in the archives and records related fields.

Terminology on the loose

I want, however, to look at the effects of borrowings from the traditional archives' terminology in the world outside the information and computing fields. This examination is based on a study of quotations from newspapers and popular literature which use what are - or were once - terms from the archival field and a

consideration of their implications. The particular quotations were selected to make general points; there were many others that could have been used.[7]

To assist appreciation of the implications of the quotations, it is useful to be reminded of the definitions of some of the terms mentioned. A definition made from inside the archival field has an archivist as a 'person professionally educated, trained, experienced, and engaged in the administration of archival materials'.[8] The same source gives three choices for the meaning of archives: as actual documents, as the buildings holding records, or as the agency or program responsible for managing archives.[9] To turn now to the quotations.

Quote No. 1

The following quotation is from a Phillip Adams column published in 1997 in the *Weekend Australian*.[10] The quotation is from a paragraph discussing a television documentary series about the USA in the 1950s.

> [The show is] well structured, well edited, well written. And well worth a look. And isn't it well overdue for someone - such as the supreme archivist, Peter Luck - to do the same thing for us?

The writer was not being ironic in the context. Leaving aside the questionable superlative, just how does a television documentary maker - no matter how good - become converted (promoted?) to a condition where the best description of him is as an archivist? The question is: do you identify him as being an archivist?

Quote No. 2

The second quotation is from *The Economist* magazine. It is from an article entitled 'Misplaced Treasures' about issues connected with the ownership of, and rights to, national cultural property. The article, in part, discusses the issues associated with a decision of whether or not in the aftermath of World War II the USA could take a share of the treasures of a defeated Germany. In the course of the drawn-out debate within the USA occupying forces:

> Captain Farmer bridled. In the Wiesbaden Manifesto, he and other American archives officers stated that they were "unanimously agreed that the transportation of these works [to America] [...] establishes a precedent neither morally tenable nor trustworthy".[11]

Unfortunately, no reference is given for the interior quote used in the article. The morality in the decision is impeccable and could perhaps give a warm feeling to archivists everywhere.

A recent book on the subject of the fate of treasures during and post-World War II, *The Rape of Europa*, also discusses the Wiesbaden Manifesto.[12] In the book, the persons called 'archives officers' in *The Economist* article are described throughout as 'Monuments Officers'. It turns out that their proper title was 'Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives Officers'.[13] It is understandable that a shortened form of such a title would be used. The question is: why would the anonymous writer of the article choose Archives Officer as the contraction instead of Monuments Officer?

Quote No. 3

The third quotation is from the *New Scientist* magazine:

> Librarians protest that they, as natural hoarders, feel a pang at the loss of the book equivalent of the slipper orchid. Yet if books are not being used frequently enough, is this anything to do with their funding? They simply have to go [i.e. disposed of], preferably retaining an archive copy somewhere in the system.[14]

On consideration, I interpret this as meaning that an 'archive copy' of a book can be the only copy existing anywhere. Alternatively, the archive copy may be just one of many copies of the book all of which are held somewhere not immediately accessible. The main point is that the contents of the book may not be available immediately. In this situation, something like 'relative scarcity' seems to describe the condition that generates the archival value and epithet. I could, of course, be completely wrong.

Quote No. 4

The next quotation is from the *Australian Book Review*.

> The great value of the Internet [is that it] makes up the first ever computer information mass storage medium that's archivally useful and lasting, that won't become unusable within a year or two.[15]

If you are confused as to exactly what it all means then you are not alone. If the writer meant that somehow all information can be (or will be) readily accessed electronically, then half a mark to the writer for their optimism. But if it is supposed that all such information will be readily preserved and accessible, then no points for ignorance.

Quote No. 5

The final quotation is from Alan Ramsey, Canberra political correspondent for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He wrote in a column:

> Collins felt maybe it wouldn't be such a good idea to put it to the test. A great pity.
> Meanwhile, some more humour from the Archives.
> March 11, 1986 - Senator Arthur Gietzelt, speaking in the Senate: "The Hawke Government has ...."[16]

Strictly speaking, he is quoting from Hansard - most likely from a printed set of the record of the proceedings of Parliament. He is not quoting from a record from an archives. The closest approximation to what he means is perhaps 'history' - anything but archives.

I want to look now at the quotations collectively and their assumptions and implications.

1. All the quotations use 'archives', 'archivist', or 'archival' and are from a wide range of publications meant for consumption by the general public. There is no qualification attached to each term or an explanation of the meaning of each term. The likely assumption of all the writers is that the public shares their concept of an archives and archivist. In each case, they are obviously not the same as those held by professional archivists. Rather, the writers have a more generalised concept (if it could be called that) at odds with the archivists' concepts or understanding.

