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ON FIRST-NATION TONGUES:
UGANDAN LUGANDA
KENYAN GIKUYU
ECUADORIAN KICHWA

PROFILE: NGŪGĨ WA THIONG'O



I've never actually seen an iota, let alone a jot or a tittle. Have you?

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FROM THE EDITORS



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Views Editor

Indigenous tongues in once colonized lands pose unique challenges. Should the purity of each language be preserved, as Ugandan priest Joseph Musoke would have it? Should writers in lands such as Kenya write only in their native language, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has chosen to do? Is Ecuador’s grounding of its new constitution in the Kichwa concept *sumak kawsay* a model for others to follow? These provocative ideas are explored here in Father Musoke’s article “Murdering the King’s Language”; in Julie Winter’s profile of Kenya’s Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o; and in an essay by Patrick Saari, translator of Ecuador’s 2008 Constitution, on the implications of the Constitution’s foundational use of the Kichwa term *sumak kawsay* and the challenges of translating such a term. All three are addressing in different ways the importance of respecting ancestral languages, especially in the face of global pressures, on the grounds that nuances of wisdom and perception would otherwise be lost.

Tony Beckwith’s regular *By the Way* column focuses on another ancient language, Latin, as he explores the origins of writing and the impact of the Latin alphabet on our world today.

In her Letter from the LD Administrator, Mercedes Guhl invites readers to “jump out of invisibility and silence, to be among colleagues and to ask questions, make comments and share your triumphs, by using the channels our division provides.”

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SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Submit articles up to 1600 words, font size 12,
Word or text file, single-spaced.

Indent paragraphs or put a space between them.
Include a brief bio of two or three sentences and,
if convenient, a photograph.

Illustrations and links, etc., are encouraged.
Submissions may be edited.

We encourage submissions from Asia, Africa,
and all other cultures less frequently represented
in these pages.

Send general submissions for future issues to
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Submissions of reviews or profiles go to
juliemwinter6@gmail.com.

Submissions deadline for the next issue: July 1
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LETTER FROM THE LD ADMINISTRATOR

Dear LD members,
As translators, we often complain about what seems to be an ailment: the invisibility syndrome. Our names always appear in small print as credit for our work, almost invisible, or they are on pages nobody bothers to read. Clients fret when they hear about our fees or get our invoices, as they do not know much about what we do and what it involves. For them, it would be better if translation costs and schedules were invisible in their plans, as they would rather not have to deal with them. In the production chain we are part of, our good judgment is sometimes overstepped and ignored, as someone reviewing or proofing our work makes changes without any regard for our deliberate and reasoned choices.

That's the situation out there, and we do our bit to make it better by educating clients and trying to inspire respect for our efforts, but any improvement on that front will be slow. That invisibility, however, should not be a mirror image of what happens here, within our division and among colleagues. Here we have the opportunity to share our concerns and interests, to listen to someone else's point of view on a particular problem.

So let me invite you to jump out of invisibility and silence, to be among colleagues and ask questions, make comments and share your triumphs, by using the channels our division provides: We have a webpage (www.ata-divisions.org/LD) with lots of resources and information for the practice of literary translation. It

is undergoing some changes right now, and eventually the design and general layout will be replaced by a new one, but still it is worth a visit. And your input is very valuable to keep it interesting and up-to-date! Let us know about local events, awards, articles and reviews related to literary translation. You can contact me at mercedesguhl@gmail.com. And if you have a translation that has been published after 2010, send us the details. We will post them on our very own "wall of fame", for our fellow members to see, and you will be one step away from invisibility.

Our Yahoo listserve (<http://yhoo.it/lgcAyMf>) is moderated by Josefina Iannello, the LD Assistant Administrator. There we share links, comment on articles, ask various questions on translation and seek guidance for client relations.

We are in LinkedIn too, with a group managed by Jesse Tomlinson (jesse@tomlinsontranslations.com), for discussing translation, literature and work practices. Just send her an email if you want to join.

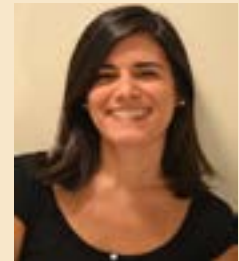
You already know about our quarterly publication, as you are reading it right now. It is always open for submissions.

As a member of the LD you are entitled to those benefits. Join in and make them work for you or just to satisfy your curiosity! And don't forget that your input is important to make the LD work for you and for others.

Sincerely,
Mercedes Guhl



Mercedes Guhl is a freelance English into Spanish translator. She has over twenty years' experience translating for the book industry in Latin America, mainly translating books for young readers and academic research in humanities.



Josefina Iannello is a translator from Buenos Aires, Argentina. Her working languages are English, French, and Spanish. She currently lives in Los Angeles, where she focuses mostly on subtitling.

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MURDERING THE KING'S LANGUAGE

BY FR. JOSEPH MUSOKE



Fr. Joseph Musoke is a trilingual Ugandan priest. He speaks Luganda (fluently), English (fairly well) and German (sparingly). Apart from teaching chemistry and biology at Sacred Heart Seminary, Mubende, he is a passionate reader and a promising author. A Muganda, he belongs to the Ngeye (Colubus Monkey) clan and is a zealous monarchist.

Luganda is one of the many indigenous languages spoken in Uganda, one of the five East African states. It is spoken by the Ganda people who regard the King as their absolute ruler, a demi-god and the supreme custodian of *ennono* (tradition). The Baganda comprise the largest of the country's 56 ethnic groups and live mostly in the central region. Many foreigners mistakenly believe that all Ugandans are Baganda.

The Baganda eagerly embraced what the colonialists were willing to offer. They were thus the first Ugandans to benefit from European education and civilization in general. Consequently, the Baganda advanced in all sectors of economic, social and political life in the colonial era, a status that helped to spread their language to other regions around the country.

Unfortunately Luganda is a language which has been tremendously corrupted by the assimilation of hundreds if not thousands of words, phrases, proverbs and expressions from other local and foreign languages, especially Swahili and English. This trend has led to a steady degradation of the language in both its spoken and written forms.

A language is one of the most precious treasures of the people speaking it. A language doesn't belong to any particular generation. It's like an heirloom that is kept and passed on without being altered in any way. Like all precious things it must be jealously guarded because it is a medium through which the cultural heritage is shared among contemporaries and passed on to future generations. This blessing comes with a responsibility: every new generation must protect it from abuse and hand it down untainted.

