

SESSION 4: CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

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The title of this section is Language and Terminology, and I would like to begin the proceedings with a few remarks about the relationship between the words of the title. I shall refer as I go along to a valuable thread of comment that has emerged in the conference so far.

The central questions are:

Are terms detachable from the languages in which they occur?
Are there special areas of the vocabulary of a language which can fix and maintain a one-to-one correspondence between form and meaning?

Technical terms have a peculiarity of distribution in texts. Their overall frequency is low - very low in many cases, but in texts where they do occur, their frequency is quite high. This sort of distribution suggests a dependency on particular texts.

In relation to sentence structure, it is fair to say that they are fairly detachable. They have little influence on their immediate syntactic environment, and in general behave like most other low-frequency lexical items; they can be slotted in and out of standard structures with little or no contingent changes.

But the effect of their high density in specialised texts is substantial and important. It is not easy to observe because the patterns are large-scale, and the techniques of observation and analysis are in their infancy. Those who deal professionally with text, however, cannot fail to have grasped intuitively that terms do not behave according to expectations. Several speakers have expressed the doubts of translators about the value of term banks; as one of them (Dr Hildegund Bühler) observed, translators deal in parole, i.e. text. A term bank must be closer to langue.

Evidence is now available from Philips (1) that technical terms have a range of organising functions in specialised texts, and the same term may have a different function in different texts, or in different parts of the same text. Terms are by no means independent of text; in fact they help to create it.

More generally expressed, each word in each text is continuously defined by its usage. One speaker (Colonel Reading) has produced the slogan "Let usage decide". In fact usage will decide, whether we like it or not.

There is a hint here of serious incompatibility between a word seen as a term, and the same word seen as a unit of textual organisation. On the one hand, its semantic meaning needs to be fixed and known and stable; on the other hand its textual occurrence is subjecting it to constantly new experience, tending to destabilise the meaning and to set up new local relationships. I took note of a comment earlier which challenged the relevance of standardised vocabulary to the unstandardised world of texts, and that is the nub of the problem.

A previous speaker (Professor Felber) made a good contrast between conceptually organised term banks, and those which are linguistically organised. He felt that the conceptual ones were the only feasible ones. This opinion is particularly important since choosing the conceptual option provides the best insulation from actual texts. In a conceptual organisation, the words used are labels defined by the conceptual network, and they need not bear any relation to the same words used in text.

The critical question, then, is whether term-study should be a branch of conceptual semantics or of text linguistics.

If the former, then it will remain a set of private codes within small groups in information science. Each code will degenerate with the passage of time. The linguistic option was rejected on the grounds of feasibility, not desirability, and it is to feasibility that we must turn our attention.

This is where the computer comes in. Modern data processing is quite adequate for manipulating language text, and very large quantities of it. It is certainly now possible to study terms, leaving them where they are, and where they belong, in texts. The LEXIS (Kyle Bosworth) project already shows in a rather crude way that retrievability is feasible and practical.

The comparison of terms in different languages is made more difficult but more accurate through comparative text study. Here we are to some extent aided by the existence of a specialised or restricted languages within the full range of normal language. We have heard how in Air Traffic Control (John Dancer) it is possible to restrict the structure of the working language because of the special circumstances; a similar venture for the world's merchant shipping is under development in the SEASPEAK project (2). Texts which are rich in technical terms tend also to be restricted in the totality of their patterning, making comparisons easier.

The concept of a "reference languages" is worth exploring. One speaker (Professor Yannai) has remarked that the neutral status of modern Hebrew allows it to be used in interesting comparisons within a cluster of languages. Certainly if one language were to be designated as a reference language in a technical field, through which the others were compared with each other, the number of comparisons would be much smaller than if each had to be compared with every other. It is

difficult to see how progress can be made in text study with any number of languages co-varying.

My conclusion is that we must elevate our sights in the longer-term to envisage efficient and sophisticated text-based term study, using the resources of large data processing computers.

REFERENCES

- (1) PHILIPS, Martin. Lexical macrostructure in science text. PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 1981. Unpublished.
- (2) STEVENS, P. and JOHNSON, E. SEASPEAK: a project in applied linguistics, language engineering and eventually ESP for sailors. ESP Journal, 2(2), Forthcoming.