

# ELRA: Next 25 years

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Presidential address

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Two years ago, in 2020, ELRA celebrated 25 years of existence. Emboldened by this landmark, the Board of our association undertook an extensive strategic reflection about its future, with the help of invited experts. As at LREC2022 we are all gathering again for the first time since then, this is a most opportune occasion to invite our members and friends into this exercise, of taking stock of the achievements so far and of pondering on the most promising lines of action for the future.

## **Major achievements**

Two major achievements stand out as readily acknowledged by everyone.

Our association set up and operates one of the largest repositories of language and speech resources and its associated distribution platform. This reference repository includes resources of all types and modalities, distributed for free and for a fee. It covers speech and language. It is used by individuals and by organizations, both commercial and non-commercial. And no — this is worth to be underlined —, it is not a mere inventory that just collects metadata records of resources located somewhere else. It is a real repository where actual resources are properly licensed and deposited and from where they are obtained.

Our association also set up and organizes one of the most impactful world conferences on computational linguistics. Its conference, LREC, is open to all topics on the science and the technology of language. And most notoriously, it is an intrinsically inclusive event and a major venue to publish research results concerning any language of the world.

From these two achievements alone, it is fair to say that, in its first 25 years, ELRA has been a crucial driving force for the progress of the science and technology of language. But there are many more. Let us briefly add just a few more highlights.

### **Further achievements**

Our association jointly pioneered and manages the ISLRN, the International Standard Language Resource Number, a universal identification schema for Language Resources which provides them with unique names using a standardized nomenclature.

It set up and maintains the publication of the Language Resources and Evaluation Journal, the major scientific journal in this field.

ELRA provides unique expert consultancy services specialized on the intricacies of intellectual property rights, data protection regulations, and related issues.

Our association supports the organization of researchers into SIGs (Special Interest Groups) covering specialized topics, as for instance Under-resourced Languages or Spoken Language Translation.

And since recently, but nonetheless importantly, it is responsible for keeping the corpora emailing list, a most popular and vital channel to share information in our scientific area.

And this partial list of examples, with long term initiatives, could be continued with an enumeration of more short-lived activities, but by no means of a less opportune and pioneer nature. That would be the case of the REPROLANG workshops series, responsible to raise the issue of reproducibility in our field, and also the case of the LT4ALL conferences promoting language technology for all languages, including indigenous languages, under the patronage of UNESCO, among many other possible examples.

### **Operational innovations**

As outstanding as all these achievements are, there is the need of going beyond a mere list of deliverables in the strategic reflection exercise if one wants to get at the essence of our association and thus at the steppingstones for its future. We

came then to realize that the essence of its strength relies on its deeply innovative operation.

On the one hand, for the past 25 years, with its ever-growing platform to distribute scientific resources for language science and technology, our association has secured an economically self-sufficient service of public interest without relying chiefly on public subsidies, which are intermittent and unreliable.

On the other hand, with an increasingly impactful conference, our association has secured a top world venue for the exchange of research results without resorting to arbitrarily selective rates for punitive rejection, which are ultimately counter-productive for the research eco-system of our field.

As they are so disarmingly original, it is worth underlining them once again: public services without public subsidies, and impactful conferences without punitive rejections. Our innovative solutions became live demonstrations that what tend to be taken as *prima facie* impossibilities can be dissolved and exposed as being more unquestioned dogmas or prejudices than real contradictions.

### **Organizational values**

Having traced the strength of our association to its successful innovations, one could be content with the strategic reflection exercise only if one would ultimately get at its deep-rooted values. And that is already at the distance of a small step.

Permeated too readily by *l'air du temps*, the widespread assumption has become that the driving force of science is competition. And in fact, competition is a key ingredient as we scientists and labs are competing for funding, for tenures, and for research opportunities. But one forgets too easily that science is also, in its essence, a most noble human endeavor to respond to our relentless curiosity about the world and to share our common pool of knowledge. One forgets too easily that science is also about cooperation, and that, as fragile as it is, cooperation needs to be strongly cultivated and supported.

And there we believe we have found the fundamental and yet disarmingly simple imprint of our association: instead of joining together primarily to compete and to support exclusive selection, we seemed to have grown a preference to join together to cooperate, to share our findings and to help each other in our common pursuit for knowledge.

And once one realizes this, one easily acknowledges the reason why the inclusiveness and the promotion of language diversity are widely acknowledged as a second nature of our association: that is so because these are just natural corollaries from our intrinsic drive for cooperation.

