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A Lexicographical Library

A correspondent referred to us about two weeks ago two Latin phrases which he had been unable to understand and which he couldn't trace in any of the dictionaries he could lay his hands on. Unfortunately we were not in a position to help, because, in the first place, the phrases were quoted wrong, and, secondly because there were no Latin dictionaries to hand which could be consulted.

Latin like Greek, is a European classical language, and although it is no longer spoken, it is still the principal reservoir for new coinages in all European tongues. A Latin dictionary is thus an important asset which university libraries must not do without. The fact is however that except for English we stock few foreign language dictionaries. Next to English, some of the older universities may have a French dictionary or two, but if you need to find out the meaning a Norwegian word, the chances are that you will not obtain any help in any university.

But academic demands apart, now that Bangladesh maintains diplomatic relations with most countries the absence of a lexicographical library where all the principal languages will be represented, is a sad commentary on our indifference to practical problems. The Ministry of Culture sometimes receives letters in French from UNESCO which need to be translated. Arab states use Arabic in their communications. We also receive correspondence in other languages, and whenever this happens, the foreign embassies are approached for help.

There should however be a centre where dictionaries of foreign languages with explanations in English should be stocked, so that we do not have to run from pillar to post whenever something in an unknown tongue arrives. It is not that dictionaries in all the three thousand odd languages must be immediately acquired. But as we have said, the principal languages must be represented, and that would mean at a guess about a hundred languages, the principal European, Asian, African and American languages. Europe would account for the majority but such languages as Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, Korean, Indonesian, Burmese, Thai—all of them Asian—and Swahili, Hausa, Afrikaans from Africa—must find a place on the shelves.

The Modern Language Institute could take upon itself the responsibility of obtaining information about publishers, titles and prices, as a first step.