

# Words, Terms and Translators

*ABSTRACT: My paper deals with the problems that translators encounter when they try to decide whether to look up a particular lexical unit in a general dictionary, a special-field dictionary or a terminological vocabulary.*

*In the first part, I shall focus on delimitation issues in lexicography and terminology<sup>1</sup> and on differences between descriptive and normative approaches to terminology as theoretical standpoints that affect the end products and users' choices.*

*In the second part I shall show what the translator's dilemma is in practice and suggest that, if it is accepted that the line between lexicography and terminology is fuzzy, the end products will also become translator-friendlier.*

## 1 Introduction

Where does lexicography end and terminology begin? Translators would like to know because they have to decide whether to look up a lexical unit in a general dictionary, a special field dictionary or a terminological vocabulary. Unfortunately, the answer is not always obvious but depends on a number of factors, particularly on the professional affiliations of the person who answers the question. It is one of those eternal issues to which there is no clear-cut answer that would unambiguously guide the translators in their choice of the correct work of reference. Instead, the policy or non-policy followed in a particular dictionary/glossary-making project automatically affects the end products and it is often so well hidden that it takes a long time before the translators have worked it out and know how "reliable" the product is in different translation contexts.

Among the important policy decisions to be made are, in lexicography, an agreement about where to draw the line for and how to present the specialized material and, in terminology, an agreement about the limits of the vocabulary and whether the vocabulary should be descriptive or normative. Translators, in their turn, have to learn how to decide whether a lexical item is used as a word, term or something in-between and what level of expertise lies behind the original choice of expression.

Landau (1984:21) points out that the borderline area between words and terms is by no means stable. The proportion of scientific and technical vocabulary in general dictionaries has grown consistently over the past fifty years. In WEBSTER'S THIRD NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY, the share of scientific/technical vocabulary is, according to Landau,

1. I use the terms 'lexicography' and 'terminology' as umbrella terms for the respective fields of study and their products.

over 40% and in college/desk dictionaries around 25-35%, and he predicts that the share of "genuine" general vocabulary will continue to diminish also in the future.

Béjoint (1988) shows that it is by no means clear how the line should be drawn between scientific or technical terms and general words, and what criteria should be used for including specialist vocabulary in, or excluding it from, general dictionaries. And it is certainly true that an observant dictionary reader can often spot the subjective preferences of the editorial team; how, e.g. mycology or printing technology definitely belong to a general dictionary but computers or electronics are too specialized to receive any deeper treatment.

Béjoint (1988: 366) also points out the difficulties that lexicographers face when defining technical words. Should they be defined from the expert or lay point of view? How should one combine scientific precision and general accessibility? Should one use terminological definitions or lexicographical context definitions, etc.? The methods and aims of lexicography and terminology are often so different that it is extremely difficult to combine them in a sensible way in a single dictionary.

Landau (1984: 181-183) takes up the problems with field labels. It can be claimed that they fragment knowledge and impose restrictions that are not necessarily always valid. Technical words do not behave in a stable way. They continuously cross borders, become part of the general vocabulary and lose something of their stringency in the process (cf. also Varantola 1991).

Riggs (1989) approaches the problems of descriptive vs. normative terminology in his article on the complementarity of terminology and lexicography. He discusses the aversion of the social sciences to terminological clean-ups and prescriptive decisions. He points out the negative, dogmatic implications of the use of labels like 'preferred' and 'deprecated term', and the tendency in social sciences to develop new meanings for existing terms. On the other hand, he advocates the use of the onomasiological, concept-based terminological approach also in lexicographical work.

Sager (1990: 58) comments on modern terminological theory and says that it now accepts synonyms and "rejects the narrowly prescriptive attitude of the past which associated one concept with only one term". When terms are studied in their communicative context, and the pragmatic information thus gained is recorded as such, free from a dogmatic theoretical straitjacket, it also becomes more useful for the user. Sager (1990: 47-48) also discusses the needs of translators when they consult term banks and points out that they may, in addition to finding equivalents in other languages, want to know more about the conceptual network and related terms as well as encyclopedic information before they feel confident of fully understanding the term in question. He also stresses the potential of modern techniques to provide multifunctional and multi-layered information (cf. also Varantola 1991).

All of these observations touch upon crucial issues in lexicography vs. terminology, issues which have an effect on the end product and the end user's options.

