



TOGAF® – A Lingua Franca for Enterprise Architecture?

by Roger Evernden

One of the major selling points for TOGAF is that it provides a standardized, common foundation for the discipline of Enterprise Architecture. In other words, everything in TOGAF – the ideas and concepts, methods and process, techniques and guidelines, metamodel and reference models – defines the lingua franca for EA.

Speaking the Right Language

A lingua franca is the language, adopted as common, between speakers whose native languages are different. (Historically lingua franca was a mixture of Italian, French, Greek, Arabic, and Spanish that was used in the eastern Mediterranean.) So my question in this blog is: how useful is TOGAF as an Esperanto go-between language for enterprise architects from different backgrounds?

This subject came up recently when I was asked by a client about recruiting experienced architects. How varied are the backgrounds of experienced architects? Are they all speaking the same language? Or do they speak different languages?

Well, I don't know the answer, but I think the answer is open to interpretation. As a personal anecdote, this year is my 30th year as an enterprise architect, and throughout these three decades the phrase "enterprise architecture" continues to have different meanings. For me, it has always meant an architect the discipline of Enterprise Architecture, Information Architecture, or Systems Architecture, meaning as today!

You're an Enterprise What?

The phrase was coined by Richard Saul Wurman in 1976 as a response to the growing volumes of contemporary information. He argued that we needed a systemic way of managing the fourth resource of information, and saw an analogy with the use of architecture in buildings. It was much later that information architecture gained its more narrow focus, associated with the Internet.

Then EA became known as Information Systems Architecture – a phrase popularized by the publication of John Zachman's Systems Journal article on the subject, which later became known as the Zachman Framework. Gradually EA evolved to cover more than just its IT origins – expanding to include business and organization. And EA's scope has expanded now beyond the enterprise boundary to include its environmental and societal context.

It is surprising that EA professionals are yet to be defined. The TOGAF community is attempting to provide a common foundation for the discipline of Enterprise Architecture, but gradually came to include a stronger business orientation. This is evident in the four TOGAF domains – starting with Business, followed by Data and Application, and ending with Technology – and in the way that EA starts from business division and business

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Overcoming the Linguistic Barrier

Even within TOGAF, the nature of each of the domains means a difference in subject matter and techniques, which can create linguistic barriers. I had to address this issue recently with a client where the word "application" had several meanings; for business people an "application" was often the complete suite of software that supported their needs; in operations application and system were interchangeable terms; and even within development an application could mean standalone software or a module.

But this was the tip of the iceberg... on one project we found that the same architectural components were referred to variously as a transaction, process, procedure, activity, service or function. Executives, business analysts, product managers, business managers, policy makers, application architects, and process modellers had their own label or different meanings. A further complication is that there are frequently overlapping labels and meaning!

Fortunately TOGAF can help to solve this problem through its limitations. The language throughout the TOGAF documents and standards is consistent. One of the reasons for interim releases such as 9.1 is actually to correct any minor deviations in TOGAF. The four domains go a step further by providing consistent ways to segment the architecture; this segmentation is based on the different subject matter, concepts, and components (and there are many) in each domain.

The metamodel attempts to do this, but this is where providing a lingua franca becomes tricky – providing a single metamodel construct to cover every stakeholder perspective only works for very simple concepts.

In Conclusion...

So here's the rub, TOGAF is about as good as it gets as a common Esperanto for EA. Everything described in TOGAF uses a consistent language – and that helps enormously. But as architects we need to be aware that we can't force a common language on stakeholders.

There will always be differences in meaning. And this point is sometimes overlooked when practising EA: ultimately we need to talk to stakeholders in their own language, while simultaneously translating into TOGAF-ese. Beware of only speaking TOGAF!

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