I believe that, like human beings, all languages are unique in some way. An idea or concept can be expressed in as many ways as there are languages.

Every language has structures that are unique to it. This is why a literal translation of an idea from one language to another may make no sense or convey a different idea. This diversity weaves a beautiful tapestry that is admirable. We all appreciate the art in Persian carpets and all manner of woven crafts like mats, baskets, bags and textiles. The most marketable ones are those woven in two or more colors because they are more appealing than the ones in simple colors.

Remarkable craftsmanship is evident in the mixing of many colors observed in handicrafts and nature. I am convinced that the world

would be a very boring place if all humans spoke one language and had one culture or skin color.

The uniqueness and integrity of each individual language should be preserved to thwart its extinction or total corruption. A language may be re-born as a result of a Diaspora, leading to languages such as Swahili, Yiddish, Ladino and Ebonics, but not in its own cradle. Luganda has a treasure trove of hundreds of thousands of words. Unfortunately many such words are now passing out

The train was given the name *ggaali y'omukka*. This was funny because *eggaali* means bicycle. Hence the literal translation was the 'smoke bicycle.' The smoke referred to the enormous clouds of smoke the early trains spewed from burning coal.

of usage because of the influence of English and Swahili and negligence on the part of those who speak it. I have had a lifelong passion for books written in the vernacular by some outstanding local authors, many of whom have already passed away. I have in mind authors such as Kawere Edward, who wrote *Nketta mu Bizinga* (A Spy in the Islands) and *Zinunula Omunaku* (What Redeems a Poor Man). He used a rich language with a vast array of rare but original Luganda words, idioms and expressions that surpass anyone's imagination. His language style and profound literary skills highlight the little recognized wealth of our language.

The Occidental and Oriental worlds with which the Baganda came into contact as early as the mid-nineteenth century brought with them a multitude of goods, concepts and ideas which were all foreign to our social-cultural setting. Because they were appearing for the first time among the Ugandans, there were no names or expressions for them. These various novelties were eventually given names. The Luganda names for items such as cars were coined. For example, the names of cars depended on their design. A station wagon was called *muserebende* (flat back) or

entemeko (the cut one or the one without trunk or boot). A pickup truck was called *kabangali* (this referred to the tray-like structure behind the cabin). A lorry was called *nsangabisibe* (the one which picks packed things). Tractor-trailer rigs were called *lukululana* (the one which pulls). The train was given the name *ggaali y'omukka*. This was funny because *eggaali* means bicycle. Hence the literal translation was the 'smoke bicycle.' The smoke referred to the enormous clouds of smoke the early trains spewed from burning coal.

Over time these words lost their popularity in the spoken language and today one can hardly find them outside literature. A station wagon is now commonly referred to as *esiteeti* (which sounds like 'estate' and is a corruption of the English equivalent station wagon). The pickup is often referred as *pikaapu*. The lorry is called *loore* and the tractor trailer is called *tuleera*. All the above vehicles are now always referred to as *motoka* (a corruption of the word motorcar). The train is now often referred to as *tuleyini* (a corruption of its English equivalent).

This 'easy-speak' highlights a profound weakness in language usage and a glaringly complacent attitude towards what must be cherished and protected in an endeavor to preserve and promote. It is easier to say *tuleyini* than *ggaali y'omukka*. However this particular trend impoverishes the language by choice since the words that could be used do exist, but corrupted foreign words are preferred for the sake of convenience.

Today it is not easy to hear someone speaking without including words, phrases

and proverbs borrowed from foreign languages. Many Baganda thus speak what has been termed here as Luganda-English. This is a spontaneous mixing of English and Luganda in speech. Worst of all, some Baganda adopt the faulty accents and speech of foreigners. In the process, the original language structure is slowly but steadily disappearing, especially among the educated and semi-literate youth and young adults.

The major culprits are radio presenters, masters of ceremonies, disc jockeys, entertainers, movie actors and those in the advertising business. I often watch foreign movies with a Luganda voice-over which provides a translation. Often the translator is a comedian who doesn't feel obliged to stick to the correct presentation of the various scenes. On top of all that, it is disheartening to hear a translator repeatedly and erroneously using the word *nyyoko we* (*your mother*) to mean *his mother*, instead of saying *nyyina*, the right translation. He then says *nja ggenda* (*I will go*). The right expression should be *nja kugenda*. In this instance the prefix ku is very important.

When listening to young people speaking today, one wonders whether they are speaking Luganda or some other language. I often tease my students who sometimes speak Luganda like toddlers. You often hear them say *Nz'agenda okuzannya omupiira* instead of *Nze ggenda okuzannya mupiira* (The nasal sound represented by the double 'g' in the word *ggenda* is pronounced with the back of the tongue pushing against roof of the mouth. The character which represents this sound

is similar to overlapping the letters 'n' and 'j'. As you would have guessed, my keyboard does not have this particular character. This is why I use a double gg). Young people often avoid pronouncing this consonant. They thus opt for the crude expression whose translation is: *I, he is going to play soccer.* Just like in English, and probably in other languages, it doesn't make any sense to combine two personal pronouns whether they are similar or not.

It is often disgusting to read large roadside bill-boards with announcements written in corrupted Luganda. One billboard on the motorway near my town screams: '*Ssimu ez'omulembe zibuze wano.*' This is an attempt to announce 'Ask for trendy mobile cellphones here.' By omitting the second 'u' in the word *zibuze*, the announcement is nothing but an expression of regret that there are no more cell-phones here. This is because *zibuze* means they have run out of stock, whereas *zibuuze*, which was definitely intended by the advertiser, is the key word for the proper translation since it means 'ask for.' The culprits in this case are clearly the translators (from English into Luganda) who are paid for a job that, out of carelessness, they fail to do.

The most unfortunate outcome of this is the propagation of linguistic errors among the population, especially the young, who are learning the language. The childlike trust in the media by ordinary folk, especially the young, is obvious for anyone who cares to observe society with a

critical mind. Often the bill-board writer, the radio presenter or any public speaker is perceived to be knowledgeable and reliable. Their spoken and written errors are thus adopted and disseminated.

