

## 6 Mixed signals: thoughts and second thoughts about terminology

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### ABSTRACT

Terminology is characterized by a variety of features which, if the former is considered in a linguistic context, may appear alien, if not contradictory, setting it apart from ordinary language and customary communicative behavior. Looked at singly, terms appear to meet notably three conditions: they are considered

- context-independent
- connotation-free and
- semantically stable, i.e. unaffected by developmental change.

While those characteristics do indeed seem to offer a useful instrument for unambiguous usage, they are also responsible for the disadvantage of making terminology opaque and dysfunctional to a large number of users as it is with increasing frequency appropriated by commercial and political interests. As a result, terminology as a linguistic concept is about to lose its intended effectiveness along with its conceptual rigor. In order to preserve its socially meaningful role, a pragmatically-oriented revision of its aims and methods is overdue.

## Ανάμεικτα σήματα: Σκέψεις και συλλογισμοί περί ορολογίας

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### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η ορολογία χαρακτηρίζεται από ποικιλία γνωρισμάτων τα οποία, εάν αυτή εξετασθεί σε γλωσσολογικό πλαίσιο, μπορεί να εμφανίζονται ως αλλότρια, αν όχι αντιφατικά, κάνοντάς την να ξεχωρίζει από την κανονική γλώσσα και την συνήθη επικοινωνιακή συμπεριφορά. Εξεταζόμενοι μεμονωμένα, οι όροι εμφανίζονται ότι πληρούν κυρίως τρεις συνθήκες. Θεωρούνται:

- ανεξάρτητοι από το συγκεκριμένο
- απαλλαγμένοι από συνδηλώσεις και
- σημασιολογικά σταθεροί, δηλαδή ανεπηρέαστοι από αναπτυξιακές μεταβολές.

Ενώ αυτά τα χαρακτηριστικά πράγματι φαίνεται ότι προσφέρουν ένα χρήσιμο εργαλείο για αναμφίσημη χρήση, είναι ταυτόχρονα και υπεύθυνα για το ότι η ορολογία καθίσταται αδιαφανής και δυσλειτουργική σε μεγάλο πλήθος χρηστών αφού, με αυξανόμενη συχνότητα, την ιδιοποιούνται εμπορικά και πολιτικά συμφέροντα. Ως αποτέλεσμα, η ορολογία ως γλωσσολογική έννοια κινδυνεύει να χάσει την σκοπούμενη αποτελεσματικότητά της μαζί με την εννοιακή αυστηρότητά της. Για τη διατήρηση του κοινωνικά σημαντικού ρόλου της, επιβάλλεται η αναθεώρηση των σκοπών και μεθόδων της με πραγματολογικό προσανατολισμό, αναθεώρηση η οποία έχει ήδη καθυστερήσει.

## 0. Introduction

So prolific and various has technical and intellectual work now become, as compared with previous centuries, that natural and controlled evolution of technical terms can no longer be relied on to ensure unambiguity and efficiency in the use of language.

Wüster 1955

**0.1** Like any event in the real world, the activity of terminologists is encumbered by a cluster of paradoxes and contradictions. The expectations on which Eugen Wüster had predicated his groundbreaking work since the early 1930s have in many ways come true; in retrospect they may indeed seem almost too modest. Not only has “technical intellectual work” exploded within the life-span of barely two generations into a firework of inventions and novel processes, but the conditions under which such activity is taking place have dramatically changed as well. The transition from a nationally-based organization of scientific and economic activity into a global one fully vindicates Wüster’s prescient conviction of the overriding need to control language as a vital instrument of such activity. At the same time, his prophecy has proved overly optimistic in regard to the latter part of the above quotation. His chief aim, “to ensure unambiguity and efficiency in the use of language” through standardization of existing and new technical terms, has not been entirely achieved; there are in fact developments that suggest an increasingly uneasy future for the concept of terminology as outlined by Wüster and its practical application.

