

Bassey E. Antia

AGENDA FOR FUNDAMENTAL RESEARCH IN TERMINOLOGY: BRIDGING THE EAST-WEST DIVIDE

0. Bernard Shaw was concerned that America and England were two countries separated by the same language. I have attempted to show how (Antia 2001). Our concern here is perhaps greater: the separation of Eastern and Western Europe by walls and languages. I understand that, logically, claiming a wide gulf might be a non-sequitur, but an opportunity such as this for direct discourse is welcome. The paper by Professors Shelov and Lejchik on basic concepts of terminology in the erstwhile Soviet Union (particularly Russia) has fallen on Professor Sue Ellen Wright and me to read from the standpoint of Western Europe, with a view to pointing out similarities and differences, and to sketching a research agenda. My reflections will be on the first part of the Shelov-Lejchik paper. Wright will deal a lot more with systems, which form much of the material of the Shelov-Lejchik paper.

The distinction in the former USSR between notions and concepts is interesting, even though Shelov-Lejchik's account of the fortunes of these two terms in the West (in support of trends in Russian) misses an important cross-lingual (if not also disciplinary) perspective: the acceptation and register of these two terms in different Western European languages. In the version of the Shelov-Lejchik text on which this commentary is based, the absence of 'concept' in a sample of French writing on terminology (where 'notion' is used) is taken to index the fortune of this term in Western writing. This is of course incorrect as the preferred term in corresponding material in English would be 'concept' (not 'notion').

However both terms entered Russian terminology scholarship in (at least) English, it is interesting to see the functional differentiation they have undergone. Shelov-Lejchik distil a basic tendency from the welter of characterizations of notions and concepts in terminology studies: the view of the notion as static, more or less precisely predicated, and of the concept as dynamic, vague and fuzzy. Note that both entities are designated by terms.

In the West, the more familiar distinction is the one between meanings and concepts, usually made in the context of specifying the reference of words as opposed to terms. In the work of most Western scholars of terminology the consensus is that, as a representation of an area of knowledge, a concept is more consciously and deliberately constituted, and the enabling social norm is not that of an entire language community, but of a special interest group that is keen to avoid vagueness in reference. This latter attribute of vagueness is believed to be a characteristic of word meanings, because although the social norm and the act of designation serve to initially structure or delimit the sensations we form, the limitation in the number of available words produces a measure of indeterminacy; that is to say, a given word is repeatedly called to do duty in the communication of other formed sensations.

The Soviet distinction between notions and terms is particularly interesting today that the West seems to be entering into an ère de soupçon (apologies Nathalie Sarraute), a kind of period of suspicion with regard to the precise nature of the concept. Literally by the day,

researchers in the West are claiming that evidence in the data they deal with indicates that concepts, the reference of terms, are not as precisely delimited as is generally believed. However, it seems that as researchers we are all guilty here of not noticing that at least 15 odd years ago, de Beaugrande, Budin (with Galinski, Nedobity, Thaller) and others were already developing theoretical models of object-concept relations that allowed for degrees of indeterminacy. Talk of theory being ahead of practice (in this case, text analysis)! At any rate, going by Alexeeva's view (cited by Shelov-Lejchik) that it is only within the boundaries of text that determination is made as to which representation is static/clearly predicated and which is dynamic/vague, it would seem that Soviet research is ahead of its Western counterpart in this area. Eastern European colleagues appear to have gone past the stage of discovering or proclaiming the relative indeterminacy of terminological concepts in text to a point where distinctions can be made as to which concepts are more or less determinate, and how such a judgement may be made. For a sense of dates, the table in section 3 of the current discussion is enlightening.

In the light of the Soviet distinction, one may ask a number of inter-related questions which could form the basis of future and collaborative East-West research:

- a. Does the terminology community have a theoretical account of types of concept that is able to explain and predict degrees of precision?
- b. To what extent can previous theoretical models on object-concept relations contribute to such an account, and properly contextualise current claims of term-concept instability?
- c. Are there text types or parts of texts in which different concept types, or term-concept stability relations can be found?
- d. Should consideration be given in this exercise to the type of discipline one is dealing with (nomothetic and ideographic), the phase of development (constitution, consolidation), etc.?
- e. Should a typology of concepts reflect the distinction between system and use, and is there (still) a basis for the system-level? Is the dictionary dead?
- f. To what extent can claims of imprecision of concepts be taken care of by the construct of 'views' or, 'perspectivisation' as some have called it (Gerzymisch-Arbogast, Rogers)?
- g. To what other mechanisms, for instance, the very act of writing, do we owe established cases of concept indeterminacy?

