

# CONSIDERATIONS ON CERTAIN PRINCIPLES OF TERMINOLOGY THEORY

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## Introduction

An interpreter studying the principles of the general theory of terminology feels a sense of affinity for this subject. The present paper proposes a reasoned explanation for this feeling and raises the question as to whether there is actually any common ground between the general theory of terminology and interpretation. Detailed attention will be paid to certain facets of consecutive interpretation.

### 1. Considerations on form and meaning in terminology and interpretation.

Terminologists and interpreters both have a detached attitude towards the external forms of the texts they analyze.

The aim of a terminologist is the study of the systems of concepts underlying a given field without being misled by the terms which he is expected to evaluate at a subsequent stage.

When terminologists recommend the use of a given term at international level, they aim at achieving international agreement on the meaning of the term and, when possible, harmonising its form as well. Any harmonization of form in the absence of agreement on meaning runs counter to the purposes of terminologists as it creates false synonyms and is detrimental to mutual understanding.

The prerequisite for the harmonization of form is, therefore, prior international agreement on the concept underlying the term: no form without content, no term without substance.

Substance is of the utmost importance for interpreters. Source-language conditioning is a major disadvantage leading to a final result comparable to a distorted mirror image of the

original speech, as can be observed in the case of student interpreters in the early stages of training.

However, an important difference must be underlined. Terminologists concentrate their attention on terms and consider other parts of speech beyond their scope, while interpreters work on the message as a whole. Therefore, as will be subsequently observed, the concepts interpreters endeavour to identify comprehend those specifically described by the general theory of terminology as well as others, more dynamic and of a more general nature.

### 2. Concepts and their 'Merkmale'

When studying a given field, terminologists identify the systems of concepts underlying it and establish corresponding systems of terms. Eugen Wüster underlines the function of concepts as *Denkelemente*, essential auxiliaries to thought, in his introduction to the general theory of terminology. By *content* of a concept (*Begriffsinhalt*) he means the whole (*die Gesamtheit*) of its *Merkmale*. A number of given objects sharing identical *Merkmale* (a class of objects as conceived by logic) correspond to a concept.

The attention of interpreters concentrates on segments of speech at a time. The word *segment* has been preferred to the formal term referring to a complete grammatical structure - *sentence* - because an interpreter will rarely wait for the speaker to end a long period before starting to translate some parts of it.

In consecutive interpretation this portion may well be longer than a single sentence, because the interpreter gains an overview of the speech from his notes and may decide to merge two or more sentences for reasons of style and brevity.

As determined by the difference of approach, the concepts interpreters aim to identify may be listed as follows:

- terms equivalent to those studied by terminology.

*Example:* an interpreter is faced with a term of which he knows the equivalent in the target language thanks to previous studies and translates it effortlessly, thereby concentrating the process followed by terminology in a split second.

- terms similar to those studied by terminology, but in a context outside that of special languages.

*Example:* use of the word *nerve* outside a specific medical field. The interpreter is expected to translate with accuracy, but elsewhere he may take his decisions more freely than a neurology context would permit.

- different from those studied by terminology.

Interpreters are expected to extract from a sentence (or a portion of it) the essence of the flow of energy it contains. Within this framework the expression *finding concepts beyond words* has a different meaning if compared to the cases described under a) and b). All parts of speech concur to form the meaning of a sentence. Therefore, in this case *finding concepts* means *understanding what is really meant by the speaker*, a result achieved after considering his message as a whole. *Concept* is synonym of *meaning*, understood as already detached from the original text, concentrated and ready to be re-distributed throughout the structure of a new sentence in the target language.

Not only do interpreters and terminologists share a common interest in concepts, they are also expected to represent them. A term is a form of representation of a concept which has been agreed upon by an authority and belongs to a well-structured system. It refers to certain essential properties of the class of objects it refers to and is structured in such a way that a clear and logical relationship is evident between terms belonging to the same system.

A different case of representation is offered by the symbols adopted as an aid to note-taking in consecutive interpretation. This kind of note-taking is developed personally by professionals and by no means the result of "rules". However, most students, at an advanced stage of training, adopt systems based either on sets of symbols and

abbreviations enabling them to lay down the meaning of a sentence in a form ready for translation or series of short sentences made up of key words intended for the same purpose.

The first option will now be considered. Concepts and their *Merkmale* are represented by means of the following elements.

a) Shape, outer form of a symbol

Though a symbol of this kind may or may not refer to a term in the proper sense, its shape (outer form) is intended to convey the highest possible number of essential features innate to the concepts it refers to.

