ADVANCES IN KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION
Proceedings of International ISKO Conference - ISSN: 0938-5495 - 2026 - São Paulo

Robert Pagès and his documentary language for Social Psychology

Marcelo Vieira de Figueiredo

University of São Paulo (USP), Brazil

Abstract

Robert Pagès (1919-2007) was a philosopher, social psychologist, documentalist, and political activist who, for over thirty years, headed a pioneering laboratory in France dedicated to experiments in Social Psychology. Having studied under Suzanne Briet in her Documentation course at the *Union Française des Organismes de Documentation – UFOD*, and a critic of hierarchical classification languages for document indexing, he created and implemented the *Code Documentaire – CODOC*, a synthetic, multidimensional documentary language with constructive capacity. Despite having published over three hundred texts, Pagès's ideas have not received due historical recognition.

1.0 Who was Robert Pagès

Robert Pagès (1919-2007) was a French polymath who lived in a highly unstable Europe during the interwar and post-World War periods. He acted as a political activist, leading small clandestine resistance groups in Toulouse and Paris under the pseudonym Rodion (Demailly 2009).

A student of Georges Canguilhem during his training in Philosophy, and later a student of Psychology at Sorbonne University, he attended courses with Jean Piaget, Henri Wallon, and Henri Piéron. In 1952, at the invitation of Daniel Lagache, Pagès helped found Sorbonne's *Laboratoire de Psychologie Sociale – LPS*, a pioneer in France in applying experimentation to the field of Social Psychology. In 1954, he took over the laboratory's leadership, holding the position until his retirement in 1985. At the LPS, he established a sophisticated documentation service, including a multidimensional indexing language created and implemented by him and his team, the CODOC, making the laboratory's collection one of the richest in Europe (Biographical Directory of Documentation and Information 2025).

The knowledge in documentation techniques required to operate the laboratory's collection was acquired between 1946 and 1948 at the *Union Française des Organismes de Documentation – UFOD*, where Suzanne Briet and Gérard Cordonnier taught (Le Deuff 2018). Subsequently, both Pagès and Briet became professors in the Professional Education Program in Documentation founded by her at the *Institut National de Techniques de Documentation – INTD*, officially recognized by the *Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers – CNAM* (Hudon 2018).

Besides founding organizations to promote Social Psychology, directing academic programs in the field, and teaching at various universities, Robert Pagès wrote extensively

on all the subjects he addressed, yet without producing a synthesis of his ideas (Bibliothèque de psychologie Henri Piéron 2026).

2.0 Pagès's concept of Documentation

In the text *Transformations documentaires et milieu culturel – Essai de documentologie*, Pagès defined a document as a "symbol or grouping of symbols able to endure naturally or artificially beyond the moment of its expression" ([1948] 2021, 7). The transmission of knowledge between people, which characterizes a culture, would not occur naturally, but through a dialectical relationship between the individual's repertoire and interests (the interpretation attributed to symbols) and the information available in the surrounding environment. Thus, for Pagès, "there is nothing more important for the study of culture than the analysis of its technical 'base'", as "documentation is to culture what machinery is to industry" (2021, 1).

In developing his reasoning, the author differentiated documents into unique (those characterized by self-referential information) and representative of a set. Napoleon's hat serves as an example of the first type, termed an auto-document, whereas a caged gorilla represents the category of gorillas (Pagès 2021).

The following excerpt from Suzanne Briet's *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* is often mentioned as a precursor to the idea that a caged animal could be a document: "Is a star a document? Is a pebble rolled by a current a document? Is a living animal a document? No, but the photographs and catalogues of stars, the stones in a mineralogy museum, and the animals catalogued and displayed in a zoo are documents" (Briet [1951] 2016, 1). Subsequently, Briet exemplified that a newly catalogued species of antelope would be a primary document, while underlying information (such as the recording of the animal's cry) would act as a secondary document.

Even with evidence that Briet recorded the concept in her personal notes from the course she taught at UFOD between 1945 and 1946, Pagès published the idea of the caged animal as a document in 1948, thus three years before Briet's book. Ronald Day (2024) argued that, rather than establishing authorship, it is more important to investigate the possible precedence of these French pioneers' work to notions central to neo-documentalists, such as documentality proposed by Frohmann (2012). For Buckland, "the study of documentation as the infrastructure of culture provides a good definition of the scope of information studies" (Buckland 2021, 3).