As a contribution to this direction of research, I have suggested elsewhere that there is something quasi-anthropological that seems to explain why precisely defined system-level concepts lose a part of their determinacy in the writing process (cf. Antia 2002).

2. With respect to the second issue raised by Shelov-Lejchik, the term, I think the previous remarks suggest the probable crisis we are in when we define the term via the detour of the concept; in other words, as the designation of a concept, when there are currently doubts about the attributes of the concept. Should we be adopting the Eastern idea of degrees of termness? I think only to the extent that we are interested in the ontogenesis of terms (mor-

phologically). If termness is to be used for varying degrees of referential precision, let us call everything words.

But beside a definition of the term, Shelov-Lejchik raise a further issue of the status of the term: is it an ordinary word or a special word? Are terms a distinct category of lexical items, and deserving of a different kind of treatment than is given other lexical items? One suspects that between Lotte ('terms are special words') and Vinokur ('terms are ordinary words with special function') there are competing interests: the contention between the establishment of a separate field of enquiry and the reaction of an existing field. Shelov-Lejchik's view is extremely well articulated: "the term represents a compound multi-strata product in which the natural language substratum and [the] logical superstratum are available". Natural language provides, though not always, the communication infrastructure, while a knowledge system provides the content. There is, as we have seen and as we shall still see, awareness in Eastern European terminology studies that the textual environment can affect both the communication infrastructure and the content, so the point will not be belaboured here.

At any rate, in the West, a most recent variant of this debate can be framed as follows: are terms referentially a distinct category of lexical items? Cabré and Sager have different answers. Cabré (1998/9) proposes to "treat terms as linguistic entities akin to other lexical units with respect to their referential nature and their function in discourse." She argues that if linguistics is interested in the competence and performance of language users, the descriptions it provides would be incomplete if it did not account for terms.

How is linguistics made to account for terms and words in the same manner? Her answer is Wittgensteinian in the sense that it views language as making available to users words which, in my interpretation of her, can be seen in one of the following ways:

- a. as dummies that acquire meanings in different contexts, including specialised ones;
or
- b. as having default meanings which are, according to contexts, confirmed, overwritten, or otherwise modified.

Her arguments are that:

- i. there is a measure of semantic continuity between words used in an LSP which one is acquiring as part of an initiation into a specialism and words in the individual's repertoire prior to the LSP exposure;
- ii. "the nature of a term is not given, but arises as a function of its usage in a specific and situational context."

She might have cited the Russian Vinokur according to whom "the term is not a special word, but a word with a specific function."

A close reading of Sager (1998/9) shows that he disagrees with the above view, and I take the liberty to quote a number of passages:

- c. “For a justification of terms as a distinct category of lexical items we have to look in two areas: (1) the things terms refer to and (2) the nature of this reference.”
- d. “I shall be looking first into the possible explanation of the linguistic origins of terms and secondly, into the philosophical arguments for the separate existence of terms.”
- e. “By grouping the considerations of the reference function, form and nature of specialised lexical items under the heading of Terminology, we can talk of meanings without doing linguistics ...”

Even while providing an excellent description of a linguistic approach to the study of terms, inspired presumably by Quine’s ontogenesis of reference, Sager hinges the case for a distinct lexical status for terms on the argument that concepts (to which terms refer) are in a different referential class from the reference of words. Unlike Cabré in whose perspective lexical units acquire meanings in context, which may be generalised or specialised, Sager’s perspective considers the circumstances of the emergence of a reference as the factor determining whether the reference is distinct, and deserving of an equally distinct designation.

The argument goes roughly like this. Reference exists at two temporally successive levels corresponding to stages in the formation of representations, that is, in the organising/structuring of perceptions, reflection, intuition, etc. At a first natural stage, the representations formed are general and unwieldy, and although we assign labels in the form of words to better have a grip on these natural representations, the restricted number of available words means that we will inevitably overload words with more or less different representations.