### **Action lines**

Having taken stock of its first 25 years of existence and penetrated the soul of our association, it is possible to venture into preparing its next 25 years.

Seeking to leverage the association's potential, a number of action lines have emerged. While such strategic reflection can only be an open and ongoing exercise, some of them will require a long-term effort to materialize. Some others will definitely need the contribution of our members to get implemented. And all of them will need to be updated and complemented as we all will go along.

While everyone is urged to come to this afternoon's business meeting and contribute to the discussion on desirable measures, here we focus on two of them that are being adopted, and that are a priority as they are pre-conditions for further actions to eventually take place. One concerns the nature and governance of ELRA, the other how LREC is organized. Their common trait is that they seek to further open the association to the contribution of its individual members. Let us briefly consider each one at a time.

### **Becoming an open International scientific society**

Our association was born as an association of organizations, encompassing both commercial and non-commercial ones, and including both providers and users of scientific resources, its core mission being to secure a self-sufficient platform for the preservation and distribution of such resources.

This setup soon started to evolve in the face of the dynamics springing out from its highly successful operation. As the data-driven paradigm for the science and technology of language steadily gained center stage, an ever-growing community of individual researchers emerged around the association and its conference.

Timely responding to these dynamics, the association membership was enlarged to encompass not only organizations but also individuals, who got the right to

discounts in LREC fees and ELRA services. Later, in a second moment, the statutes of our association were adjusted for its governance to get the contribution of individual members: there have been since then a reserved seat in the Board filled in by a representative elected by individual members.

The measure that was taken recently and it is being hereby announced appears thus as natural advancement along this path. Under the proposal of the Board, the General Assembly approved a further revision of the statutes a couple of months ago.

In complement to its endeavor of distributing scientific resources, and its inner vocation of inclusiveness, which is preserved and further fostered, our association widens its purpose. It becomes a fully-fledged international scientific society whose mission is to foster the progress of the science and technology of language with a particular interest on scientific resources, data and evaluation, in view of the promotion of all human languages.

Reflecting this enlargement of scope, the governance of the association got expanded as well to encompass the contribution of all members, both organizations and individuals. Every individual member will be able now to vote to the election of the Board and can participate also in the General Assembly and in its deliberations.

As this represents a substantial organizational adjustment, we are confident that this setup paves the way for the continued progress of our association in the next 25 years.

### **Further grounding the conference**

Let us turn now to the second set of measures adopted, which concern LREC.

Our flagship conference was born primarily as a networking event. Soon its nature evolved as its organizers were taken by ever great surprise, and satisfaction, in the face of the ever-increasing number of participants at each edition, the rise of the quality of the contributed papers, and last but not least, the ever-increasing impact of the conference, measured by independent and objective indicators.

Our conference is among the most impactful venues to publish research results in language technology. The measure that was taken recently and it is being hereby underlined appears as a natural advancement along these dynamics.

Fostering its vocation for openness, the organization of the conference will progressively seek for an increasing contribution from members of our research community that goes well beyond the mere submission of papers. A step in this direction is already visible in the present edition, whose organization for the first time is counting on the distributed contribution of Area Chairs. Further steps along the same direction are envisaged for the coming editions, as these innovations are due to become accommodated without disrupting the distinctive character of our conference.

### **Next 25 years**

As chance would have it, I am fortunate to be serving as President of ELRA when our association accomplished its 25 years of existence, and to have the honor and the privilege of being here as the spokesperson addressing you with this brief overview. But by no means it was by a chance of fate that our association is celebrating its amazing successes and is inviting all members and friends — present and future — for its upcoming achievements.

Our association is a major international driving force for the science and technology of language. Its outstanding track record is the visible result of the convergent contributions, of countless colleagues: all those who have participated in our conferences and workshops; who have published their research results with us; who have helped to organize our events; who have distributed their scientific resources with us; who have served in the Board and helped in the Office; and all those members and friends who contributed with voluntary work, support and feedback in one way or another.

This is thus a most opportune occasion to look back and, on behalf of the scientific community that gathers around our association, rightly offer you all the warmest thank you for your invaluable contributions.

And it is also the opportune time to look forward and to invite our friends to become our associates and our associates to reinforce their participation in the activities of our association in the exciting times ahead. At every new breakthrough in language science and technology, the data-driven paradigm only gets further reinforced. Scientific resources, of all types — known and yet to be designed —, and for all languages — hyper-resourced and yet to be resourced —, will get ever more important. All together, with the support of our association, we will keep achieving new advancements and will make new opportunities to unfold, for each and everyone of us, in the next 25 years.