### 1 Wüster’s technological bias and the consequences

**1.1** There are several reasons for this. For one, Wüster himself was by training an electrical engineer with no particular insight into the ways and means of language. He perceived language as a closed system that can be manipulated in accord with logical principles very much like a numerically-based science and its material manifestations, susceptible to arbitrary, though rational, control within and beyond national linguistic borders. Limited by the terminological scope of his vision, Wüster hardly acknowledged the existence of such - more problematic - areas of terminological interest as the humanities and the social sciences: areas growing in importance as the need for social and political organization of ever more complex structures is becoming apparent. The nascent academic discipline that grew out of Wüster’s efforts to

establish *Fachsprache* as the proper domain of terminology was accordingly dominated by the technological bias of the LSP (*language for specific purposes*) idea. Since those beginnings in the 1980s, the academic discipline of terminology has - ironically - muted into an abstract science practiced increasingly under the umbrella of philosophy: the business of making and testing of terms has, in other words, passed from the hands of the practical user almost entirely into the field of theory and speculative research. At the other end of the spectrum, international planning and administration, notably at the level of Infoterm in Vienna, has lost much of its initial enthusiasm and direction. Along the way of these developments, a lot of confusion and misunderstanding about terminology and its role has been disseminated around the world, together with some benefits to language teaching and a sizeable output of publications, notably specialized dictionaries.

- 1.2 Without doubt, the various approaches to the phenomenon of terminology were made in a problem-oriented spirit. But have they always been focussed on the real problems? Wüster's legacy was a lexeme-based approach concerned chiefly with a fit of semantics with morphology, to be achieved in a modern spirit of industrial and social management that represents *au fond* globalism *avant la lettre*. Following along the same path, lexicography has been preoccupied with the non-linguistic issue of Standardization, to the detriment of such areas vital to language as pragmatics or psychology which would afford a wider, more comprehensive perspective. The reductive isolation of the term from the system of language elements and their interplay on which a large part of research in the field has come to be based, has not yielded commensurate results. If the failure to appraise conditions and requirements for a comprehensive study of terminology is surely one reason for its limited progress, another is the persistent tendency to locate the discipline and its application within a rather narrow range of relatively uncomplicated "hard" subjects in science and technology, medicine, or - more recently - the vast field of law and administration which seems destined to remain impervious to all attempts at effective management, at least as far as the aspect of international standardization is concerned. But what about "soft" fields of interest as e.g. Nina Puuronen's "concepts of action" (Puuronen 1997)? And is not the area of subjective beliefs and judgements as essential to social cohesion and the functioning of the body politic as the objective processing of unambiguous statements of fact is to efficient economic performance?

**1.3** To argue that it is the abstract nature of “soft” concepts that scares potential research away, is to acknowledge but a small part of the truth, for abstraction, besides being a necessary precondition for any systematic assessment of reality, lies at the root of all work related to the physical world as well, in the form of ordering notions like weights, measurements and general descriptions as in fact postulated by Wüster. A fundamental impediment to terminological work in the “soft” portion of experience lies in the fact that, in contrast to departments of the material world, it is not informed by absolute and immutable truths to which the terminologist can refer. Lacking those, standards necessarily become flexible, adapting to changing historical circumstances: the very hotbed of ambiguity. The resulting question is, Does this mean we must abandon all hope of including “soft” knowledge fields in the purview of terminology? Alternatively, can our concept *term* be modified to fit both, “hard” and “soft” knowledge? Or should we give up the struggle altogether, conceding that Wüster’s concept of terms just does not work for a sizeable portion of human experience? The answer(s) will in no small measure depend on our understanding of what terms are and how they come about.

## **2 Meaning and function of terms**

**2.1** Terminology as part of the system of languages has come to be perceived as a phenomenon of the 20<sup>th</sup> century concomitant with modern civilization. That such a view is hardly justified becomes apparent in a quick glance at our parent civilization of Greek and Roman antiquity where, notably, a complex legal system and its administrative consequences gave rise to a body of dedicated language instruments that can only be described as technical terms -*termini technici* - satisfying all those demands which we tend to place on such lexical material today as well. The very word, *terminus*, reflects as much the concept of clarification and delimitation contained in its original sense of “stake” or “cornerstone” as it suggests a continuum from the physical to the immaterial realm in its application. Since the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century the word turns up in the English language with the marked sense of “expression” and eventually - in the 19<sup>th</sup> century - gives rise to its derivation *terminology*, “system of terms”, without arousing any noticeable attention from leading linguists until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Terminology as an object of language research was from the outset considered in the light of standardization, following Wüster’s elaborate schemes postulating specific functions for concepts, terms, and their correspondence, as well as detailed rules for their use under the aegis of contemporary international agencies.