When this natural situation is considered undesirable, because it leads to misunderstanding, a somewhat artificial situation arises where the acceptance of the general representation is negotiated. The result is a sharpening or refinement of the general representation, which thus satisfies the design specification of a concept according to the German logician, Sigwart: “A representation is a concept only when it is clear, i.e. if what is thought in it is completely conscious” (cf. Sager 1998/9).

This account allows for a consistent description of LSPs as more deliberately and consciously created and used artefacts that constrain some of the flexibility of LGP.

The interest of the debate for me hardly lies in the contention as to in which or in whose realm the study of terms should fall; rather the interest lies in the multiplicity of perspectives for term study which the contention has generated. A view of the debate as an end to itself is no longer necessary. Terminology as a field exists currently. Any contention is ... I prefer trivial to academic. What is required is an openness to who brings what to the table. The study of terms would be stifled if it credited linguistics with providing a scope that was all-explanatory and all-research-agenda-setting. Similarly, to neglect the language substratum, particularly as it affects the logical substratum, would produce extremely austere re-

search. Grinev, a leading Russian scholar of terminology, must have been in this frame of mind in writing, some ten years ago, that “the efficiency of decisions concerning the choice of forms and their endowment with a specific meaning, as well as their use, depends on a clear understanding of the most general laws governing the development and functioning of terminologies” – to which laws linguistics and something-other-than-linguistics contribute. Putting it light-heartedly, the extralinguistic factors say the following, among others, to the linguist:

- a. the model of development of a field (e.g. on the basis of an existing science, of the interaction of two neighbouring sciences or of several sciences) affects the terminology of the field, and you can't study this terminology meaningfully except you develop some expertise in the field or are willing to collaborate with an expert;
- b. your study of terms may lack some of its profundity and certain of its ramifications if you do not know how the age of the field affects terms in the field, particularly from the perspective of the relation to words in the general language, terms in other fields, etc.;
- c. your analysis of polysemy, synonymy and related phenomena may turn out to be one dimensional if you do not relate it to the state of the field being studied: is it in a laminar, stable state, or in a turbulent, paradigm-shifting stage?
- d. your identification of precision and vagueness in the reference of terms does not say much until you tell us the nature of material from which the field under study forms its concepts.

On the other hand, the linguistic factors say the following to the group of persons interested in domain-specific knowledge and its rational communication:

- a. you can't lock out synonyms; in any case, there is nothing to bother about as there are countless precedents of synonyms becoming referentially differentiated over time;
- b. in any case, analyses may reveal functional lexicogrammatical specialisations or differences in distribution of so-called synonyms (cf. Kuryško 1993);
- c. the variants of a given term are not a problem at all: they possibly represent several stages in the development or formation of a term;
- d. some variants are the result of a natural law at work: the law of economy of effort.

It would be regrettable if the study of terms had to do without one or the other perspective on account of some territorial or protectionist intrigues. This seems to me to be Grinev's (1993) point.

3. Concerns about the nature of the concept quite naturally reverberate in the area of definitions – another issue broached by Shelov-Lejchik. The authors recognise this when they suggest that perhaps what in Soviet studies is referred to as definition proper should apply to

notions, whereas expositions apply to concepts. Historically, definition is equated with the concept in the sense that it is a definition that places a concept in the public realm for use, debate, etc.

In connecting the reference of a term to a definition it would be helpful to introduce two types of considerations and to explore how they interact:

- a. the definer's perspective, or a Skopos theory view of the definition. From the way Skopos theory is understood in translation studies, this would mean looking at definitions, particularly in texts, as crafted-to-fit or context-driven (created/immanent) predications – irrespective of the assumed precision quotient of a concept. The extent to which a function or definer's led approach to defining is proven could invite a re-appraisal of categorizations of definitions based on the putative precision quotient of the definiendum. In the West a basis for exploring further this track may be found in the work of Gerzymisch-Arbogast (1996) on concept perspectivization in text and in Bowker's (1997) construct of the multidimensionality of concepts. In dealing with this first consideration, a second needs to be borne in mind, that is
- b. the knowledge grid or mesh on which the coordinates of the concept are plotted through the act of defining. A knowledge grid that is emergent, thus interdisciplinary in the sense of obvious links to a variety of competing ancestor or mother disciplines, is likely to be characterised by the multidimensionality of concepts, which in turn is likely to give the impression of both vague concepts and unstable definitions. Because it makes no room for inessential concept characteristics, a grid in which concepts are the results of a pre-specification of characteristics that have no ontological basis is unlikely to offer the variety of perspectives that may be encountered in a grid in which concepts are formed by abstraction on the basis of similar objects. The kind of language resources used in a knowledge sphere (more natural vs. more artificial) and/or the degree of control exercised over language used can determine the level of concept – definition stability.