Today a radical movement dating back to colonial times has put much effort into translating all English words into Luganda, including all references to scientific concepts ranging from the electron to the largest galaxy. A new Luganda Lexicon has been published and marketed. This is a revision of an earlier edition that was in place for many decades. Improved editions are in the offing and the sky is the limit for this noble enterprise. This is a venture that deserves recognition and support.

It is incumbent on all members of a language group to learn a language in its originality and then respect its rules and regulations. Educators should be at the forefront of protecting and advancing the cause of language.

I am a strong advocate of the growing campaign against the mixing of languages or the speaking of crude vernacular. As an educator I take pride in my constant vigilance against the wanton abuse and 'murder' of my language. I will endeavor to fully involve my colleagues at work and students in this ongoing struggle to promote this noble cause. The battle is formidable. I am convinced, however, that, whatever personal or collective effort is required, each day makes a difference.

PROFILE: NGŪGĨ WA THIONG'O

BY JULIE WINTER



*Julie Winter translates from German to English and lives in Spokane, Washington. She is the translator of Marion Yorck von Wartenburg's *The Power of Solitude: My Life in the German Resistance* (University of Nebraska Press, 2000) and Freya von Moltke's *Memories of Kreisau* (University of Nebraska Press, 2003).*

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a prolific author who has frequently been considered a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature, is a Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature and English at the University of California, Irvine. He is the author of numerous novels, short stories, plays and essays, a post-colonial literature theorist, the editor of literary journals, and a literary and social activist. He holds seven Honorary Doctorates, has received the 2001 Nonino International Prize for Literature, and frequently lectures at universities around the world.

Early in his career Ngũgĩ wrote in English, the language of colonial Kenya, where he was educated; he later made the decision to write in his native Gikuyu and to translate, or have translated, these works into English. Ngũgĩ's decision to write in his native tongue is considered bold, risky, and ground-breaking, and raises some interesting issues in translation.

Born in 1938 in Kenya, Ngũgĩ and his peasant family witnessed and were involved in the Mau Mau War of Independence (1952-1962). Kenya was a British colony from 1895 to 1963, and Kenya's struggle for independence is a major theme in many of Ngũgĩ's early works. His first novel *Weep Not Child*, published in 1964, brought him critical acclaim, as did *The River Between* (1965) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967).

From 1967 to 1977 Ngũgĩ held a lectureship in English Literature at the University of Nairobi, along with academic appointments at Makerere University College and Northwestern University. He was arrested in 1977 by the post-colonial Kenyan government for writing and producing the socially critical play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*), co-authored with Ngũgĩ wa Mirii. The play was produced as a community project in a village 30 kilometers from Nairobi; through drama, Ngũgĩ hoped to provide the villagers with literacy skills and cultural education.

While in prison Ngũgĩ made the decision to write in Gikuyu; *Caitani Mutharabaini*, written on toilet paper, was published in 1981 and later translated into English as *Devil on the Cross* (1982). After his release from prison in 1978, Ngũgĩ spent years in exile as the Kenyan government banned him from working in his native country and attempted to have him assassinated abroad.



In the article “Recovering the Original,” Ngũgĩ explains that his decision to write in Gikuyu was “an act of resistance.” As a child, he began his education in a missionary school and later attended a nationalist school where the curriculum stressed African history and culture and was taught in Gikuyu and English. However, the African-run schools were shut down, and some were turned into colonial schools, run by the state, where children were cruelly beaten and humiliated for using their native language. Ngũgĩ learned to distance himself from Gikuyu and to do well in English, the only way to succeed. He did so well that he eventually attended Leeds University in England where he wrote his first three novels in English. Ngũgĩ explained that while he was writing the novels, he would hear the events he wrote about in Gikuyu in his mind and then he would translate them into English: “This means that for every novel I wrote in English, there was an original text” (14). In addition to feeling that the originals were meant to be written in Gikuyu, Ngũgĩ was disturbed by the fact that the people he wrote about would not be able to read his works in their own language. His decision in prison in 1978 to write in Gikuyu was an attempt to recover the linguistic, literary and cultural traditions that had been undermined as a result of the British colonialization of Kenya.

This had not been his first attempt to recover from that loss. Before writing the play that resulted in his arrest, Ngũgĩ had led his colleagues at the University of Nairobi in what he calls “the great Nairobi literature debate.” Ngũgĩ and his colleagues could not agree on which literary tradition to emphasize in school and university curricula—African, British, or European? Ngugi wanted African literature to play a larger role, arguing that it was wrong for African children to learn about themselves through the perspective of imperialism and that Kenya, East Africa and then Africa with their oral traditions should be the center from which all study of literature should begin. Other literatures could then be studied as they were relevant to the Kenyans’ self-understanding. This new model has been generally accepted in Kenya, although the debate has been ongoing, and the plan has been rejected by some schools that view it as Marxist. Ngũgĩ writes that it is indeed Marxist: the struggle of Africans to learn about their own history, culture, language, literature and art is a struggle against imperialism, oppression, and slavery, and against the idea that a human being can only do better at the expense of another.

As mentioned, one of the primary reasons Ngũgĩ chose to write in Gikuyu was to connect with his community through his writing. Although he was warned that his work would not sell in Gikuyu, when Ngũgĩ was released from prison he offered his

1978 novel *Caitani Mutharabaini* to the publisher Heinemann. The first print run of 5000 sold out within a month, and 5000 more had to be printed. The play that led to his imprisonment—*Ngaahika Ndeenda*—also sold well. The publisher then wanted Ngũgĩ to translate the novel into English to reach a larger audience. Ngũgĩ translated it into English himself (*Devil on the Cross*), and from that point on he pledged to first write in Gikuyu for his community and to use translation to connect to the wider literary world.

Critics have been quick to point out that Ngũgĩ's solution to the language problem is not as simple as it might at first appear. There are a variety of issues to be examined. Kwaku Gyasi, for example, raises the question about the form of African narratives. African literature is based on an oral tradition, and although writers may try to mimic elements of oral literature and incorporate them into their works, if they write a novel, they are using a genre that was introduced through colonialism. In order to participate in this written form, African writers have to abandon the oral tradition, and this in itself constitutes a kind of compromise.

