Terminology Planning: Considerations from a Pluricontinental Perspective

ABSTRACT

Instead of discussing the requirements to be fulfilled by a language to be considered a Language of General Usage (LGU), the basic requirement is stressed for a language to be considered a Minority Language (ML): minority languages are all those languages which are not the official language of a state. One of the advantages of this approach is that the same language can be a LGU in one country and a ML in another. Besides, attitudes of speakers and their political representatives using the language of science and technology are important LGU-ML markers.

In this respect, three broad situations are of relevance from a terminological point of view, i.e.:

(1) For the major languages a certain terminology is given.
(2) For the many languages spoken by a very small population no terminological effort is being undertaken.
(3) Languages which are employed at schools, at different levels, are adapted to terminological needs.

These observations apply to LGUs as well as to MLs. As a matter of fact, the probability for a language of adapting its terminological production and resources to the needs of science and technology of its speakers is directly related to the efforts continuously made by that community aiming at the development of that particular language as a whole. Social factors are determinant, linguistic factors make the task easier or more difficult. It was argued that there is nothing which could be called a template for minority languages: the adequate path for proper terminological development, from the linguist’s point of view, is the one followed by communities decided to invest in their linguistic resources. The outcome of these efforts was demonstrated by referring to the work of Termcat which is the terminological body of the General Directorate of Language Policy of the Autonomous Government of Catalonia.

The question placed at the origin of this paper could very well turn out to become a different kind of statement: it is impossible to agree on the definition of minority languages. Under this designation, in fact, several very different objects are hidden. Let us try to exemplify them:

(1) All languages, and any language in the world context, are minority languages: no language is spoken or even understood by the majority of the population of the earth, i.e. two thousand five hundred million people, approximately.

(2) Languages spoken by a small number of human beings, less than 10 millions, for example, enjoy a much better situation than languages spoken by several scores of that number. This is the situation for Catalan vs. Swahili or vs. Persian, probably even vs. Bahasa Malaysia and Bahasa Indonesia.

(3) Languages spoken very consistently in countries with a higher degree of development lack a terminology policy and cannot offer the support expected with regard to 'much smaller' tongues. This is the very case of English, especially in the States, as opposed to French, not only to this language but, also to many others, in spite of their dependence on science and technology usually presented and disseminated in English.

I will stop after these three preliminary points in order to call for some precisions:

(a) I propose to establish a difference between languages of general usage (LGU) and minority languages (ML). Instead of discussing the requirements to be fulfilled by a language to be considered of general usage, I shall stress the basic requirement for a minority language, viz. minority languages are not the official language of the State being considered. One advantage of
the distinction between LGU and ML is that it solves the problem posed by the not uncommon cases in which a language is a LGU in one country and a ML in another. The very widespread situation affects Spanish in the States, Korean or Thai in the People’s Republic of China, and many other languages in different degrees and ranges. Thus, Korean will be a LGU in North and South Korea and a ML in China. Swedish will be a LGU in Sweden and a ML in Finland, and so on and so forth.

(b) Secondly, it has to be pointed out that the main difference depends on the attitude of the speakers and their political representatives faced with the use of the language in science and technology.

The second point requires further amplification. I’ll exemplify it now with the linguistic situation inside Spain, but I’ll not stick in this paper solely to European examples.

Spain, in fact, has an official language, called in the Constitution “the Spanish language official in the State”. In addition, there are three languages that are official in several autonomous regions inside Spain: Catalan, in Catalonia, Valencia and the Balearic Islands, Basque in the Basque Country and Navarre, and Galician in Galicia. (For the sake of clarity I will not discuss the status of Aragonese and Asturian here). Less than seven million Spaniards have as their mother tongue a language different from Castilian Spanish.

Those three languages have, in the last three years, developed institutions for the co-ordination of terminology in their respective areas. We may now parallel the linguistic situation and the terminological consequences. Perhaps I should say beforehand that Spanish is spoken and understood by every Spaniard, more or less accurately, depending on the degree of education of the speaker.

Catalan is a language that underwent a complete process of grammatical unification and reform at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is actively spoken by a little less than half the population of Catalonia, Valencia and the Balearic Islands. It is understood by approximately 75% of population. The cultural degree is high and the linguistic and literary tradition as old as that of French and Spanish. We’ll see later on how terminology is planned.

Basque is actively spoken by a tenth of the population of the Basque Country and Navarre. The linguistic and literary reinforcement of the language started in the 19th century as an offshoot of the Romantic movement. Pre-indoeuropean Basque is the oldest European language. It is a treasure, but it has never been a language of science and technology. The industrialization of the Basque Country was made in Spanish. The oldest Basque University, that of the Jesuits, is only one hundred years old; since the beginning, its language has been Spanish. The first problem of the language is its planning, its unification. Mutually not understandable varieties of Basque are being reduced to a unified tongue, called precisely that, viz. batua, which means “unified”. The Basque Government actively encourages the use of eusker batua, which is also employed for terminology. Since 1987 U.Z.E.I. (Unibertsitate Zerbitzuara Euskal Ikastetxea) is the agency in charge of research on language planning, and Euskalterm is its terminological institute. A huge number of terms and glossaries have been translated into Basque, but this attitude is not to be misunderstood. Terminology is but a part of the crucial goal: the unification of the language. The general framework is that of language planning.

The linguistic situation of Galician is also different. Till the 20’s, Galicia was isolated from the rest of Spain during the winter, save by sea. Some hundreds of years ago, Galician and Portuguese were the same language. The present situation is clearly split: the population, in general, speaks a compromise between Galician and Spanish. Technically, Galician is the language B and Spanish the language A. There are two solutions to this situation: the official one is to enforce Galician by unifying the language and creating entities for different activities, including terminology. The results are still very poor. The second solution is the gradual “adaptation” to Portuguese. This tendency is not the official one, as I said, it lacks support and faces the problem that European Portuguese, unlike Brazilian Portuguese, differs considerably from Galician.

