

TERMINOGRAPHY: IN DEFENCE OF DESCRIPTIVE RESEARCH



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It is my belief that contributions to Festschrifts enjoy greater liberty than contributions to journals. I will therefore take the liberty, in this text, to mix the genres of the essay and the scholarly article. Essays are often born out of frustration, scholarly articles out of inspiration. I have both motives to start writing this text, which justifies my hybrid choice.

Let me start with the *frustration*. As the head of our department's Terminology Centre (www.cvt.ugent.be), I have spent many hours supervising terminological theses. Time and again in recent years, I have had to defend my patch. Terminological theses typically examine a number of concepts within a specific domain and chart the terms used to refer to these concepts in two or more languages. Sceptics hint that this type of research is 'purely descriptive'. With this allegation they seem to suggest that terminography, the practice of writing up termbases, is a craft like that of the cobbler or plumber rather than a scientific activity.

In what follows, I will argue that terminography, as an example of descriptive research, applies all the principles and methods of true scientific research and that it is, in fact, an excellent example of *useful* research.

The *hypothesis hypothesis*

There is a belief these days in the humanities that proper research necessarily consists of testing a *hypothesis* or asking a *research question*. Researchers in the humanities, always eager to prove that their research can stand shoulder to shoulder with that of the hard sciences, have noticed that laboratory scientists like to start from a

hypothesis, conduct an experiment and then draw conclusions. Linguists and translation scientists have zealously mimicked this method, sometimes to the extreme. The hypothesis might be, for example, that translators, in their attempt to make the message extra clear, will tend to use 'explicitation'. Whether this is true is then checked in a bilingual corpus; cases of explicitation are carefully counted and examined and graphs are drawn up (quantification and diagrams being another much-revered indication of scientific quality).

I have nothing against such research and in fact I am curious myself to know whether explicitation is indeed common, and how common, in different types of translations. What worries me, is that this type of research is presented as respectable because it applies this method. I am waiting for the researcher who will come up with the hypothesis that left-handed writers use more conjunctions than right-handed writers. Looking at the titles of some research papers (and of course it is not my ambition to quote examples here), I have the impression that some would-be scholars are already heading in this direction and I am horrified by the thought that they may well be taken seriously.

The sceptics' claim, then, is that terminography is 'purely descriptive' and falls short of what is expected from serious scientific research. This allegation is false in two ways.

Firstly, it is not correct that all science worth the name is of the *hypothesis* kind. When Linnaeus set out to write his highly acclaimed works on minerals, plants and animals, he did not really engage in the testing of a hypothesis. His approach was descriptive and it is valued to this day. When Vesalius contributed to our knowledge of anatomy, his main innovation was to use direct observation rather than reliance on Galenus; his strength lay in description, not in hypothesizing. Add Mercator's construction of globes: the man was admittedly experimenting with techniques – but not with hypotheses; his work was essentially descriptive. And when the government of the United States decided to sink money in the

Human Genome Project, it was not funding an experimental set of studies, but a descriptive venture. These high-profile examples may help to prove that it is wrong to narrow down scientific research to the *hypothesis* type. Descriptive research is science and it can be equally valuable as experimental research.

But there is a second reason why the allegation against terminography is unfair. It may be true that a master thesis which examines 30 concepts does not start from a single research question. However, such a thesis can be said to have multiple research questions. For each of the concepts, the student will ask himself what the appropriate terms are in two or more languages. These are 'research questions' indeed. Several of these questions will also involve hypothesizing: the terminographer may hypothesize that *hyperventilation* is to be translated as *hyperventilatie* in Dutch – which seems reasonable and will be confirmed by reliable sources. But when the student similarly hypothesizes that the French equivalent is *hyperventilation*, he will find that this term is hardly used in French and that *spasmophilie* is preferred.

The true face of science

Terminography, then, is descriptive, which is fine, and it also involves hypothesizing and looking for confirmation, which is again fine. But it has also other characteristics that make it a scientific activity. It relies on empirical evidence, for instance. Is *hyperventilation* really used in French sources and are these sources reliable? Is *ambulatory care* really synonymous with *outpatient care* or are there minor differences in meaning or usage when one compares the sources in which these terms are used? Our students are asked to check primary sources (written by and for domain specialists) as well as secondary sources (written for the layman; or works of reference) and to check whether the sources are original or translated, have a normative or legal quality or not, and so on. The critical appraisal of sources, including of *what others have said or written*, is again a typical characteristic of scientific research.

Also, terminography applies agreed principles, which is yet another characteristic of proper research. The principles that the terminographer adheres to are especially those formulated in the discipline of *terminology*, a sister discipline of *lexicology*. Like in other sciences, terminologists admittedly do not always agree among themselves. There is Wüster's General Theory of Terminology (Wüster, 1979 and 1991), with its emphasis on concept orientation and its distrust of synonyms; and there are more recent ideas that challenge some of Wüster's tenets, like Temmerman's sociocognitive approach (Temmerman, 2000) and Cabré's communicative approach (Cabré, 1999). We try hard to encourage students to make the link with these theories and to contribute to the debate. Yet, as I have tried to demonstrate, their contributions qualify as scientific research even when they do not engage in the theorizing aspects.

As to the belief that figures and quantification are needed to prop up scientific claims, one may rest assured that this practice is also well-established in terminography. In deciding which synonym or equivalent is the winner over its competitors, students typically compare occurrences in online sources and add nice tables or pie-charts with figures and comments.

Terminographical research is descriptive and empirical; it involves hypothesizing and looking for firm evidence; it is informed by theoretical principles and requires critical appraisal of sources; add to this that it invokes the gifts of analysis as well as synthesis. Terminography is indisputably a scientific activity.

Useful research

Not only is terminography science. It is also an excellent example of *applied science* and therefore a research activity that should take pride of place in a department that deals with applied language studies. Applied research may roughly be defined as research that does not seek to formulate a theory but rather applies a theory. But it is also often thought of as research that caters to a practical need.

While it is true that not all research need be utilitarian, there is no need to be ashamed of research that serves a practical purpose. Terminography clearly serves many practical goals. When it comes to technical texts (in the broad sense), human translation as well as machine translation badly need support from glossaries or termbases. Interpreters, too, rely on term lists. Increasingly, technical writing and corporate communication are using pre-defined terminology lists and so do document retrieval systems. (For the many uses of terminology management, see for example Volume II of Wright and Budin, 2001).

Conclusion

Unless one makes the mistake of narrowing down the concept of 'science', terminography undeniably qualifies as a scientific activity and it has the added advantage of being a useful scientific activity.

References

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