In addition to using the European genre of the novel, African writers, even those writing first in their mother tongues, such as Ngũgĩ, must use the languages of their colonizers to reach wider audiences. Many African writers have struggled with feelings of ambivalence towards using the languages of the colonizers for their creative expression; indeed, their feelings can be described as 'a mixture of love and hatred, acceptance and rejection' (qtd. in Gyasi 76). Some African writers have tackled the problem by using European languages in creative ways to capture the sound and patterns of their mother tongues, but it is clear that a certain amount of loss is inevitable.

Simon Gikandi focuses specifically on the matter of linguistic and cultural loss in his article about Ngũgĩ's *Matigari Ma Njirũũngi*, translated by Wangũi wa Goro as *Matigari*. Gikandi believes it is a good English translation, so good that it allows us to read the work as though it were an English novel. Using the example of sayings in Gikuyu, Gikandi writes that they had to be simplified in English to make them resonate properly. The complexities of the Gikuyu language in the sayings, however, were lost; readers have neither a true sense of the original nor a sense that they are reading a translation. "In short, the eloquent English translation of *Matigari Ma Njirũũngi* defeats Ngũgĩ's intention of restoring the primacy of the African language as the mediator of an African experience" (166).

More generally, Joseph Mbele points out that if it is indeed true that translation can mediate between cultures and that translation is the way to solve the African writers' dilemma, then why not skip the step of first writing in African languages? Why not simply write in English and translate back into the African languages? He also accuses Ngũgĩ of demonizing English as the language of the oppressive colonizers; after all, not all speakers of English were or are colonialists, and, furthermore, the colonialists also produced dictionaries and grammars of some African languages that enabled Africans to become literate in their own languages. Mbele describes Ngũgĩ's struggle with English as an Oedipal conflict, "for he is bent on killing the father, the former colonial

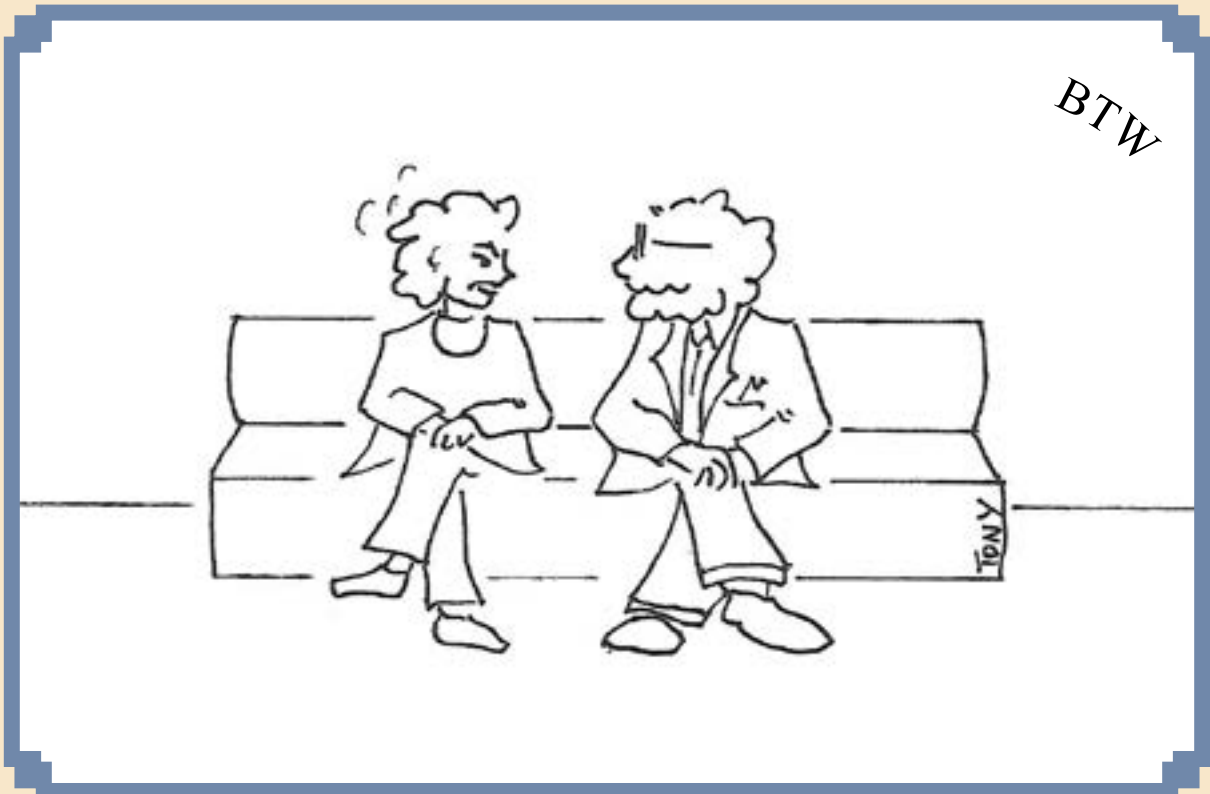
master, who, through a process of displacement, is represented by the colonizer's language. But this language begot Ngũgĩ as a writer" (150).

These issues, raised by the critics, highlight the complexities involved in writing novels in African languages. Ngũgĩ's determination to connect with his community and convey his and his community's experiences in Gikuyu is, without a doubt, an important step for African literature and has fascinating implications for the role of translation. Moreover, Ngũgĩ's achievements deserve wider recognition, as Zoe Norridge, writing in 2010, explains:

Of course there is only one Ngugi, and other African writers with such political and commercial traction are few and far between. But if the Nobel committee had chosen to honour him this year it would have renewed the African literary community's belief in the possibility, and indeed necessity, of change... If Ngugi had won he would have been the first author writing primarily in an indigenous sub-Saharan African language to win the prize. It would have been a reminder to us all of his resistance to the hegemony of European languages. "English" departments across the world might have sat up to take note.

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**If I could just stop thinking about food,
dieting would be a piece of cake. *Dammit!!***

HOW TO LIVE WITH THE GOOD WAY OF LIVING

BY PATRICK SAARI

Suppose that a great commotion arises in the street about something, let us say a lamp-post, which many influential persons desire to pull down. A grey-clad monk, who is the spirit of the Middle Ages, is approached upon the matter, and begins to say, in the arid manner of the Schoolmen, "Let us first of all consider, my brethren, the value of Light. If Light be in itself good—" At this point he is somewhat excusably knocked down. All the people make a rush for the lamp-post, the lamp-post is down in ten minutes, and they go about congratulating each other on their unmediaeval practicality. But as things go on they do not work out so easily. Some people have pulled the lamp-post down because they wanted the electric light; some because they wanted old iron; some because they wanted darkness, because their deeds were evil. Some thought it not enough of a lamp-post, some too much; some acted because they wanted to smash municipal machinery; some because they wanted to smash something. And there is war in the night, no man knowing whom he strikes. So, gradually and inevitably, today, tomorrow, or the next day, there comes back the conviction that the monk was right after all, and that all depends on what is the philosophy of Light. Only what we might have discussed under the gas-lamp, we now must discuss in the dark.