2. Not only has terminology derived from the archival and records related fields spread to the information and computing fields generally (*pace* Cox), it has, I would suggest, spread into the wider world beyond. As usage of such terms has spread, so has their meaning changed and quite radically in some cases. Take for example Quote No. 3. Here 'archival' seems to infer something that has a value requiring that it be kept for a long time (however

such a period is defined). Alternatively, it can also be applied to mean something that is unique but does not necessarily have a defined or even determinable value.

3. Following on from the previous point, 'archives' and 'archival' are becoming buzz words or even things that could be called 'blur' terms as evidenced in Quote No. 2. By blur it is meant that they have no precise meaning either provided by the writer or able to be determined from the context. In such instances, either the writer does not properly understand their meaning or has a precise meaning in mind. More significantly, they do not expect their audience to have a problem with the terms as they are used - the audience is not going to object. Essentially, these terms are becoming so non-specific that they can be used as easy substitutes for more accurate descriptions or avoid the necessity of providing a detailed explanation. Such explanations would, of course, take up valuable space. The question to ask yourself at this point is: how often would a letter to the respective editors objecting to how the terms are used make it into print?

4. 'Archives' and 'archivist' have become indicators of high status of a thing or person (see Quote No. 1). This status is achieved in spite of the wider public ignorance of what the professional archivist does. Alternatively, the status is because of the public's ignorance of the true meanings of the terms. For example, everyone has been in a library at one time or another but, dare I say, nobody but librarians claim to be librarians?

All the examples quoted of how archival terminology is being used have come from non-fictional sources. The adaptations of meaning may well have been driven by the borrowings of information fields having moved into the wider community. Another medium for change is by fictional means. How much the general perceptions of the community about archives are derived from fiction or other media such as film and television are, of course, unknown.[17] While this issue is outside the scope of this paper, it should be noted that at least one master's thesis has been written on the subject of perception of archives and archivists in fiction.[18] There is also a Web site devoted to the fictional depiction of archives and archivists.[19]

I suspect, however, the effect of fiction and other media on the perception of archives and archivists is essentially not something that is quantifiable. This is in part due to the complexity of the processes of terminological change. For instance, I suspect that it is not simply a one way process: the use of archives in a book or film will inspire its use in another book or film. This process has occurred to the extent that the use of such terms has passed to being almost name-dropping or status enhancing as previously discussed. A random example of this is:

> 'Start with this,' he said. 'Where did this person get the virus to begin with? Not exactly something you order through the mail.'
> 'I don't know. To my knowledge there are only two places in the world that keep archival smallpox. CDC and a laboratory in Moscow.'[20]

But all is not gloom concerning perceptions. Archives and archivists in fiction may well be located in musty, dusty, basements serviced by staff of similar mien, but all is not lost. For in fiction or film when someone is admitted to hospital there is a 50:50 chance that they will die. I would observe that almost invariably when an archives (traditional) and an archivist (traditional) are introduced into the plot, then the protagonists will invariably find what they are looking for. A search by the inexperienced may take next to no time (especially if they have to break in to the archives after dark with only a torch to assist them). Alternatively, a search might take quite some time in the daytime. But the search will almost invariably come up with the item desired. A character in fiction or film may perhaps curse a hospital or a doctor but never an archives or archivists. It is gratifying that the image portrayed and the reality experienced by actual users so closely correspond.[21]

More seriously, I believe that the terms so long treasured or cosseted by professional archivists have escaped from custody. The terms are now estrays - or have gone feral if you prefer. With that in mind, the following questions can be posed:

- Can archivists re-establish control over their terminology? In other words, whose views will prevail - those of the traditional archivist or those of the wider public; and

- If archivists can not re-establish control over their terminology, then what will be the result for the archival profession?

My short answer to the first question is that the profession will not re-establish

control over its traditional terms. In part, this is because the language itself is beyond its control. It is always easier in English to load an existing word with additional meanings than coin and promote a completely new word. For a group or profession to adopt terms from another profession's terminology is a common occurrence in what has been called a 'hybridisation' process.[22] By the way, you can play a game guessing which term will be the next one adopted - or is there nothing else worth having from archives?

As for the second question, from the viewpoint of professions generally, the short answer is a point raised earlier in this paper. This is the problem of having the archivist sufficiently widely accepted (especially by members of other professions) as controlling a particular territory or functions and of having the performance of such functions accepted as requiring significant professional knowledge, skills, and experience.

