

Obituary.

Dr. Emilia Currás



DOI:10.5771/0943-7444-2020-6-436

Born in Madrid on 8 October 1927, Emilia Currás died in the capital city on 29 March 2020 at the age of ninety-two. Her parents came from Galicia; her father, Bernardo Currás, was a jeweller, and her mother, Emilia Puente, was one of her first teachers and the influence for her scientific, innovative, travelling and polyglot spirit. She was the eldest of two sisters who, after graduating, went to Germany to study.

Emilia Currás spent her childhood, impacted by the Spanish Civil War (1931 to 1939), in the Valencian village of Alberique in the Republican zone, where the fighting was not as fierce as in other towns on the front. At the end of the war, her mother left for Tetuán in Morocco, which, in 1912, had become a protectorate under Franco-Spanish jurisdiction. In the years of the Spanish Republic, from 1931 to 1936, an attempt was made to introduce reforms and many Spanish schools were created. Girls were schooled separately and the schooling rate was low.

Emilia's mother had ranked in first place in the public teachers' examination and was able to select her destination, choosing Tetuán. She settled there with her daughters as a teacher in the No. 1 Muslim Girls' School. Emilia landed there in 1939 at the age of twelve. Her mother was to be her teacher and she took her first year high school exams on her own initiative in Ceuta. She continued her studies at a Spanish school, immersed in a colonial setting where Arabic, French and Spanish were used. It was here that Emilia began to forge her restless spirit, learning languages, travelling, becoming familiar with diverse ways of living and other cultures, all enhanced by her mother's excellent teaching.

She returned to Madrid at the age of fifteen, having come from a context that was highly unusual for girls. Whereas

Spain was immersed in one of the harshest periods of the dictatorship, she came from a more expansive world and arrived in an environment that was more limited in all respects. She finished her high school in the Lope de Vega High School in Madrid and then graduated in chemistry from the Complutense University of Madrid (the former Central University), completing a subject at the University of Santiago de Compostela in 1953.

On finishing her studies, she worked in the Veterinary School as an intern researcher in the field of Chemistry and in the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) until 1955, the year when she left for Berlin to do her doctoral studies. She was admitted to the Technische Universität of Berlin and attained her PhD in chemistry from Berlin University in 1959. In 1961, she returned to Spain and received a doctorate from Madrid University with her thesis *New research on the tribromide antimony dissolved as an ionising solvent*, describing five new compounds, registered in the Index Chemicus, and directed by Angel Vian Ortuño at the Complutense University of Madrid.

In 1961, she returned to Madrid and entered private business, founding the Chemistry and Technical Translation Section of Hanomag-Barreiros in Madrid. She told us, "When I left Berlin with a PhD in my pocket, my father told me I had to look for a job. As I could speak several languages, it was easy to find work related to foreign bibliography and literature, so I found a job at Hanomag Barreiros, a tractor manufacturer, translating documents from Germany. This was how I began working with documents and it was my first contact with Documentation" (Interview 2013).

In 1962, she went to work for the company Spanish Auxini-Piritas, in the position of Director of Document Negotiation, until 1964. She told us, “After a few months, I transferred to Spanish Piritas, a company pertaining to the National Institute of Industry (INI), to fill, precisely, the role of ‘documentalist,’ with all its ‘documentation’ load, reviewing journals and documents relating to the exploitation of pyrite mines in Huelva. There we did everything: translations, filing, summaries, writing short articles. In a nutshell, everything covered by ‘Documentation and Information’” (Interview, 2013).

In 1965, she returned to Germany to become Head of the Materials Analysis Laboratory of Linde AG (Köln-Suhn). There, she continued her professional development and enrolled in the Institute for Documentation of Frankfurt am Main, obtaining her qualification as a Scientific Documentalist in 1966. She remained in Germany until 1968 in the role of Head of the Patents Documentation Division of Dynamit Nobel (Troisdorf).

In 1969, she returned to Spain to found and manage the Documentation Department of Hispanoil (Madrid). In 1970, she left private enterprise to join the Science Faculty of the Autónoma University of Madrid and to run the Scientific Documentation Office in the Department of Applied Physical Chemistry.

A pioneer in the responsibility of the professional status of documentalists in Spain, she told us, “I had returned from Germany and had once again become immersed in Spanish documentation tasks, first at Hispanoil and later in the Science Faculty of the Autónoma University of Madrid. At that time, there were very few of us who considered ourselves to be documentalists and we were scattered, here and there, around different institutions. I missed the corporatism I had experienced in Germany and thought that we could also join forces in Spain. If we were united, it would be easier to practise our profession and to achieve improvements in all kinds of things” (Interview 1992).

