CONSIDERATIONS ON THE GENERAL THEORY OF TERMINOLOGY

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In Italy the general public tends to identify 'terminology' with the art of collecting lists of words related to a given field and 'translating' them into another language. This misconception has prompted the present writer to attempt a broader view of the various facets of terminology. The intention of the present work is providing some considerations on a few of these facets in a concise form.

These considerations are centered on the observation that interpreters apply certain principles of the general theory of terminology, not knowing or not, at two distinct levels. Firstly, they appreciate the importance of a systematic study of the concepts of a given field as opposed to memorizing lists of words. They know that knowledge of the inner structure of their field of interest is a precondition for successful work, unlike the mere learning of supposed equivalents of technical terms. In a sense, the knowledge of the motives which determine the attitudes and goals of the parties involved in any kind of debate can be compared to a quest for concepts beyond words. Secondly, they are expected to single out the meaning of each speech sequence they hear and render it in another language without being excessively influenced or misled by the surface value of single words. They therefore apply certain facets of the theory of terminology both at a more general level, when studying a new field of interest, and moment after moment in their simultaneous or consecutive translation.

The birth of the theory of terminology in the first decades of this century was determined by the rapid development of technology, leading in turn to an uncontrolled and confused evolution of technical languages. It must be underlined that the founder of this branch of study, the Austrian scholar Eugen Wüster, had a professional interest in technology as well and has been referred to as 'Der Techniker' (1) as opposed to scholars who had not such direct knowledge of technical disciplines. The study of terminology and its practical applications were, therefore, intended to promote a more predictable and ordered development of technical languages.

The problem of adopting a limited number of languages as a communication vehicle on technical subjects at international level gave rise to those studies as well. It must be pointed out that the study of terminology can also be exploited in the opposite direction to create a technical language within a community which for various reasons lacks one.

The word 'terminology' is often used to indicate various facets of terminological studies indiscriminately. This general habit was criticized by Wüster himself (2) who favoured the adoption of specific terms. He proposed the term 'Theory of Terminology' to indicate the common theoretical features shared by the specific terminological studies and forming a general theory.

One of the major features of his line of thought is the attempt to identify the systems of concepts underlying a given field of science, for example, and linking them in a binonvocal fashion to corresponding terms by means of definitions. This method can be used to study various fields of
activity, and is not restricted to the analysis of
 certain branches of scientific disciplines. Moreover, the theory of terminology considers it possible to represent the systems of concepts underlying a given field of interest by means of appropriate terms in any language.

This approach can raise theoretical problems because it touches one of the most debated questions in the history of philosophy: the nature of concepts and their existence as separate entities forming a sort of 'world apart' from the things they refer to. If this existence is denied at philosophical level the above mentioned theory is shaken at its roots. Moreover, this view of concepts could be criticized as 'archaic' (it bears the mark of Plato's thought and its later use as a philosophical basis for a world dominated by religious thought). Other problems have been raised by the need to study some disciplines, such as logic or mathematics, whose concepts are difficult to define according to this approach.

The study of the systems of concepts underlying a given field is followed by the attempt to link them to corresponding terms by means of definitions. It has been pointed out that in theory a term may take the shape of a single word or a syntagm as well as that of a symbol or a numerical expression, even though these cases do not occur frequently.

Terms generally take the shapes of natural languages and have a threefold nature: logic, linguistic and syntactic. This manifold nature is stressed, along with other major facets of the theory of terminology, in a much quoted paper by Wüster: Die Allgemeine Terminologielehre - ein Grenzgebiet zwischen Sprachwissenschaft, Logik, Ontologie, Informatik und den Sachwissenschaften.

From a logical point of view terms behave like names, that is to say, like signs denoting objects of any kind or indicating concepts. The objects to which terms refer can be grouped into classes according to given criteria on the basis of their definitions. Terms are therefore names belonging to well-structured systems: This logical point of view is extremely important in the theory of terminology, and explains the tendency to single out the conceptual content of verbs, for example, to express it by means of names when possible.

From a linguistic point of view terms can take various shapes, like those of morphemes within words made up of several elements, or various kinds of syntagms. From a grammatical point of view most terms are nouns, some of them verbs, and just a few adverbs.

The theory of terminology provides a set of principles inspiring terminography, the practical side of the discipline, but theoretical models may only be followed partially. For example, terminographers may build a theoretical model of the system of concepts underlying a given field and compare it to the actual configuration at a later stage. Theoretically perfect definitions are expected to render the very essence of a concept, a goal very difficult to achieve in practice.

Wüster considered it highly advisable to present the results of terminographic studies in a systematic fashion (alphabetical indexes of terms were to be added for practical reasons). His deep interest in concepts and definitions, leading him to inquire well beyond mere 'words', can be compared by analogy to the mental framework of interpreters. Not only are they directly touched by terminological problems, they also scan a given speech to identify concepts and present them in a suitable fashion. They refer thereby to frameworks developed throughout years of profession, even though they are rarely presented in a written form.

Notes


References