The explanation for what I believe may be seen as relative failure was also raised earlier: archivists are victims of their part success. By that I mean traditional archivists have raised the profile of the uses and value of records for so many different purposes. Indeed, they have even succeeded (to an extent) in ensuring the proper housing and preservation of records across a wide range of organisations both public and private. But they have been unable to take the next step. This is the vital one of gaining recognition as exclusive holders of valuable skills by the wider community, of having their function properly understood.[23]

However, this type of problem is not exclusive to the archivist; it is common to other groups with characteristics in common with archivists. For example, essentially the same issue has been raised in connection with librarians and libraries. As the situation has been put by one librarian:

> the information we supply appears to be free and is therefore not valued as a commodity. Libraries are regarded as being amenities (like swimming pools) rather than as vital supports of our society.[24]

Thus even if archivists (that is, those few who are known) are 'loved' it does not mean they are successful. That is, successful at least to the extent that society and organisations do all which is necessary for the good of archives as the traditional archivist knows them.[25]

The future

As for the future, in my opinion the future is likely to bear similarities to the following sentiments. These somewhat pungent views were expressed by Robert Hughes in 1984:

> To resurrect something, to study and endow it with a pedigree, is to make it saleable [...] Twenty years ago *antique* had an agreed-upon meaning: it denoted something not less than a hundred years old. Today it is used indiscriminately of anything made the day before yesterday, for instance 1940s nutmeg graters. For those objects that were too ephemeral, ugly, dumb or recent even to pass as modernist archaeology, the word *collectible* was invented.[26]

In 1998, a drive through the countryside demonstrates (in Australia at least) that the situation has worsened. The word 'collectible' is a misnomer when it is used and has, for all intents and purposes, become redundant. This is because almost everything is described as being 'antique'. Essentially, we have reached the point where there are 'antiques' and there are 'antiques'. Just how do you determine the general quality of what is on offer except by stopping and going inside?

In my view, all you need to do is to substitute 'archives' for 'antiques' in the quote and you might have some idea of the likely future. A future where you will not know the quality until you do the equivalent to going inside each one and assessing it. A future I suggest that will see archives more and more as a noun that is draped in amplifiers. Some such attendant terms, from the archivists' perspective, can be called oxymoron, redundancy, and tautology.

That future might be here already. For example, a magazine advertisement for *Star Wars* (the film) paraphernalia presents the wares in terms of:

> Icons Authentic Replicas proudly presents its Star Wars Archive Collection. A series of [...] officially authorised authentic prop and miniature replicas[27]

I have enough problems with the concept of an 'authentic replica' - let alone what it does for the concept of archives.[28] As such usage debases the language, so archives will not escape unscathed. But it is by such company the archivist may know the archives of the future. For when the terms are so debased that everything are archives and archival and anybody an archivist, then how well will the Archives

fare? Will they be treated in a way necessary for them to serve their traditional purposes? I, for one, am not sure.

The above views may well be unduly pessimistic. But, as mentioned at the start, the issues of professional terminology and professionalism do present problems. If only those of the less than adequate recognition of the role of archivists and archives by society and organisations. I do believe that each year the problems become more pressing and equally more difficult to resolve.

However, to finish on a lighter note: when your terminology is being subject to bastardised usage, one option is to invent new terms or concepts that will be opaque to borrowers (another 'fonds' for example). Unfortunately, such terms may well have to be explained in every instance where they are used outside the professional group, and possibly run a gauntlet of abuse from inside it (another 'archivy' for example). An alternative is to fight fire with fire: enlist oxymoron, tautology, and redundancy in the cause and create new terms with some familiar components. For example: 'permanent archives' or even 'millennial archivist' (those who ensure records last 1,000 years). Never mind the problems tomorrow, think of the status they could impart today.

Endnotes

[1]   John Chandler, 1806-1876

[2]   The problem in English was that until the 18th century the spelling of a word was very much the writer's choice. With the development of dictionaries the trend then developed for standardised or fixed spelling of words. Unfortunately, while the written forms become all but fixed their pronunciation has continued to evolve.

[3]   Some examples of relevant books on professionalism and related issues are: Thomas L. Haskell, ed., *The Authority of Experts: Studies in History and Theory*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, c. 1984; William M. Sullivan, *Work and Integrity: The Crises and Promise of Professionalism in America*, HarperBusiness, New York, c.1995; J. Broadbent, M. Dietrich, & J. Roberts, eds., *The End of the Professions?: The Restructuring of Professional Work*, Routledge, London, 1997.