The retrieval, reflection, and recognition of the works of European librarians and documentalists would enable the construction of epistemological bridges in fields that currently define themselves as interdisciplinary (such as Information Science) but suffer identity tensions by not attributing "due importance to their own memory" (Tálamo and Smit 2007, 56).

3.0 CODOC: an indexing language for Social Psychology

In *Robert Pagès et l'analyse codée*, André Demailly (1992), a student of Pagès who was part of the LPS between 1962 and 1965, synthesized the intellectual path that led his professor to the conception of CODOC. Demailly argued that although their practical application did not spread beyond his laboratory, the concepts developed by Pagès innovatively address current challenges in indexing, integration, and updating in documentary languages.

Pagès was a critic of traditional classification processes, which he believed perpetuated "a fixist classificatory tradition – of closed cultural categories, without connection and without history" and which anchored themselves, under the justification of simplicity, in "magical or pre-scientific dualities or trinities" (Pagès 1955, cited in Demailly 1992, 65) such as the Pythagorean classification of numbers into even and odd, the Holy Trinity, and the "thesis-antithesis-synthesis" triad of Hegel's dialectic.

The classical association between instances of knowledge and the tree with its branches was also a target of Pagès's critique. According to him, such a "pseudo-genealogical" premise, initiated as early as the 3rd century AD with the Tree of Porphyry and perpetuated ever since, where the general contains the particular in a rigid and unidirectional manner, does not represent the reality of scientific research, which would develop mostly in a "non-arborescent" way, and whose multidimensional relationships would be better represented by coordinates of a cartesian system (Pagès 1955, cited in Demailly 1992).

From these criticisms, and applying ideas from Hjelmslev (double articulation of phonemes and morphemes) and Cordonnier (phonoclassificatory artificial language and term-key logic of Selecto cards), Pagès conceived and used CODOC in his laboratory, a highly synthetic language that did not hierarchize disciplines, but instead, the base lexicon designated objects and processes, such as: *a* - scientific approach; *d* - formal systems; *i* - individual; *l* - communication; *r* - mythical domain (Pagès 1955, cited in Demailly 1992).

Pagès sought a classification where not only documents were indexed, but their constituent information. He also considered it fundamental that knowledge surrounding the object of study (in his case, Social Psychology) could be organized in relation to other sciences, rather than in isolation. Finally, he intended that the language used in indexing and retrieval be capable of portraying past culture while remaining open to new future cultural categories (Pagès 1955, cited in Demailly 1992).

It is important to point out that CODOC preceded the SYNTOL language, developed by Jean-Claude Gardin in the 1960s based on challenges presented by his primary field of work (Archaeology) and his studies on the representation of objects (Hudon 2018). In 1966, in the text *Elements d'un modele pour la description des lexiques documentaires*, the author proposed establishing a distinction between real and apparent unidimensionality, the former being present in scientific taxonomies and the latter in more widely adopted documentary classifications (Lara and Kobashi 2022). Gardin's ideas on the representation of reasoning seem to have inspired the subsequent development of ontologies and the semantic web, while Pagès's studies on multidimensionality did not have the same repercussion.

4.0 Final considerations

Revisiting Robert Pagès's ideas is significant not only for the European branch of the history of Knowledge Organization but also for the current challenges of the field. For Buckland, “the writings of Robert Pagès are worth revisiting. In particular his penetrating analysis of documentation and culture remains relevant and fertile” (Buckland 2023, 5). Demailly echoes this, stating that “Robert Pagès did not receive the recognition he deserved because he disdained traditional disciplinary divisions and was always ahead of his time” (2007, 285).

His leadership in the design and implementation of a sophisticated documentation service in a Social Psychology laboratory recognized as pioneering and relevant in France, along with his innovative ideas published in the fields of Philosophy, Psychology, Documentation, and Politics, make Robert Pagès a figure that cannot be overlooked. This ongoing research aims primarily to delve into his work and synthesize his main ideas to stimulate future studies and experimentations with his theories.

AI Usage Statement: During the preparation of this work, the author utilized AI tools to assist with English translation.

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