In 1972, a short time after returning from Germany, she made an attempt to drive the creation of associations in the profession. She began developing a collective of documentalists that would work together and promote proper training, that would defend the profession, organise congresses and disseminate their work in publications. She told us, “As the profession of ‘documentalist’ was established as an independent, steadfast profession, it needed a professional organisation, that is why the idea of creating an association people could become a member of came to me. This is how the SEDIC, the Spanish Association of Documentation and Scientific Information, arose. We included the term ‘Scientific’ because the work done requires methodical, seriously thought-out organisation, with methods proper to the case in question” (Interview 2013).

Thanks to her decision, her persistent work and her vision, after several setbacks, she succeeded in constituting an association, something she put her heart and soul into. She said, “At such difficult times, with no money, with all the librarians in opposition and the apathy of the members ... a good deal of enthusiasm and a lot of determination was needed so as not to falter” (Interview 1992). She worked with perseverance and from 1981 until 1987 served as the Chairwoman. Her term of office also saw the creation of the FESEABIC, the predecessor to the current FESABID, the Spanish Federation of Archives, Libraries, Documentation and Museum Associations.

In 1985, she obtained a post as full professor at the Autónoma University of Madrid as a Scientific Documentalist, until 1996, the year of her formal retirement. Nevertheless, in practice she did not retire and continued working until 2015 when a hip fracture led to her effective retirement.

She was a member from the outset of ISKO—International Society for Knowledge Organization—and a founder of the ISKO Spain Chapter, later Spain and Portugal. She met Ingetraut Dahlberg while she was doing a course in Scientific Documentation in Frankfurt am Main. This professional and social relationship gave rise to her membership, from the beginning, of the International Classification Society, attending congresses and meetings. In 1989, she became a member of the new International Society for Knowledge Organization (ISKO), in whose founding meeting the decision was taken, among other matters, to create national chapters in the different European countries. This conference was extremely successful and, as a consequence, a large number of professionals joined ISKO. She was appointed Coordinator for Spain as she was the only Spanish member and had, among others, the mission of founding the Spanish Chapter.

The year 1992 saw the staging in Madrid of the grand Congress of the International Federation for Information and Documentation (FID), a circumstance that the different specialised committees took advantage of to hold their meetings. One of them was the FID/CR Committee on Classification, which Emilia Currás had been a member of for some years together with Ingetraut Dahlberg. The FID/CR meeting was arranged in conjunction with ISKO. ISKO Spain already had five members, including myself, following in the wake of Emilia Currás. In 1994, the by-laws were passed and the Constituent Assembly took place, in which Emilia Currás was elected chairwoman and I the secretary, consolidating my professional life by her side. In 1998, she was elected Honourable Chairwoman of ISKO-Spain (since 2012 ISKO Spain-Portugal). Tribute was paid to her contribution to ISKO-Spain in a commemorative book published in 2003 and titled *A Life: Profession and Passion*.

She was also a member of other international organisations and was on the Board of the FID for eight years as well as belonging to the FID Spanish Committee. She was a member of IRFIS, a founding member of Hispano Term and ASEABI and also held several management positions in chemical and documentary associations. She was a member of the International Committee for the Evaluation of Professional Certification of the American Library Association (ALA) and belonged to the Advisory and Editorial Boards of several journals.

Out of the countless awards she received, the most noteworthy are: the Gold Medal of the Prof Kaula Foundation, India (1990); she was a Fellow of the Institute for Information Scientists, London (1992); The American Biographical Institute of Raleigh, North Carolina (USA), named her Woman of the Year 2004, and even included her in its yearbook *Great Women of the 21st Century* (2004); the medal for Technological Merit of FEDINE (1997); the Gold Insignia of the German Association of Information Scientists (DGI) of Frankfurt (2002); an Honorary Member of the Hispanic Association of Internet Documentalists (AHDI)(2004); the Gold and Diamond Insignia of the Chemists' Association of Madrid (2011); a Numerary Member of the International Association of Researchers of Toledo and an Honorary Member of the SEDIC since 2013; a Member of the Club of Rome; a Knight's Cross awarded by the government of Colombia; an Honorary Associate of the Associations of Doctors and Graduates; an Academic Member of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and Historical Sciences of Toledo; a Member of the Academy of Letters of Brasilia and a Dame of the Order of Academic Palms of Valencia. She was decorated and honoured by the universities of Düsseldorf, Zaragoza, Brasilia, San Marcos of Lima, the Autónoma of Madrid, Opavá (Czech Rep.), the Complutense of Madrid and of La Manouba (Tunisia).