—G.K. Chesterton

When Ecuador's latest Constitution was ratified by voters in a referendum held in September 2008, it was hailed by a few as a *poema a la vida*,¹ ignored by many² and roundly pooh-poohed by the upper crust and quite a few underdogs. Underpinning the Constitution is a concept in Kichwa,³ *sumak kawsay*, officially translated into Spanish as *el buen vivir*. What is unique about *sumak kawsay* is that it reinstates a traditional Andean principle harking back to hundreds or possibly thousands of years before the fateful Spanish Conquest, in a language that was widespread throughout the Andes long before the Cuzco Incas had built their empire.

1 With its 55,494 words, it is not the world's longest Constitution, as India's has 117,369 words (in English), but as an "ode to life" it might qualify as a minor "epic" (Homer's *Odyssey* in the original Greek has 87,185 words).

2 Ecuadorians could not be blamed for being jaded: after all, it was their country's 20th Constitution since a Republic was established in 1830 and the sixth since 1944.

3 Kichwa, spoken by about 2.3 million people in Ecuador, northern Peru and southern Colombia, belongs to the Quechua language family, which, with its many dialects and varieties, is now used by about 8 to 10 million people throughout the Andean region in South America, including Argentina (and even parts of New Jersey and New York), making it the most important non-European language in South America. Though Quechua is an official language in Peru and Bolivia, in Ecuador Kichwa, along with Shuar, is only an "official language for intercultural ties" and is "recognized," along with other languages, only in the communities where they prevail, although not as official languages nationwide. Nevertheless, the 2008 Constitution has been duly translated into both Kichwa and Shuar... as well as English.

Although “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” from the U.S. Declaration of Independence and France’s “liberté, fraternité, égalité,” as well as other catchwords, slogans and principles of governance, were culled from the Enlightenment, *sumak kawsay*, as the unifying vision for the creation of a new society, stresses ancestral wisdom far removed from the European traditions brought over by the Spaniards. In the Ecuadorian Constitution, it appears on the very first page of text, in a lyrical Preamble, as the guiding principle for the entire nation.⁴ Surprisingly there are none of the usual condescending references to its native, indigenous, autochthonous, aboriginal or even “first-nation” origins.⁵

It was the butt of quite a few jokes and flippant comments, and it may well be one of the reasons why, in certain circles, the President was sarcastically referred to as *taita* (Kichwa word used affectionately by children to address their parents and caregivers) and he himself, as an astute politician who had learned Kichwa in a highland community after graduating from college, had gone out of his way to call himself and his first-nation supporters *mashi* (Cotopaxi Kichwa word used by indigenous persons amongst themselves for “close friend”), to the dismay of many true-blue members of first-nation communities who felt patronized. In all fairness, however, for whatever remembrances of the country’s colonial past it may have summoned, not all of them very uplifting, *sumak kawsay* does make a sound case for the sorely needed values of solidarity, community, harmony and environmental health. By contrast, Bhutan’s “gross national happiness” (Buddha himself might have preferred “release from suffering”) sounds like a hip-hop mass-media New-Age twist on a very contemporary market-driven economic term, gross national product (GNP), and is almost as silly as “sustainable development.”⁶

After seeing and hearing *sumak kawsay* translated in documents and at conferences as “the good life” or “good living” or even “living well,” all of which I found mournfully inadequate because of their bias toward having a good time and being prosperous, my specific concern, as the Constitution’s English translator, was to coin *le mot juste* that would transmit at least some of its true meaning without

4 “Decidimos construir una nueva forma de convivencia ciudadana, en diversidad y armonía con la naturaleza, para alcanzar el buen vivir, el *sumak kawsay*”, Asamblea Nacional, *Constitución 2008*, p. 21.

5 Do Turkish *gastarbeiters*, their descendants and other *Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund* in Germany refer to Germans as “first-nation dwellers”? Are the English, French, Italian and Spanish viewed by immigrants from the Indian subcontinent, the Maghreb, the Middle East, Africa and Asia as “natives” and “indigenous peoples”?

6 Anybody with common sense would want development to disappear altogether, leaving in its wake good governance, a booming economy, and intelligent well-fed children, but certainly not more of itself. Like “zero growth,” “sustainable development” is an oxymoron. If development, like any other activity, cannot be sustained, however slightly, then it is not development at all; it is, in the best of cases, prosperity, well-being, or utopia, hopefully long-lasting, and, in the worst of cases, stagnation, decline, or collapse, often stubbornly and explicitly sustained. And if the goal of inexhaustible development as a process is endless development as an achievement, you have a self-defeating tautology, or redundancy, much to the chagrin of all those dreaming of a better life. As both an oxymoron and a redundancy, “sustainable development,” much bandied about for more than two decades by all and sundry, linguistically and conceptually self-destructs in less than five seconds.

resorting to something ponderous or shallow. The task was all the more prickly as I am not a native speaker of Kichwa and whatever I came up with would have to be the translation of a translation. The English would also have to be a valid translation of both the Kichwa and the Spanish terms, *sumak kawsay* and *el buen vivir*, identical concepts for the purposes of the Constitution, despite discrepancies between the two if examined more closely by a Kichwa linguist.

While bravely plowing through the rest of the text, I kept thinking how I could turn that phrase around. First, the term itself in Spanish, *el buen vivir* was somewhat awkward, because of how it used an infinitive as a noun with an article and adjective tacked onto it. Nothing grammatically wrong with that as the infinitive can be used as a noun, usually translated as a gerund in English: “*El buen comer promueve la salud*” (Eating well makes you healthy). And I am sure that this Spanish option, instead of *buena vida* or *vivir bien*, was used precisely to avoid anything that might give the idea that the law of the land was promoting consumerism, a life of siestas, rum and song, and buying condos in Miami and to remind readers that it is a concept foreign to the Spanish language as well.