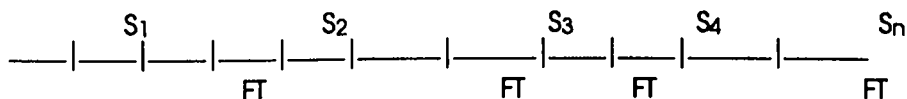
## 2 Terminology vs. lexicography

Where does lexicography end and terminology begin? We can approach the problem by means of three scales.

**Scale 1**

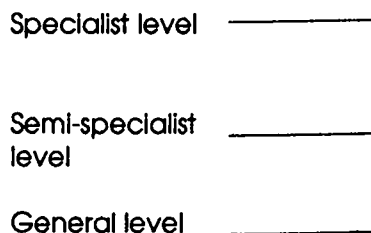


**Scale 2**



S1 to Sn = prototype terms in the subject fields  
 FT = fuzzy terms (near-terms, neologisms, subtechnical words etc.)

**Scale 3**  
**The depth of terminological conceptualization**



In other words, we could envisage

- one linear scale with lexicographical and terminological prototypes as extremes;
- another scale within the terminological scale consisting of the terms and near-terms in the different subject fields;
- a third scale that would be a vertical scale illustrating the depth of the terminological conceptualization, ie. whether the terms are defined for or used in specialist or lay contexts.

Scale 1 would have a fuzzy-edged area in the middle that would incorporate all the sub-technical words that could not be fitted into the clearer areas at either end.

Scale 2 would have gaps between the subject-field specific prototypical terms, uncharted areas with near-terms, neologisms and subtechnical words, ie. words that would be "undefinable" in the terminological sense of the word.

A simplified example for Scale 3 would be to say that we have to define whale either as a mammal according to specialist criteria or as a fish according to general pragmatic

criteria (cf. Varantola 1991). Paradoxically, perhaps, one can claim that the specialist definition would probably be much more succinct than the pragmatic general definition because it could rely on shared knowledge of the field and its conceptual structures.

### 3 Descriptive vs. normative terminology work

A great deal of confusion and, I think, misunderstandings result from considering these two approaches as mutually incompatible and as competing views of the world. It is often claimed that those who are dogmatic want to fix the concepts and the terms used for them, and prescribe their correct forms and extensions. In contrast, those who are liberal and pragmatic advocate a *laissez-faire* attitude and a survival-of-the-fittest philosophy. Yet, for normative terminology work to function and reach its aims, it has to be based on a consensus within the terminology project and immediate user groups. The various user groups have to have come to the conclusion that prescriptive work on term use is needed to prevent a break-down of communications. Typically, such a situation arises when terms and concepts of a particular subject field are imported unsystematically into a language community over a period of time, are haphazardly translated by a number of people and are used more or less indiscriminately without anybody really knowing what they mean by their terms. If a clean-up is desirable, and is done, it primarily affects and benefits the user groups who pay for the clean-up work, ie. for the terminology project, and are aware of its results. Secondly, normative work has a stabilizing effect on term use in the whole field and in the rest of the language community, depending on the importance of the particular terminology for the general language community.

All normative work must, however, be preceded by descriptive work that is based on an analysis of relevant corpus material and matching of the various synonyms and near-synonyms against each other. The work can stop there and even so be very valuable for subject specialists and translators, in particular. It shows how the field is developing, how different researchers conceptualise and terminologise their views and what they have in common with others.

Naturally this development can lead to extremes (cf. for example, Aitchison 1990: 148-149 who in a review criticizes excessive use of idiosyncratic new terminology that acts like a reader-repellent to a text) but it is also a vital means for scholarly creativity.

### 4 The translator's dilemma

Why is it difficult for translators to decide whether a lexical unit is a word or a term and whether to look it up in a general or a special dictionary/vocabulary?

Experience has shown that it may not be worth while to look up special vocabulary used in a special field context in

(1) general dictionaries because the expressions are probably too special to have been included or are part of the common or basic specialized vocabulary and are therefore defined in a very vague, non-committal fashion.

(2) special-field dictionaries because they tend to be too wide in scope and try to cover, eg. both science and technology in the same volume. This means that they often give a

number of different alternatives and no further explanations, i.e. can be used only by people who know the answer in advance (cf. Varantola 1992). Translators would need an active dictionary also into the mother tongue and not a passive one, which is usually the only one available.

(3) in terminological vocabularies because, although they may be impeccable from the theoretical point of view, systematic, and with explicit concept systems and clear definitions, they are too narrow in scope. They have discarded all terminology that is not central to the theme of the vocabulary. The problem is the same as with small term banks. From the translator's perspective, they are frustrating because the critical mass is not there.