**2.2** The recognition that terms as a specific component of the lexicon have existed in the languages of all organized societies for one or the other social function long before being discovered by Wüster as a salient element of modern civilization, should direct our attention to their fundamental nature and role. This has undoubtedly been one of marking and differentiation - needs that languages would have even in their early rudimentary state of an as yet undeveloped lexical spread. It is therefore reasonable to assume that terminology in its origins was merely the habit of semantic discrimination practiced on a unique "all-purpose" lexicon as the need to do so arose in certain conventional communicative situations. Morphologically such "language for specific purposes" would be in no way different from "ordinary" speech, with existing single words or collocations turning into "lexicalized" terms on the strength or at the discretion of particular situational requirements, and losing that distinctive quality as soon as the communicative situation reverted back to "normal".<sup>1</sup> Beside these there might exist a small group of words associated with notions of taboo, referring to the divine, sacred or supernatural, which were from the outset reserved exclusively for such restricted use,<sup>2</sup> their function has always been symbolic rather than indicative or descriptive and hence linguistically inert. As a general observation it might in other words be said that "term" denotes a context-dependent function, but not an intrinsic quality, of a lexeme.

### **3 Types and their intrinsic limitations**

**3.1** Ad-hoc quality determined by circumstantial factors and intentions, rather than existing as an independent lexical item, a term necessarily operates *pro tempore* as well: its *signifié* may change from one application to the next one or evolve in the course of time into something else, requiring the term to be accommodated to the new situation. This is of course a natural condition of all language use, and the expectation, that terminology can somehow be exempt from that general rule, would indeed be very unrealistic. Yet this is precisely the aim set by Wüster and pursued at the policy level ever since through ISO norms and international planning efforts. The chief tendency of these efforts appears to be the creation of highly referential and unambiguous

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<sup>1</sup> A large number of pre-modern terms originated in this way as a special case of polysemy when common lexemes like *vessel*, *plane*, *thread* adopted a special meaning in certain contexts or among certain speakers.

<sup>2</sup> This group represented by such items as *God*, *the Virgin*, *Paradise* etc. effectively includes all proper names used as terms: *Watt*, *Kelvin*, *Volt* and a host of (old and recent) trade names: *Mason*, *jar*, (to) *Hoover* etc.

dedicated terms that are considered unalterable under any circumstances. The facts of modern life shaped by swift shifts and developments at many levels should, however, caution us against such an assumption: whether created *ex nihilo* or through an act of arbitrary selection from a number of existing alternatives, terms must be expected to enjoy but a limited life-span of effective application. There are several reasons to this, of which progress in the technical field itself may be the least problematic one, easily overcome by coining a novel term that soon enough will replace the “unemployed” previous one. A more consequential effect of this process will often be the rapid passage of the new term into uncontrolled general usage where it sooner or later will lose its distinctive quality in becoming “fuzzy” through indiscriminate handling. Neologisms and obsolescence seem but two sides of the same coin, one calling forth the other in like manner.

**3.2** The type and nature of terms apparently matters only marginally in this process. The demand for differentiating descriptive criteria created by the elaboration of nomenclatures and thesauri is frequently met through the device of binary appellation, i.e. collocations consisting of a comprehensive basic designation coupled with a delimiting modifier of the type *gross weight*, *fiberglass* etc; other examples of this conventional practice are found in the Linnéan classification system of botanical and zoological names. What these terminologies and others modeled after them all have in common, is their nominal character, combined with the increased defining potential of collocation: two aspects that characterize terminologies regardless of language or field of application even though they may differ in the degree of complexity depending on the combinatory rules and patterns of the languages concerned and the degree of abstraction which the term must convey. The recent proliferation of terms that confer a definite identity to their *referenda* without offering descriptive markers has introduced a type that is likely to be much more short-lived and at the same time more ambiguous as a consequence of its semantic hermeticism: *Velcro*, *BlackBerry* or *iPod* can only be decoded at the price of comparatively ample world knowledge and are thus particularly prone to misinterpretation and hence, an early demise as effective descriptors. The wide and unreserved use of such terms of the market place which come and pass with the ever-accelerating seasons of economic activity, suggests that the idea of stable and controlled terms in the Wüsterian sense cannot work.