Her track record is extensive and she is a benchmark in the Spanish information and documentation field, introducing scientific documentation studies into Spain. She published more than 130 research articles in Spanish and foreign journals and wrote thirteen books and seven as collective publications.

She has been translated into English, Portuguese, Arabic and Chinese, and her work has received more than 200 citations. Her theories on information and other topics are studied and are the subject of doctoral theses. Her scientific contributions can be divided into three areas: informationism, documentation sciences and thesauri.

Her most notable contribution was the creation of Informationism theory and an integral vertical of science; a concept that appeared in 1981 and was accepted in 1988. Informationism proposes a new epistemology based on the theory of neuronal networks of information, which reaches our brain in the form of minute impulses called "infor-

mation quanta" that impact our neurons, activating them and transforming these "quanta" into useful information. This theory regards information as the cornerstone of our lives and the driving force behind the entire neuronal and physical evolution of the human being; or, in other words, the larger the amount of useful information our brain handles, the larger our neural tissue, creating the start of the route of the development of civilisation.

Informationism is based on the paradigm of the universality of information, which in itself is an independent scientific discipline, but which is related in a systemic and vertical way to other sciences. It is necessary, then, for information to be understood as a cosmovision and an energy that flows from the highest ontological abstraction to the most immediate and applicable piece of data.

In the field of documentation sciences she was a pioneer in Spain and in numerous Spanish-speaking countries. She introduced the concept of "documentation sciences" as a discipline that housed different disciplines relating to the information processes contained in a document so that it can reach users quickly, clearly and efficiently. These disciplines or sciences are archiving, bibliography, library science, documentation and museology, which she addresses in her three books: *Treatise on Information Science* (1996); *Information in its new aspects: Documentation Sciences* (1988); *The Sciences of Documentation: Library Science, Archiving, Documentation and Information* (1982) and in many others.

She worked on the design and building of thesauri, contributing to the creation of three manuals in which the thesaurus was addressed from different perspectives: *Ontologies, Taxonomies and Thesauri* (2005); *Thesauri. Building and Usage Manual* (1998); *Thesauri. Terminological Languages* (1991).

Her conception of the thesaurus is based on knowledge ordering systems in order to enhance them through the use of computer technologies, insofar as they force a change in organisation and information search processes. Document classification systems and subject classification systems articulate the concepts of taxonomy and ontology, the latter understood as the ultimate logical structure of concepts, and their application in the development of documental thesauri. It applies previously unused concepts and methods, such as ontologies and taxonomy, to thesauri. Her initial principles were based on classifying topics according to a hierarchical or relational structure of terms, which means coming up with constructions, hierarchical and relational, and adopting coherent structuring methods. Ontologies, in the field of library science and documentation, promote a systematic description, establishing relationships and their qualities, analysing like languages used in computing to transform natural language into a coded language, within the scope of a specific domain of knowledge, thus differentiating them from thesauri.

Her methodology validates the construction and use of thesauri, with the help of IT programmes. It is rounded off with a study of the application of classical systems to the ordering of knowledge, insofar as they are the most fitting for this purpose. Her proposal for knowledge organisation concludes by formulating her epistemological theory—informationism—taking information as her main paradigm. It does not advocate the perception of a horizontal vision of things, but the attainment of a higher level of abstraction, where everything is related to everything else, without hermetic compartments; where systemic science—the theory of systems—shapes the ordering of knowledge. It concludes that the classical systems, which seek to group and classify by evolutionary relationships, are the ones that offer the closest similarities to classificatory languages.

She had multiple professional concerns yet her personality was not limited to the field of the scientific but penetrated the poetic. Her poetry is a “literary expression of emotion. A basically amorous emotion, which she feels as a presence, even in its absence.” In her poetry, she captures “a vital and poetic process that leaves us the bitter sweet taste of sadness, immersed in beauty, of poems filled with musicality and sincerity, but not exempt from analysis and thought.” She leaves us her poetic work in the books *Del pasar y correr amo* (1999), *Fugitiva del tiempo* (2001) and (2010), *En el Rincón de mis pensamientos* (2011), *En una tarde tibia* (2013) and *A la sombra del árbol perdido* (2018).

Emilia Currás was a scientist and writer. Her prolific activity conveys the image of a tireless woman and leaves us with an extraordinary legacy and a considerable scientific output. She contributed to the internationalisation of science, to the creation of scientific organisations and the training of information professionals. The woman who, for years, was our chairwoman and our honorary president died in Madrid from COVID-19. For us, at ISKO Spain-Portugal, she was the main founder, the main inspiration and an innovative personality. Those of us who knew her, shared her work, longings and concerns, and trained with her theoretical and non-theoretical teachings, are left with a sadness that not even her poetry can manage to describe.

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