Unit I
Introduction to Terminology

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Lesson 1: Terminology

1.1. Definition of Terminology

Terminology is a science whose aim is to study terms, which are lexical elements used in specialised fields (subjects or their branches) and generated in such fields or modified from elements already existing in other fields. Terminology allows the compilation, description and presentation of terms.

- **Compilation of terms:** preparation of lists with terms belonging to a certain subject, according to a previously established methodology.
- **Description of terms:** definition or definitions of each term (semantic focus) and description of the elements composing the term and its generation process (morphological focus).
- **Presentation of terms:** preparation of dictionaries.

Terminology has some aspects in common with Lexicography, although the differences between the nature of the lexical objects studied caused the development of Terminology’s own theories on the lexical elements of a language and Terminology’s own methodology based on such theories. This allows considering Terminology as a science separated from Lexicography.

“Terminology” is a polysemic word referring to three different aspects related to compilation, description and presentation of terms:

- **Terminology as a theory:** this is a collection of premises, arguments and conclusions on the relations between concepts of the words used to represent them and the nature of such words.
- **Terminology as a practice:** this is a collection of practices and methods, resulting from putting the theory into practice, that allows bringing out the compilation, description and presentation of terms according to internationally standardised techniques. All in all, it is the collection of activities leading to the preparation of dictionaries.
- **Terminology as a thesaurus:** it is the structured collection of all the words and expressions used in a specific science. It results from the application of terminological theory and practice. It could be said that a terminology, in this sense, is a specialised dictionary—the specialization is the belonging to a specific subject, a specialised field of knowledge. Thus, in this case, the word “terminology” needs to go with the name of the science whose terms have been compiled (for instance, chemical terminology, computing terminology, linguistic terminology, etc.)

Some authors make the difference between Terminology and Terminography (similar to the distinction between Lexicology and Lexicography). In this case, Terminography is the art of making “terminologies”, meaning “specialised dictionaries”. So, to these authors Terminology encloses the theoretical component and the result of applying the terminological theory and practice (the specialised dictionary).
1.2. Subjects related to Terminology

Terminology is a science itself, with its own theories on the specialised vocabulary of a language and the methodology to work with it; however, it takes some aspects from other sciences:

- Philosophy and Epistemology

From these two sciences, Terminology takes, among others, the theories on how knowledge is structured, the generation and representation of concepts, the enunciation of definitions. It takes specifically from Epistemology, the way knowledge is organised in each subject, since there is a tight relation between the organisation of scientific concepts and sorting the terms used to represent such concepts.

- Psychology

Terminology takes from this science theories related to the mind processes of each person about perception, understanding, communications, etc., etc.

- Linguistics

From this science, it takes theories on lexicon and the way it is structured and generated.

- Lexicography

From this science, Terminology takes the theories and methodologies for the sorting and description of lexical units in order to be presented in dictionaries.

To these sciences we could add Computing, as a necessary technology nowadays to prepare dictionaries and terminological databases. International standardising organisations also have a main influence in the methods used for the compilation and presentation of terminologies.

The specialised dictionaries and terminological databases are the visible results of Terminology. They make this science known in the most varied fields.

References

Lesson 2: Term and word

In Terminology, the “term” or “terminological unit” is the meaning unit made up of one single word (simple term) or several words (complex term) and represents a concept in an univocal way in a specific semantic field (Office of the French Language of Quebec). From this definition, we can understand that a term is a specialised word in relation to its meaning and the field in which it is used. It is considered in that way when used in a certain context in which it takes the function of a “term”.

Terms can be more or less complex lexical units that are generated following several processes:

- The extension of the meaning of a word in the standard language (for instance, “mouse” in computing terminology is a device that allows the user to interact with the computer).
- Generation of a phrase that functions as a whole with one specialised meaning (superconducting magnet).
- Symbolic expressions, as chemical element symbols (Na) or chemical and mathematical formulas (H_2SO_4).
- Abbreviations (PVC) and acronyms (NATO, from North Atlantic Treaty Organization).
- Names of post (Prime Minister), organizations or administrations (United Nations, Prime Minister).

The border line between word and term is drawn by the use of the lexical unit in a specialised field of knowledge with a specialised meaning or not. That is why a certain level of specialised knowledge is needed to recognise a term (we will only know that mouse is a term if we know the computing terminology). The characteristics of a text –communicative purpose, subject, specialisation grade– are also helpful to recognise the presence of terms.

In order to establish the limit between term and word, it is important to know the characteristics of terms in a specialised language. According to Gutiérrez Rodilla (1998: 88-94) the characteristics of terms are precision, emotional neutrality and stability over time. For instance, “aplasia” is a medical term meaning incomplete or faulty development of an organ; it is monosemic which implies precision; it is neutral emotionally; and finally, it is stable over time since it has been used without any variation in use, form and meaning for a long period of time in scientific documents.

There are variations in the use of terms depending on the specialisation grade of the discourse. The terminological density, which means, the amount of terms in a text is conditioned by the kind of discourse:

- Specialised discourse: aimed at experts (there are different specialisation levels).
- Didactic discourse: aimed at education.
- Informative discourse: aimed at people without a specialised knowledge of the subject.
The amount of terms used will be very different in these discourses. The level of competence of the text users on the subject presented increases in accordance with the amount of terminologies used (Condamines, 1993). In this way, the specialised communication requires the terminology to be adapted to each type of text. This type is determined on the quantity of information shared between producer and user of the text and the purpose of the text (Marinkovich, 2006). We will not find the same number of terms in the Penal Code as in a generalist newspaper’s news item on a trial.