Second, although the term did not have a moralistic or preachy edge to it, it did suggest an ethical approach to life as a whole and was much more than the sum of its parts. So, using the gerund “living” as the true translation of *vivir*, traveling back through time to age-old philosophical and religious tenets on the other side of the Pacific, where the original inhabitants of the Americas allegedly came from, and literally translating *buen* as “good” so as not to run the risk of giving this highly subjective word any personal interpretation, I “boldly” came up with “the good way of living” and inserted a Translator’s note at the foot of the Constitution’s first page of text:

Sumak kawsay is a term in the Kichwa language referring to an ancestral Andean concept highlighting the importance of solidarity, community ties, harmony with nature, and dignity. It is translated as *buen vivir* in Spanish. To avoid the consumer connotations of “to live well,” the “good life,” “good living” or “standard of living,” the phrase “the good way of living” has been coined for the translation into English, inspired by the Chinese concept of Tao and the Japanese concept of Do, both of which literally mean “Way.” It is closely related to a similar concept in the Aymara language in Bolivia, *suma qamaña*, which can be translated as “living in plenitude.”

The full translation of the Constitution was duly delivered and eventually published, with nary a comment on my footnote, but the matter kept nagging me: there must have been a “better way” to translate the term. Other translators persisted in saying the “good life” or “living well” and I even came close to having a spat over the matter with a good friend, an interpreter with decades of experience. I was thinking of changing it to the “right course of life” or “living together well and fully” to depart even more radically from both the oft-repeated “good life” and my bland rendition “good way of living.” But obsessiveness is neither tenacity nor perseverance and has its drawbacks and pitfalls.

Seven months later, I was interpreting for the formidable Vandana Shiva,⁷ who immediately took a keen interest in the new Constitution, which I printed for her in English (all 202 pages) so she could look at it on her flight back to India. I broached the subject of *sumak kawsay*. Without blinking she told me it was very similar to *rtã*, dating back to the Vedic religion and its holy texts, the Vedas, written between 1500 and 500-150 BCE. *Rtã* was at the origin of dharma, which is the Hindu “way of life” although longer explanations are required to do justice to the term. Among the many definitions I later found for *rtã*, the most succinct were “the course of things,” “the path that was always followed,” “the way life ought to be,” and the “right path.”

I had been on the “right track” all along, although once again I was dealing with translations of translations (from Vedic Sanskrit to Classical Sanskrit to English). My translation was awkward and simple enough to reflect the Spanish without being too literal, giving a respectful, albeit neck-twisting, nod to both domestication and foreignization. It eschewed high-flying speculations of a cosmic order hinted at in the Vedas and also veered away from any type of Biblical admonition (“Because strait is the gate and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it,” Matthew 7:14), but nevertheless did take its cue from ancestral wisdom.

Although the rest of the translation of the Constitution, with its new amendments, both recently ratified and in the pipeline, could do with some tinkering, if not an overhaul, at least with this term I am at peace, the “way” I should always be but rarely am. *Sumak kawsay* dovetails nicely with many of the most sacred of rights and aspirations enshrined in UN-sponsored international conventions and declarations, the UNDP’s Human Development Index (HDI), the 2009 Declaration of the Common Good of the Earth and Humanity, and the 1989 ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, as well as with alternative approaches to measuring human “wellness” (the hip word for well-being), including the current concern with happiness and the environment, whether the New Economics Foundation’s Happy Planet Index, green GDP, ecological footprint, Satisfaction with Life Index, etc.

But *sumak kawsay* has deeper broader roots, reaching far beyond the Enlightenment or Renaissance, and has none of the sound-bite think-tank pizzazz that makes for good headlines, nor can it be easily boiled down to an econometric coefficient, neat statistic, or decimal-point index.⁸ My exploration of the Far East to

7 President of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology and author of *Staying Alive and Water Wars*, Dr. Shiva is an ecofeminist and environmental and anti-globalization activist from India. In 1993, she won the Right Livelihood Award (widely known as the Alternative Nobel Prize).

8 At a meeting of a regional Amazon river basin federation, a member highlighted an exasperating dilemma: his people were better able to voice their world vision, aspirations or predicament using colors, dance, stories and music, with references to myth, cosmogony and almost ineffable beliefs. But when they actually did so at national, regional or even world forums, although enthusiastically applauded, their “show” was viewed as a manifestation of picturesque folklore, an aesthetic experience devoid of any real meaning. The other participants could only “get down to business” and grasp reality by means of charts, graphs, Power-Point presentations, Excel tables with figures, long reports by experts, checklists, computer software tools, etc. Inhibited from doing the former because it was ineffectual, incapable of doing the latter because they had no training and could not see how it was in any way connected to their lives, dwellers of the Amazon, although respectfully invited to international meetings, were oftentimes silent or forced to allow others to speak for them.

find the right term may have been somewhat fanciful, but the subsequent rediscovery of similar notions among other nations was not. The Mapuche of Chile and the Guaranís of Bolivia and Paraguay talk of *ñande reko* (our way of being) and *tekó porã* (good way of being and living), the Achuar of Ecuador's Amazon region of *teko kavi* (good life), and the Tzeltal, who are descendants of the Maya but are now living in Chiapas (Mexico), of *lekil kuxlejal* (life harmony, inner and outer peace),⁹ all very similar to *sumak kawsay* and the related Quechua term *qhapaj ñan* (noble path) and of course Bolivia's *suma qamaña* (living in plenitude) in Aymara, among many others embracing peace, harmony, fullness, holism, and community.

Despite this somewhat romantic background, which Rousseau would surely have enjoyed, many indigenous groups, including those who were at the origin of the proposal to include *sumak kawsay* in the Constitution, claim that the notion does not dip into the faraway past but was forged out of decades of uprisings, protest marches, struggles for cultural and linguistic recognition, land, water rights, and territorial identity, the search for alternatives to predatory neo-liberalism and their call for Texaco-Chevron to remediate the Amazon rainforest it polluted with sloppy oil extraction practices. It was the umbrella under which many other elements of the Constitution could fit, most notably "the rights of nature." For the first time in history, a constitution declared that nature was a subject and holder of rights and that, as such, it could be defended by attorneys in court.