There appears to be consensus in the West for these theses on the relationship between the nature of definitions and the knowledge system whose concepts are to be defined. I find confirmation in several sources: in Picht's work on different types of concept formation; in Lauren/Myking/Picht's work on types of discipline (nomothetic versus ideographic), and on the issue of responsibility for concepts and terms in fields of enquiry that are in a state of consolidation as opposed to fields that are emergent; in the work of the German philosopher Rickert recently publicised by Sager (2000). Writing on the subject of definitions two centuries ago, Rickert found it important to organise some of his reflection on the subject around groups of disciplines (law, natural sciences and mathematics).

There is also confirmation in the East. There is an excellent Soviet framework for researching into the triad of concept-term-definition which we have been discussing: in the work of Lejchik, a co-author of the paper on which this presentation is based. I will back up a bit here to contextualise Lejchik, and will end my presentation after pointing out what I believe is the common research agenda for the East and West arising from Lejchik's work.

Since it is the functioning of terms in texts that gives rise to concerns about definitions, even in the Shelov-Lejchik paper under review, it was interesting to see what Soviet research exists on terms in text, and what perspectives might be gained therefrom for definitions. A study by Grinev (1992) of directions in Soviet research (as exemplified by student dissertations) from the 1940s – 1980s was instructive. Table 1 is an extract from one of Grinev’s tables, and it relates to what is called functional studies.

	1940-50s	1960s	1970s	1980s	Total
Statistical analysis of terms	-	3	9	7	[19]
Functional analysis of terms	-	6	12	44	62
Functioning in special texts	-	5	11	27	43
Functioning in information systems	-	-	3	6	9
Functioning of terms in fiction	-	1	9	13	23
Determinologization	-	2	4	5	11

Table 1: Dissertations on term functions in the former USSR (source: Grinev 1994)

The time depth and the diversity of Soviet studies under just one header is striking, but that is not the issue for now. To get an insight into what studies on functioning of terms in special texts may be like, I searched for relevant publications, and was quite pleased to find Lejchik’s (1993) work on “peculiarities of term functions in texts”. Lejchik illustrates that an analysis of various text types shows that terms exist in three spheres: of fixation (as in incoherent texts like dictionaries); of theory (where terms are coined); and of functioning (as in texts like encyclopaedia that give the state-of-the-art of a field). Thus, there may be identified term-fixing texts, term-using texts and term-producing texts.

In Lejchik’s view, there are several implications for definition of this typology. Definitions in term-producing texts where new knowledge is being generated will be unstable: “it is incompetent to fix terms and terminologies in standards and dictionaries during the period when terms are being “born” in texts describing theories, concepts, new subjects (in term-producing texts)” (Lejchik 1993:99). The opposite would be the case in term-fixing texts. There is a questionable implication of definitional stability in term-using texts. At any rate, with appropriate modifications, this typology, like the Shelov posers, provides bases for East-West research collaboration in reviewing and advancing studies of the term.

4. It seems to me that in moving forward along these lines, we must constantly ask what the goal of fundamental terminology research is. Not to ask this question would be to reduce our reflections to mere trivia. It seems to me that the goal of what may be called “variational studies”, as an instance of fundamental research, is to understand and thereby improve/enhance specialist communication. It perhaps sounds provocative, but whatever varieties are pointed out by our studies may find their way back into that dreaded term, standardisation. People who need restricted codes just might find in our studies loci where tight controls are called for in the design of controlled languages. Isn’t it amusing that it was probably on account of Gerzymisch-Arbogast’s study of concept and term ‘contamination’ in a celebrated book on monetary economics that a new edition of the book “corrects” some of the contamination? Cf. Gerzymisch-Arbogast (1992).

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