A symbol of this kind is used in a process of thought very similar to that followed in terminology.

Very often symbols referring to objects belonging to the same class have a similar shape while differing in single details. Similarly, terms linked by the same kind of relation have a similar structure (they share most, but not all, of their *Merkmale* and therefore differ at some point).

A symbol of this kind tends to maintain its shape irrespective of its grammatical and syntactical role. Seldom does shape convey in itself information of a grammatical or syntactical nature. More often, spatial collocation will do so.

A bi-univocal link is established between the symbol and its meaning, as developing several symbols for the same concept or assigning several meanings to the same symbol may hamper a rapid and effective interpretation. Establishing and maintaining this bi-univocal relationship requires self-discipline in the early stages of training. A parallel may be drawn with the need to follow these principles in terminology.

An interpreter develops his/her own symbols without constraints, but has to respect this principle of bi-univocity to some extent to acquire a mastery of his tools.

b) Position of a symbol with reference to others.

Additional information is provided by the position of a symbol on paper (ex.: top right = subject, centre = verb, below left = obj.). This set of information of a grammatical and syntactical nature is essential to interpreters but irrelevant to terminologists. It contributes to form the meaning of a sentence, which can be considered a kind of concept of a broad and dynamic nature lying, how-

ever, outside the immediate scope of terminology.

Spatial collocation of a term in a cluster-like pattern, for example, provides a graphic representation of its belonging to a system. Not only do *Merkmale* form the inner texture of single concepts (to which terms correspond), they also link connected concepts in different ways. Spatial collocation provides information on these connections; this additional tool is used to the same purpose served by the several parts of a compound noun or a syntagm (alluding to essential features and evoking the existence of a general system to which the term belongs).

The representation of the meaning of a sentence (a concept of a broader and complex nature) in consecutive interpretation takes place along two distinct (though parallel) lines. Symbols and abbreviations cover the restricted area to which the concepts of terminology partially correspond. Secondly, their spatial distribution contributes to form a visual representation of the meaning of a sentence as it conveys both grammatical and syntactical information.

However, not all the grammatical and syntactical information contained in the original structure is put on paper. It is distilled in such a way as to make translation easier. The fact that in a given source language the word *environment* is either feminine or masculine is irrelevant (it is not worth noting). The fact that in a given sentence *the environment* is subject or object is. When interpreting from Dutch, the spatial collocation of symbols and abbreviations will not necessarily give a mirror image of a Dutch subordinate clause in which verbs are collocated at the end. Possibly, the notes will offer a re-arranged version containing essential information arranged in such a way that an interpreter working into Italian, for example, will find himself halfway through his work by the time he reads them: the original Dutch structure will have already been abandoned.

Therefore the position of a symbol on paper does not give a detailed view of the grammatical and syntactical features of the original sentence. Grammatical and syntactical features are purified in such a way to become mere indications.

A parallel could be drawn between (a) *concepts beyond words* in terminology and (b) *syntactical concepts* in consecutive interpretation.

Similarities between the work of interpreters and that of terminologists have been underlined in the former case. As for the latter, grammatical and syntactical information lies beyond the scope of terminologists; an inquiry may be conducted, however, as to whether the quest for syntactical concepts in consecutive interpretation has any analogy with the attempt to identify concepts in the two disciplines.

While concepts-beyond-terms form a more distinct constellation really detached from words, the syntactical concepts to which the position of symbols allude are not analyzed by interpreters at a comparable level of abstraction.

As the interpreter is expected to rearrange the original message very rapidly, he will refer to the concept *subject* in close connection with an element of the original message to which he will assign this role. Therefore the concepts of grammatical and syntactical nature represented by the position of symbols are always seen, in working practice, as closely linked to the elements fulfilling a given role.

These categories do form a solid mental framework in the minds of interpreters, a framework ideally detachable from everything else. Yet, while concepts underlying terms may be analyzed by listing their *Merkmale* and working on this inner structure, a different process takes place in the case of syntactical concepts. A process of simplification of the original message according to a basic scheme whose blank spaces must be rapidly filled is typical of interpretation work.

Rapidity and effectiveness are of great importance; therefore interpreters make use of fundamental logical relations shared by speakers of any nationality and treated as postulates of their action.

The following general consideration may be made: in consecutive interpretation symbols refer to concepts similar to those studied in terminology (their analysis is similar), while their spatial collocation expresses logical relationships of a fundamental nature which are treated as postulates of interpretation work and not susceptible, within this practical context, to further inquiry.

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