References


http://termiumplus.gc.ca/didacticiel_tutorial/espanol/lecon1/page1_2_4_s.htm
Lesson 3: Characteristics of terms

The reality around us is made up of a wide variety of objects that are observed or simply seen. The human mind is able to perceive every objects and generate a conceptual image that allows recreating the object even if it is not within our senses’ reach. In human communication, it is necessary to represent an object-concept with a material and recognisable with the means available for humans. In a verbal language such representation is the word –oral or written– and the term in specialised communication.

Thus, the term, as with any other word, is a sign with a triple dimension:

- Linguistic: the signifier (the formal aspect of the term).
- Cognitive: the meaning of the concept represented by a term.
- Ontological: the referent, the object from reality to be named.

The three dimensions give three different, but related, aspects of terms:

- Linguistic dimension – symbolic aspect: this refers to a term as a symbol representing an object, a referent.
- Cognitive dimension – conceptual aspect: in relation to the concept that allows the human mind to keep the referent.
- Ontological dimension – referential aspect: the referent itself to be named and understood.

To the three dimensions already explained, it is possible to add a fourth one that is implicit at the beginning of this section, the communicative dimension (associated with a discursive aspect). According to this dimension, the terms are inserted in a discourse with the purpose of taking part in the message produced in a communicative event. From this communicative point of view, the sender of the message, the author of the text, uses each term with a sole meaning, regardless of whether it is the term’s meaning, one chosen among the different concepts and referents represented by a single polysemic term, or an
altered, modified or adulterated meaning that the author assigns to a term accidentally (perhaps due to a lack of competence in a specialised knowledge) or intentionally (a personal use of language and terminology).

The balance in the relations between the different dimensions and aspects defines the characteristics of each term, but not all the terms share the same level of relations, that is why the features of terms as a whole are more of a trend, desired by their producers and users, than a reality. According to Gutiérrez Rodilla (1998: 88-94) the features of terms are precision, emotional neutrality and stability.

**Precision**

If a term is precise, then its communicative dimension is unchanging, it means, its meaning does not depend on the context, the discourse in which it is inserted nor the sender of the message nor any other factor of a communicative event. This does happen in the standard communication.

Terms have to submit three conditions to be really precise, according to Gutiérrez Rodilla:

- Its meaning has to be previously delimited.
- This meaning has to be monosemic and there has not to be any synonym.
- The relation established among the terms of a system has to be the same as the one among the concepts.

These three conditions are referred to as the immutability of the cognitive dimension. This dimension can be altered in other fields of communication because of emotional reasons, perhaps to ease the content or the purpose of a message, but in a specialised text terminological imprecision is associated by the experts in the topic with conceptual imprecision.

Let us study each of the three conditions.

- Its meaning has to be previously delimited.

To delimit the meaning of a term, it is necessary to enunciate a definition to establish a relation between the term and the concept. Such definition allows comparing the term with others already existing and defined in order to recognise the differences.

In the standard register, words also have their definitions, but the meaning of the words can be altered in standard communication to introduce the feeling, expressivity, and creativity of the speakers. This should not happen with terms in specialised communication, since the main purpose of such communication is, generally, the transmisión of objective information that cannot be altered by any feeling, expressivity nor creativity. We said “generally” because there are situations where specialised communication for other purposes, in addition to the transmission of information, can be observed. Such is the case of publicity in specialised media (e.g. the advertisement of a machine published in a journal
on a certain productive sector aimed at experts; the purpose of the advertisement is to persuade the receiver of the message that the machine is good enough to be bought).

- This meaning has to be monosemic and must not be a synonym.

A term is monosemic when it has only one meaning, representing a single concept. If a monosemic term has, in addition, no synonym, there is a univocal relation between term and concept leading to precision. This univocity is more usual among terms in specialised communication than in the standard register in which polysemy and synonymy are numerous.

It may be possible that a term is monosemic in the field of a science, but has, at the same time, several meanings in other sciences and in the standard register; in this case, there is a univocal relation in such field.

- The relation established among the terms of a system has to be the same as the one among the concepts.

Terms represent concepts related among themselves in the field of a science according to the nature of the concepts (mathematical theorems, kinds of laws, parts of the human being, etc.) Each science establishes the way its concepts are classified, generating hierarchical relations or other types of relations among them. Terms, that are images of those concepts, are also related among themselves with the same relations as the concepts. Thus, we can find hyperonyms, hyponyms, cohyponyms.

In non-specialised communication we do not always find these logical relations among words. For instance, in the standard register there are differences between beef, cow, bull, and ox, but for a zoologist all of them all are individuals of the same species, *Bos bœvis*, regardless the gender and the age.

**Emotional neutrality**

The use of terms has to be free of affective, personal or subjective components, that are observed in the standard register. They affect to the conceptual content of the transmitted information, which modifies the message and makes communication more difficult. Only when the sender and receiver know the emotional components used, can communication be kept correct. In specialised fields the emotional interference is categorically rejected.

The emotional neutrality of terminologies fades when sciences cross their specialised fields and some terms are used in the common language. Thus, “parasite”, Biology’s term used to name an animal or vegetal living in, with or on another organism, and feeding from it, has in the standard register the meaning of a person living at other people’s expense from a socio-economical point of view. Similarly, in Psychology, “hysteria” is a mind disorder, while in the common language it is used in a figurative way to represent behaviours exhibiting emotional excess.
Stability

Stability refers to the validity of a term (with its concept and referent associated) over time. This desired stability is not always achieved, since as research goes on, the concepts are modified and, consequently, the meaning of terms changes or is even erased.

Over time, two research groups may generate two different terminologies; the use of one or both terminologies may imply the agreement or recognition of one of the research lines, which influences the neutrality of terms.

References