Thus, Catalan and Galician are the two poles of this globe. Both are spoken by a relatively equal percentage of the population, but the first is consistently supported by the public, whilst the second faces the indifference of the population.

Enough, by now, with the situation in Spain. I will now consider the consequences of this analysis of the situation in a very different place, viz. the People’s Republic of China.

About eighty minority languages are spoken in China. Several of them are official languages in surrounding countries, as is the case for Korean, Thai and Vietnamese. Some of them are official languages in the Autonomous Provinces, for example Tibetan. Even some languages are official languages in adjacent Soviet Republics, e.g. Kazakh, Uzbek;

From a terminological point of view we observe three broad situations:

(a) Terminology in Chinese is being developed and a constant effort is being made, with fairly good results, taking advantage of the possibilities that Chinese offers for a re-interpretation and extraction of meaning from the intervening syllables. The linguist Yuen Ren Chao himself coined the playful Chinese name for the martini, ma3t3i3ni, ‘horse-kicks-you’. The miniskirt is mini33qun, ‘fascinate-you-skirt’. Ximíngnáe3r ‘seminar’ is ‘review-understand-accept-like-that’. I wish it could be applied to communications in workshops. But Chinese is not a minority language in China, and we will not dwell on it any longer.

(b) At the other end, many languages are spoken by a very small population. They are kept alive for ethnographic reasons but they lack every possibility of technological future and no terminological effort is being undertaken.
Languages employed at school, at different levels, are being adapted to terminological needs. Sometimes the initiative depends on the neighbours: Korea, SSR Kazakhstan, SSR Uzbekistan. Sometimes, however, it is solely up to the locals, as is the case for Uighur, the Turkic language of the majority of the population in Xinjiang. Educational, technical and scientific books are published in Uighur and they introduce the new terms as they are coined. As far as I can judge loan-words are the main source for these new terms. Any published research on the coinage of terms in Uighur is unknown to me. My informants made me aware of the fact that local sections of the Academy of Sciences and the Institute for Minorities are involved in the process, but this does not allow me to infer how they actually work.

As we approach the end of this paper we need more and more a description of a program aiming at the terminological development of a minority language. Catalan is, in my view, paradigmatic; thus, I shall refer to it in the following paragraphs.

Termcat was created 13 May 1985 on the initiative of the General Directorate of Language Policy of the Generalitat, the autonomous government of Catalonia. The goal of this center is to support and coordinate previous projects in the field of terminology.

In order to fulfill the objectives laid down in its constitution, Termcat is to accomplish the following activities:

- to plan and coordinate terminology research
- to supervise and standardize Catalan terms
- to create Catalan terms and data banks with equivalents in other languages
- to disseminate the official terminology
- to establish methodological guidelines for the preparation of dictionaries and vocabularies
- to train specialists in terminology
- to establish links with international organizations involved in terminology research.

Termcat accomplishes its activities by means of the support of two institutions: the Institut d’Estudis Catalans and the Direcció General de Política Lingüística.

The administration and the management of Termcat are the responsibility of three committees:

- Follow-up commission
- Supervisory Council
- Directorate of the Centre

Termcat provides the following services:

- methodological advice on the preparation of dictionaries
- bibliographical information of terminological interest
- information about ongoing research
- terminology consultancy about the Catalan language and its equivalents in other languages
- assistance about the proper use of Catalan - organization of educational programs in terminology

Potential users are individuals and public or private institutions interested in terminology.

Termcat organizes activities such as training course in terminology, individual courses for specific projects in the field we are talking about, lectures by specialists, etc.

Termcat also publishes works of theoretical and methodological interest as well as mono- and multilingual specialized dictionaries and vocabularies.

Conclusion
In this paper I have tried to sum up several approaches stemming from different sources and perspectives. I do not wish to judge how far my efforts coincide with those of other scholars. Indeed, what I have written here makes no claim to novelty in detail, and the reason why I give no sources is that it is a matter of indifference to me whether the thoughts that I have presented have been anticipated by someone else. Technical details, nonetheless, may be found in the bibliography attached to these pages.

As a matter of fact, the probability for a language of adapting its terminological production and resources to the needs of science or technology of its speakers is directly related to the efforts continuously made by that community aiming at the development of that particular language as a whole. In my opinion social factors are determinant while linguistic factors make the task easier or more difficult. I believe my presentation has shown that there is nothing which could be called a template for minority languages: the adequate path for proper terminological development, from a linguist’s point of view, such as mine, is the one followed by communities which have decided to invest in their linguistic resources. This approach is the sole warranty for keeping up with the continuous growth of terminological needs.

Bibliography


(Hildesheimer Beiträge zu den Erziehungs- und Sozialwissenschaften. Studien - Texte - Entwürfe, Bd. 17)


RONDEAU, Guy [ed.]. Canadian Symposium: General guiding principles for the harmonisation on terminological research. Tomes I & II. Université Laval: Giristerm, 1984, s.p.

SAGER, Juan D; DUNGWORTH, David; MACDONALD, Peter F. English Special Languages. Principles and practice in science and technology. Wiesbaden: Oscar Brandstetter Verlag K.G., 1980, 368 p., 130 x 210 mm.


WIEGAND, Herbert Ernst. Was eigentlich ist Fachlexikographie?. Heidelberg: s.e., 1987, s.p. (Typescript).