Let me give a few examples.

You want to know what REEFER means in a fairly general maritime context. The general dictionary tells you that it is

- a person who reefs (nautical)
- a reefing jacket
- a cigarette containing cannabis

You have to consult a different dictionary to find the sense

- refrigerated cargo ship/vessel/carrier

You want to know what a VDU is and find in a general dictionary that it stands for 'visual display unit' and looks rather like a television set and shows computer information on its screen. But if you need to know how VDU differs from screen, terminal, display or monitor you need more information.

You want to know what HOBGING means in Finnish. You find an equivalent in a bilingual technical dictionary but have never heard of it in your own language. You have no idea of how and where you might venture to use it.

You look up SKIRT in a non-professionally compiled meat technology vocabulary and find that it means

- cut of beef from the flank

but also among other things

- a girl

The mind boggles.

To illustrate point three – insufficient coverage – I made a small study based on a phase in a descriptively-oriented terminology project – aiming at a multilingual vocabulary on social security terms, based on the Finnish system of social security concepts. The terminologists, together with the subject specialists, had, after the corpus-based term inventory phase, produced a classification of the area, a list of expressions that should be included and a list of those that should be discarded from the final vocabulary. In other words, it was a rare chance to test potential user reactions in an intermediate phase of a

project and with material that was not too specialized for the subjects to understand and categorize according to their own concept systems. I gave the list of expressions to be scrapped (without explanations) to a group of translators and asked them to indicate the expressions they would expect to find in the dictionary.

The results were as follows:

The figure in brackets after the group shows the number of expressions intended to be scrapped from each group. Group 1 (10 people) had been given information about principles of terminology work. Group 2 (a control group of 4 people) had had no information about principles of terminology work.

No. of expressions expected to appear in the vocabulary	Group	Variation	Mean
Basic concepts (2)	1	1-2	1
	2	1-1	1
Administration & Structure (153)	1	19-56	34.5
	2	82-109	83/92
Social insurance (48)	1	4-24	10
	2	38-42	41
Unemployment security (18)	1	2-11	4.5
	2	15-18	17.5
Social services (152)	1	1-60	14.5
	2	82-135	111/135
Health services (24)	1	1-6	6
	2	1-23	10/15
Names of institutions etc. (32)	1	0-9	6
	2	19-25	23
Legal terms (109)	1	0-37	14.5
	2	68-96	76/88
General vocabulary (197)	1	0-12	4.5
	2	22-53	34/51

I think that even this limited analysis shows quite clearly that there are differences in our conceptualisation of the world, particularly in our decisions about what is central and what is non-central in a special field. They show the differences in thinking between

subject specialists, terminologists who have helped the subject specialists to explicitly conceptualise their knowledge and non-specialist translators who apply a layman's approach and conceptualisation of the field in the analysis of their own dictionary user's expectations. In a way, the results show the users' potential levels of frustration and dissatisfaction with the forthcoming end product. What they do not show is what is a correct or incorrect conceptualisation of this area of knowledge because such things do not exist. It is interesting, however, that the group who had been taught about the delimitation principles in terminology projects was much more restrained in its expectations than the group that approached the material from a general lexicographical, all-embracing angle without a clear idea of what is terminology and what is general vocabulary. It is also obvious that the "general" character of the material contributed to the high degree of differences in opinion. Social security is so close to general knowledge that the number of fuzzy expressions is necessarily large and the use of these expressions as general words or terms highly context-dependent.

It seems, nevertheless, that the frustration factor can be reduced through training the translators to have realistic expectations of the scope of a terminological vocabulary. It does not, however, change the fact that the non-central vocabulary should also be included somewhere.

## 5 Conclusions

It is possible to store a great deal of material and different types of multi-layer information in electronic databases. Thus, it is no longer so important to follow very rigid lexicographical or terminological principles in deciding what to include in, or exclude from, a lexical database or term bank. Lexicographers can accept both stringent field-specific definitions together with more general, context-based definitions for special-field concepts, and terminologists can accept that there are "undefinable" special-field concepts, slightly outside the focus of, but nevertheless central to, communication in the field. The underlying philosophy would be to accept that there are a number of ways of dividing up the continuum of words and terms. There are prototypes but also fuzzy areas and the fuzzy areas should not be excluded because of their fuzziness. It is often in these borderline areas that the developments are taking place, where concept-formation is in progress and where the need for cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication is strongest.

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**KEYWORDS:** Translator strategies, special field, general word, term, terminology, terminological vocabulary

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