Oddly enough, nongovernmental groups from the United States¹⁰ were among the most decisive champions of the rights of nature: the San Francisco-based Pachamama Alliance and the Pennsylvania-based Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (CELDF) were instrumental in expounding and promoting this new right at Ecuador's Constitutional Convention in Montecristi in 2007-2008. Whatever applause they merit for this advocacy,¹¹ it was earlier, in 1994, a year after 30,000 local Amazon dwellers filed a class-action lawsuit in a New York court against Texaco, that the Confederation of the Organizations of Indigenous Nations of Ecuador (CONAIE) enshrined this right, seemingly offhandedly, in their 55-page political platform calling for a new constitution: "Our Holistic Humanism defends, respects

9 François Houtart, "El concepto de Sumak Kawsay (buen vivir) y su correspondencia con el bien común de la humanidad," February 2012, paper prepared at Ecuador's National Institute for Advanced Studies (IAEN) for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ecuador.

10 Odd for many because of past abuse by U.S. corporations, including decades of political interventionism throughout Latin America, not to mention general wariness about the U.S. role in championing globalization, "free" trade agreements, war, and weapons and its status as the world's largest polluter and consumer of natural resources.

11 There is a very specific legal background to support for the rights of nature in the United States, probably starting with the article "Should Trees Have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects" written by a University of Southern California law professor, Christopher Stone, and published in the *Southern California Law Review* in 1972.

and asserts the rights of all lives: those of men and those of nature...."¹² And this in turn was the culmination of a long-standing respect for the sacredness of nature as the source of all life, so deeply ingrained that even political and ideological statements made by indigenous groups and parties read like poetical spiritual manifestoes.

In 2010 and 2011, the UN Secretary General, in his first and second Harmony with Nature Reports to the General Assembly, not only highlighted Andean wisdom alongside the ancestral philosophical traditions of India, Egypt, Japan, China and Greece, but also specifically mentioned Ecuador and the rights of nature in its Constitution (and Bolivia's subsequent 2010 Law of the Rights of Mother Earth), putting the Andes on the geopolitical map for reasons other than drug trafficking and guerrilla warfare and explicitly indicating how the same commonsensical ethical patterns and principles underlie many of the world's oldest civilizations.

Although the UN Secretary General's reports might, in the best of scenarios, be construed as a tentative imprimatur to a right that for many throughout the planet has come of age, it is still impossible to say whether or not the initiative for a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Nature or the recently installed Ethics Tribunal for the Rights of Nature and Mother Earth or even proposals for global citizenship and government will prosper. With recent announcements, however, that carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere had passed the critical level of 400 parts per million (ppm), 40% more than before the Industrial Revolution, that acidification of Arctic waters had also reached critical levels endangering marine life, and that bee colony collapse disorder, among other problems, had wiped out billions of bees threatening pollination and therefore crops, it might be wise to leave no stone unturned.

To add the final touch to this ever-thickening plot, when the Constitution was printed a slogan ignoring all this business about ancestral wisdom had been tacked on to the front cover paradoxically calling for a full-throttle thrust into the future: *Dejemos el pasado atrás*, which was not in the file that had been sent to me for translation. Just recently, almost three years later, I saw the English rendition: "Leave the past back." Rearing my head at what first seemed like a bad translation and feeling the acid reflux of indignation rising to my esophagus, I was about to grab the phone to call parliament (which had hired and paid me) and suggest "Let's put the past behind us" or "Let's forge ahead," when I realized that much wisdom, albeit of another kind, had probably gone into minting the slogan in English: turning away from traditional standard English with its stifling syntax and constrictive word usage, the phrase was a snub to the repressive language of the Empire! If you can say *Te llamo pa' trás* for "I'll call you back," then you can remorselessly translate *pasado atrás* as "past back." How bracing!

12 "Nuestro Humanismo Integral defiende, respeta y afirma los derechos de todas las vidas: de los hombres y de la naturaleza, como sustento de la espiritualidad, religiosidad, pensamiento y conocimiento de los Pueblos y Nacionalidades Indígenas." CONAIE, *Proyecto Político*, chapter 2, "Nuestros Principios Políticos Ideológicos," 1994, page 11.



Aren't you just sick to death of being asked to take things to the next level?

ON THE ORIGINS OF THE LATIN ALPHABET

BY TONY BECKWITH



A writer, translator, interpreter, poet, and cartoonist, Tony Beckwith is a regular contributor to Source.

When you work with words all day, every day, you start to wonder about them—where they came from, how they were formed, and what they originally meant. And you think about all the books in all the libraries, and all the contracts, and manifestos, and peace treaties, and love letters, and invoices that have been written since the dawn of our civilization, all with just a handful of letters. It's an amazing story, when you think about it.

How did writing start? And why? What were people so keen to write about that they invented writing?

To answer these questions we must go back to a place called Sumer in the Fertile Crescent, the land surrounding the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Mesopotamia. There, roughly eleven thousand years ago, our nomadic ancestors discovered agriculture, which allowed them to settle in one place and become sedentary farmers. After hunting and gathering for millennia, they learned that they could sow seeds and reap the harvest—they just had to stick around. They found fertile land along the river banks, where they planted crops and vines and built up herds of livestock. Gradually, small settlements were formed. Before long, families expanded and merged with other families and soon villages were springing up and creating an entirely new way of life.

Agriculture made life easier in some ways, but it also brought new challenges. Farmers had to store their barley, their dried meat, and their wine for their own use. They also had to keep some grain for the following year's seed and for barter, and this created one of the new challenges. During their long centuries of migrations, of course, their hunter-gatherer forebears spoke to each other and told stories of their travels and trials and tribulations. Their oral histories connected one generation to the next, and their cave paintings recorded their experiences and their dreams, but there had never been any reason to write anything down. The new generations of farmers, however, found that they needed a way to keep track of what they produced.

At first they used tokens made of clay, which was readily available on the river banks. It's not hard to imagine (for example) a farmer watching someone, his child perhaps, scooping

up handfuls of wet mud and squeezing them into different shapes, like modern Plasticine, then drawing lines and squiggles on them with a sharp stick. The farmer might notice that when those chunks of clay were left in the sun they dried into hard objects, still bearing the designs scratched onto their surfaces. He might see a disc-shaped piece with a cross on it; a cylindrical one with a zigzag line; and another shaped like a cone decorated with a straight line. It might occur to him that if he used the disc with a cross on it to represent a sheep, and he had sixty of these discs on a shelf in the barn, then he would know that he had sixty sheep in his flock without having to go out and count them. And if he sold ten sheep to his neighbor he could put ten discs in a separate pile so as not to lose sight of the transaction until he was paid in full. If the cone with a line on it represented a loaf of bread, he could keep track of how many loaves were baked daily and where they went. He could make a token for barley, one for oil, one for amphorae of wine, and thus was born a primitive accounting system that was widely used for the next few thousand years.