[4]   Eliot Friedson 'Professions and the Occupational Principle' in E. Friedson, ed., *The Professions and Their Prospects*, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, California, 1973, p. 22.

[5]   Ibid

[6]   Richard J. Cox, 'Archives as a Multi-faceted Term in the Information Professions', *Records and Retrieval Report*, March 1995. To quote: '... this bastardized usage reflects a lack of

understanding of the valid and important concepts of archives as records of continuing value to an organization and even of the basic concept of a record itself p. 2'.

[7]   I would thank Michael Piggott for drawing to my attention several of the examples cited.

[8]   See L.J. Bellardo & L.L. Bellardo, *A Glossary for Archivist, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers,* Society of American Archivists, Chicago, 1992.

[9]   For those inside the archival field, there is no problem with using the same term to describe something as tangible as a building and/or contents, and the intangible such as an administrative program. However, the precise meaning of a term at a given point in a discussion may have to be explained to the outsider. But this situation is not unique to archives related matters.

[10] Phillip Adams, 'The Past is Another Doco', *Weekend Australian,* 17 January 1998, p. 36.

[11] 'Misplaced Treasures', *The Economist,* 20 December 1997, p. 132.

[12] Lynn H. Nicholas, *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War,* Vintage Books, New York, 1995.

[13] For a brief discussion of the role of 'Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives Officers', see Greg Bradsher, 'Documenting Nazi Plunder of European Art' in *The Record,* Vol. 4, No. 2, Nov 1997, p. 7.

[14] Ian Watson, 'A Short Shelf Life', *New Scientist,* 15 June 1996, p. 49. I would note there is something in the quote offering offence to librarians as well.

[15] John Tranter, 'Lost Things In the Garden of Type', *Australian Book Review,* October 1997, p. 38.

[16] Alan Ramsey, *Sydney Morning Herald,* 6 September 1997, p. 41.

[17] An interesting paper on aspects of this issue is by Richard J. Cox: 'A Sense of the Future: A Child's View of Archives' in *Proceedings of the 1995 ASA Conference,* edited by Michael Piggott & Colleen McEwen, Australian Society of Archivists Inc, Canberra, 1996.

[18] Arlene B. Schmuland, *The Image of Archives and Archivists: Fictional Perspectives,* M.A. Thesis, Western Washington University, August 1997.

[19] <http://www.victoria.tc.ca/~mattison/ficarch/index.htm#LeonMiller>

[20] Patricia Cornwell, *Unnatural Exposure,* Little, Brown and Company, London, 1997, p. 222.

[21] Indeed, the patron saint of archivists should perhaps be St. Jude rather than the existing St. Lawrence.

[22] For an interesting discussion of this issue in the context of the social sciences see Mattei Dogan, 'The Hybridization of Social Science Knowledge', *Library Trends,* Vol. 45, No. 2, 1996.

[23] A stimulating and somewhat bracing discussion on the matter of public perception of archives and archivists is by David B. Gracy II, 'Archivists, You Are What People Think You Keep', *The American Archivist,* Vol. 52, Winter 1989.

[24] Meg Paul,'Power and Influence', *New Librarian,* November 1994.

[25] One writer has put the situation for libraries in the USA when discussing public support for libraries as:

Support in the abstract is worth nothing, and the elected and appointed politicians understand quite clearly that there is greater safety in lower taxes than better libraries. [...] Despite cuts in budget, in staffing, in services, and in hours of opening, the public is not distressed. It thinks libraries are "wonderful". Politicians know what that means. It is safe to cut the budget once again. Police protection, on the other hand, is not "wonderful" and that budget must be enhanced. [...] Money goes not to where people are happy but where they are unhappy. We have done a significantly incompetent job in making our users unhappy and angry'.

Herbert S. White, 'Who Will Lead the Unsuspecting Lemmings Over the Cliff?' *Library Trends*, Summer 1997, p. 85.

[26] Robert Hughes, *Nothing if Not Critical: Selected Essays on Art and Artists*, Harvill Press, 1995, p. 399. With the use of the term 'modernist archaeology' you can see Richard Cox's 'bastardized usage' once more at work. But this time it is the archaeologists that suffer.

[27] This was from a full-page advertisement in *Sci-Fi Universe* magazine, May 1997.

[28] Note that these are replicas and not merely copies; and what is the qualificatory difference between 'authentic' as opposed to merely being just 'good' or 'bad'. An authentic replica could in theory be a dismally poor copy.