So, what is to be done? How can Wüster's initiative be made more fruitful?

## 4 Pragmatic proposals

- 4.1 Eugen Wüster's vision of a strictly controlled and minutely defined terminological standard has taken shape in various ISO norms as a key element of language planning. Characteristically, such planning tends to pursue its aim of being effective by adopting a policy of total inclusiveness and universality of method. To proceed this way, is to amass a large number of conditions that cannot be equally well met by all of the various elements affected and to generate, with much cost and effort, a welter of redundant or otherwise irrelevant details.<sup>3</sup> A pragmatic approach based on criteria of priority could avoid some of the least tractable features of standardization by concentrating on a few carefully selected problems whose solution can be expected to make a significant contribution to communication at the local as well as the global level. Instead of attempting to emulate the ways and aims of science - which has little need for such support - terminology, as an agent of public interest and as a *locus* of research, could profitably apply its resources to issues of more immediately social concern. One among the most pressing of those issues, the language of policy and public debate is a hitherto little-explored field where terminological control is urgently needed, albeit for reductive, rather than for generative, effect: contrary to their usual aim of differentiating and expanding a dedicated special lexicon for expert use, terminologists might direct their efforts at clarifying the language of political discourse in a way that enables all citizens to take part in it effectively and responsibly. Cliché terms need to be identified and analyzed, fashionable expressions exposed as the meaningless gestures they are; quite generally, language must be shown to matter.
- 4.2 There must, in other words, be a shift of focus. Leaving behind its preoccupation with prescriptive schemes, terminology should discover and accept its potential role as an instrument of education and enlightenment. This shift of focus and methodology would necessarily affect the perspectives of terminological research and, by implication, of the entire field of linguistics which would be well served by a small dose of new pragmatism. The salutary effect of global challenges on local politics may consist in an unorthodox, yet logical and necessary, turn away from grand schemes and towards

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<sup>3</sup> As an example, here is definition ISO/DIS1087-1 (1997): (excerpt)

Object: anything perceivable or conceivable

NB Object may be material (e.g. an engine, a sheet of paper, a diamond),  
immaterial (e.g. conversion ratio, a project plan) or imagined (e.g. a unicorn).

Concept: unit of knowledge created by a unique combination of characteristics.

practicable modest measures that have an immediate impact on the lives of people, and terminology can be part of that process.

## 5 Conclusion

- 5.1** The attempt to fix, Wüster-style, the total register of specific applications of a language in a prescriptive grid for total control, was a brave but illusory undertaking bound to fail in the long run; and the expectation, to be able to achieve that control at the level of the single lexeme, ignores basic facts of linguistic behavior. A realistic appraisal of all factors involved must conclude that terms are basically words operating as restricted representations of phenomena belonging to the real world; applied within specific limited contexts, their effect is of a transitory nature, arising and subsiding as they play their temporary role for the sole benefit of evanescent communicative situations and in the company of a multitude of mutually dependent factors. To the extent that certain such communicative situations are themselves part of specific controlled operations, terms designed for, and used within, such context may occasionally be represented by exclusively conceived, disambiguated lexemes. Yet even instances of such privileged effectiveness remain subjected to the conditions of general linguistic variety and change. This circumstance serves as a reminder that terminology is most effectively practiced, not as a phenomenon of pure science and technology, but in the purview of the social sciences.
- 5.2** Previous activities on behalf of terminology, both at the practical and the research level, have unfortunately neglected the latter aspect to the disadvantage of either approach. Planning and standardization of terms has largely bypassed the social and political sciences in its choice of target areas, thus missing the chance to gain a better understanding of the complexity of the task, while linguistic research has failed to address its object with a sufficiently open mind so as to ask important fundamental questions and to accept inconvenient answers.

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