

## **HOW TO TRANSLATE THE TERM “FORENSIC” IN FRENCH ?**

The translation into French of the English term “forensic” poses certain problems. In English the French terms “médico-légal” (medicolegal) and “judiciaire” (judicial) are compounded under the more general term “forensic”. In French, their use tends to vary with the country in which forensic anthropologists or pathologists work. It should also be noted that archaeologists and anthropologists have become involved in criminal investigations only very recently. One consequence of their recent presence is the ambiguity in defining their role in criminal investigations, which is also reflected in their titles. Here we try to shed light on the vocabulary used in the forensic field, or rather in the “médico-légal” discipline, by using articles and professional websites but also through the valuable advice of French-speaking forensic experts.

The “Médico-légal” discipline refers to the medical examiner in charge of conducting expert analysis for judicial institutions (gathering pieces of evidence which may be brought before court). It includes three sub-areas of specialization: medicolegal pathology, medicolegal odontology and medicolegal anthropology. It is clear that the term “anthropologie médico-légale” (medicolegal anthropology) is the most widely used in France and Belgium. For example, Inrap<sup>1</sup> uses it on its website<sup>2</sup>. It is a preferred term as it can be classified in various sub-disciplines of anthropology. Moreover, it reflects both the methods used (i.e. in relation to anatomy) and the framework within which they are practiced (i.e. judicial). In France and Belgium, the anthropologist taking a role in judicial activities is a medical examiner (doctor) who has specialized in anthropology, hence a preference for the term medicolegal anthropologist. This is where we observe the main difference between the Francophone and the North American system; in the latter training and education in physical anthropology is obtained in a department of anthropology, rather than medicine. Furthermore, the use of specialists who are not medical doctors – who might study clues not directly linked to the corpse or be involved in genetic analysis – during criminal cases is rare in Europe but if necessary one can refer to the use of the term “judicial expert”<sup>3</sup>.

The term “judicial” is relative to the institutions of justice and do not contain any clinical or anatomical connotation. This term tends to be used more often in French-speaking regions of Canada. On the Translation Bureau website<sup>4</sup>, “forensic anthropology” is translated directly as “anthropologie judiciaire”<sup>5</sup>. Also, the informative text of the Canadian Society of Forensic Science uses the following terms: “chimie judiciaire”, “toxicologie judiciaire”, “odontologie judiciaire”, “pathologie judiciaire”, “biologie judiciaire” and finally also “anthropologie judiciaire”<sup>6</sup>. This very last term conveniently omits the medical concept because in Canada, as elsewhere in North America, the anthropologist is not necessarily a medical doctor.

The French common definition of “forensic” is vague as it refers to something related to or used in public debate or argument. While the latter meaning exists in English, the second English meaning<sup>7</sup> does not yet have an equivalent in the official French dictionary. The use of the term “forensic anthropology” seems more difficult or more complex for the [francophone] layman. The only French-speaking country where its use appears to be systematic and is assumed as an Anglicism is Switzerland. The University of Lausanne defines it as follows<sup>8</sup>: “The forensic science is defined as the set of scientific principles and technical methods applied to solve issues in criminal, civil, and regulatory development in order to help justice [...]. The word forensic [...] is a neologism. It comes from the Latin forum<sup>9</sup> [...]. It is part of the vocabulary of virtually all languages that are close to ours as German, Italian and English, but its use is recent in French.” The University of Lausanne also employs the neologism in the title of its courses: “Sciences forensiques”<sup>10</sup>, “Identification forensique”, “Génétique forensique”. In addition, the University Center of Legal Medicine (CURML, Lausanne and Geneva, Switzerland) has three departments named Unité de médecine forensique (UMF), Unité de toxicologie et de chimie forensique (UTCF) and Unité de génétique forensique (UGF)<sup>11</sup>. The term is perfectly integrated. One additional example is an article on forensic medical imaging dated to July 2008<sup>12</sup>. Outside of Switzerland, uses of the term “forensic” are uncommon. For example, the University of Alberta (Canada) has one course named “Anthropologie forensique”<sup>13</sup>. In France in 2010, Inrap supported a project entitled<sup>14</sup> : Archéologie et anthropologie forensiques : modifications de surface osseuse d’origine anthropique<sup>15</sup>. Overall, the term “forensic” is more akin to what relates to criminalistics in general (that is, techniques applied by police analysts for the use of evidence collected in criminal investigations) and should be used only in cases where the audience is aware of the meaning.

The key problem is not in the use of any these terms but rather the context or country in which they are used. In France and Belgium, people with a background in biological anthropology study skeletons of antiquity greater than thirty years but are very rarely hired in criminal investigations. Investigations of the latter kind will result in a call to medical doctors who have a specialization in forensic anthropology. This is not the pattern in North America. But in the end, the techniques used by both groups will be identical when only bones remain, making the terms “medicolegal anthropologist”, “judicial anthropologist” and “forensic anthropologist” synonymous. Our choice in terms while translating in the discipline must depend upon the training received by the person we are mentioning and/or the background of the country in which a case occurs.

- <sup>1</sup> Institut National de Recherches Archéologiques Préventives.  
(National Institute for Preventive Archaeological Research).
- <sup>2</sup> « Archéologie et anthropologie médico-légale » (“Medicolegal anthropology and archaeology”).  
Source : [www.inrap.fr/via\\_podcast/p-1774-L-archeologie-et-l-anthropologie-medico-legales-da.htm](http://www.inrap.fr/via_podcast/p-1774-L-archeologie-et-l-anthropologie-medico-legales-da.htm);  
accessed on 13 December 2010).
- <sup>3</sup> « Expert judiciaire ».
- <sup>4</sup> Translation Bureau (Termium Plus), Public Works and government services,  
[www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/site/termium.php?lang=fra&cont=001](http://www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/site/termium.php?lang=fra&cont=001).
- <sup>5</sup> Read “judicial anthropology”.
- <sup>6</sup> Read, “judicial chemistry”, “judicial toxicology”, “judicial dentistry”, “judicial pathology”,  
“judicial biology”.
- <sup>7</sup> “Used or applied in the investigation and establishment of facts or evidence in a court of law;  
“forensic photograph”, “forensic ballistics”.  
Source : <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=forensic>; accessed on 13 December 2010).
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.bk.admin.ch/dokumentation/publikationen/00292/03397/index.html?lang=fr>
- <sup>9</sup> Public place of debate and courts in Antiquity.
- <sup>10</sup> Read “Forensic science”, “Forensic identification”, “Forensic genetics”.
- <sup>11</sup> Read “Forensic Medicine Unit”, “Unit of Forensic Toxicology and Chemistry” and “Unit of Forensic  
Genetics”.
- <sup>12</sup> <http://revue.medhyg.ch/article.php3?sid=33345> (accessed on 13 December 2010).
- <sup>13</sup> Read “Forensic Anthropology”.
- <sup>14</sup> [http://www.inrap.fr/archeologie-preventive/La-Recherche/Programmes-et-collaborations/  
Projets-d-activite-scientifique-PAS-/p-9546-Les-publications-hors-cadre-des-APP-superieures-a-.htm](http://www.inrap.fr/archeologie-preventive/La-Recherche/Programmes-et-collaborations/Projets-d-activite-scientifique-PAS-/p-9546-Les-publications-hors-cadre-des-APP-superieures-a-.htm)  
(accessed on 13 December 2010).
- <sup>15</sup> Read “Forensic anthropology and forensic archaeology: changes in bone surface of  
anthropogenic origin”.