By about five or six thousand years ago, the early Sumerian villages had expanded to form towns and then cities and then empires, and new factors had come into play. The concentration of large urban populations led to mass production which created a need for new technologies. The Bronze Age required minerals on an unprecedented scale and new caravan routes pushed farther and farther afield. The potter's wheel was invented, and metal and ceramic products were in great demand. Trade boomed, boosting new urban economies, and though more refined versions of the traditional tokens were still used—now inscribed with images (pictograms) of what they were intended to represent—new systems were needed to keep track of production, inventories, shipments, wages, and, of course, taxes. Merchants and governments and temples needed more sophisticated record-keeping methods, and clay 'envelopes' (*bullae*) emerged as the next solution in this long process. These were simply hollowed-out balls of clay. The tokens were put inside, then the envelope was sealed with clay and marked with the personal seal of the person or entity involved. These envelopes were an early sort of bill of lading; a farmer contracted with someone to deliver sheep or grain to an urban buyer, and gave that person a sealed envelope containing the appropriate tokens representing the type and quantity of merchandise in the shipment. This was a relatively simple way of keeping the delivery person honest.

But as trade became more complex, people realized that improvements were needed. The personal seals on the outer surface of the *bullae* validated the nature of the shipment, but to be effective the envelope had to arrive at its destination intact. This was not a problem in the early days, on a small scale, when there was just one seller and one buyer. But once a middleman or distributor became involved, how was he to know what tokens were inside the envelope unless he broke it open? And once he did, the integrity of the original shipper's seal was voided. So, what happened when the distributor sent the sheep or grain on to the end customer?

To get around this situation, the farmer started marking the outer surface of the envelope with images of the enclosed tokens as well as his own seal. Sometimes the face of the token was pressed into the damp clay of the envelope. In other cases, the symbols were drawn with a sharp stick. So, of course, the markings on the outer surface gradually took the place of the old token system because now people could read what was in the clay envelope without having to break it open. Bit by bit the images of the tokens replaced the tokens themselves, which was a crucial step on the journey from the old system to the new art of writing. Soon, tokens disappeared altogether. Then, the envelopes were replaced by clay tablets, and merchants and government agents and temples now had written records that could be fired in a kiln and kept. Our modern concept of a filing system was born.

In time, the sticks or reeds that had once been used to etch symbols into the surface of the envelopes were replaced with a wedge-shaped stylus that was pressed into the soft clay of the tablet. This style of writing is known as cuneiform script, a name derived from the Latin *cuneus* (“wedge”) and *forma* (“shape”). Like Egyptian hieroglyphs, which were possibly also inspired by the earlier Sumerian invention, cuneiform script began as a system of pictographs, with one symbol for each item. This meant that there were literally hundreds of symbols to memorize, so scribes became very important people because—then as now—those who controlled information were powerful. The pictographic system had a number of disadvantages, however, including a high risk of error due to a scribe’s poor drawing skills, the challenge of representing abstract concepts, and the vast number of symbols that limited the development of a literate society. In time, these obstacles were overcome as alternative systems emerged and early cuneiform script mutated from the basic pictograph or representation into something far more abstract. These new stylized symbols rapidly proliferated to enable more complex communication, and soon the system had evolved beyond a mere checklist to become a fluid expression of spoken language, the beginning of what we now call writing.

By about three thousand years ago, the Phoenicians, who lived along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean had learned to distinguish between vowels and consonants and had invented a rudimentary alphabet that made the previous systems obsolete. They identified 22 consonants and assigned a character to each one, which was far more manageable than the four hundred or so characters required by that time for cuneiform script. This streamlined version was understandably very popular. It was widely disseminated around the Mediterranean as a result of Phoenicia’s maritime trading culture, and eventually replaced cuneiform script and hieroglyphs to become the basis for all subsequent alphabets. Being a Semitic language, Phoenician could get by with nothing but consonants. But what about the vowels?

We have the Greeks to thank for including vowels in their version of the Phoenician alphabet in about the 8th century BC. Some say that the desire to create a written record of Homer's poems was what prompted the addition of vowels to the existing 22 consonants. This new, simplified and highly versatile Greek alphabet led to an explosion of literacy in Greece which allowed the Athenians to develop new disciplines, such as history and philosophy, and to dazzle later civilizations with their literary accomplishments.

Greek colonists then took the new alphabet to Italy, where it was adopted and modified by the Etruscans. The Etruscan version was then further modified by the Latins, an Italic tribe living in the vicinity of the seven hills of Rome. These ancient Romans developed it into the Latin alphabet just in time for it to join Greek as one of the two lingua francas of the Roman Empire as it spread across Central and Western Europe, eventually giving rise to the Romance languages we know today. Much later, in the 6th century AD, when Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, began the re-Christianization of Britain he brought with him the Latin alphabet, which the Saxon kings soon adapted into what eventually became modern English.

Variants of Roman script, based on the Latin alphabet, are the most prevalent forms of writing in the world. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) arrived at a universal character code based on the Latin alphabet. ISO 8859-1, the "Latin Alphabet No. 1," is now the widely used standard replacement for ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange).

Our 26-letter writing system has come a long way since those early days on the river banks in Sumer. It has evolved with us over the centuries, allowing us to keep track of our history and our accomplishments: the human written record can be found on clay tablets and stone monuments and plaques deposited on the moon. The characters we type on our computer keyboards today are a distant descendant of the primitive symbols originally devised by mankind at a time when our current world would have been unimaginable. Those symbols eventually provided the organizational framework and the structure we needed to develop and expand the fields of knowledge that define us. As translators we work with these characters or their equivalents in all their permutations as we transfer information and meaning from one language to another. As translators we are intimately involved with a form of communication that was born out of an evolutionary need, has been nurtured for centuries by human creativity, and is inextricably intertwined with the destiny of mankind.

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CREDITS

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