

A Short Guide to Terminology Work

You are familiar with the terminology of one or several fields of expertise, in your mother tongue and/or in other languages.

Terminology

1. *Structured set of concepts and the terms used to represent them in a specific subject field.*

2. *The study of the relationships between concepts and terms.*

You need to convey this terminology to translators, fellow scientists from another country, or students unfamiliar with your field of expertise. You wish to harmonise the use of your specific terminology within your lab, your logging company or your research team. You would like to submit your terminology for inclusion in an international terminological database.

In terminology, the theoretical foundations are rarely if ever applicable in practice. We have tried, however, to present here the main steps and underlying principles of a terminology project.

1. Am I about to re-invent the wheel?

Even if your field of expertise is very new or narrow, some of the concepts you plan to define may already have been defined in a printed or electronic glossary. Check with your library, especially for “grey literature”, or look up one of the many terminological link collections on the World Wide Web¹.

However, beware of bad sources! For example, a dictionary written by a single author is less reliable than a dictionary written by a group of experts. Even then, in the case of multilingual glossaries, the authors should include native speakers of all the language represented.

If no (or no reliable) terminologies are available or only with definitions inadequate for your target audience, go ahead with your terminology project!

Concept

A concept is a unit of thought, not bound to a particular language, but potentially influenced by a social or cultural background.

2. A terminology for whom?

A terminology in the sense of “collection of concepts and terms” should always be *user-oriented*. Therefore you should first identify your target audience in order to provide them with the relevant type of information.

Term

The linguistic representation of a concept, characterised by special reference within a discipline.

3. Keeping tracks

All the decisions and steps made from now on should be documented, for your own usage and for that of terminologists or other users of your terminology.

Definition

The linguistic description of a concept, based on the listing of a number of characteristics.

4. Printed or electronic terminology?

The information relevant to each concept will be structured in a *terminological record*. Terminological records can be stored and managed either in printed format (as text files) or in electronic format in a *terminological database*.

If you intend to include less than 50 concepts there certainly is no need for a terminological database, unless you are familiar with a database managing system.

¹ See for example <http://www.iufro.org/science/special/silvavoc/bibliography/>

5. What is the minimal terminological information?

Whether you intend to have your terminology collection included in a major terminology database or not, the information you will collect should be presented in structured terminological records. Your work will be facilitated and your terminology collection can easily be included later on in a terminological database, if desirable.

Standard fields of terminological records include:

Compulsory terminological fields	
<i>Entry term</i>	<i>Any designation of a concept heading a terminological record. Should be in masculine, singular for nouns, infinitive for verbs. In the case of phrases and compound words, the words should be in the natural order. We advise to consider idiomatic phrases as entry terms.</i>
<i>Definition</i>	Definitions should be short, precise and stylistically homogeneous. They should not be circular, i.e. should not use the entry term to be defined. They should give the essential characteristics of a concept, which identify this concept with respect to all others in a particular subject field. In the case of multilingual terminologies, definitions are a prerequisite for testing equivalence between languages.
<i>Source of the definition</i>	Written or oral source of the definition
<i>Source of the term</i>	Written or oral source of the entry term
<i>Synonyms</i>	Synonyms are terms with identical meaning in any context, i.e. which can be substituted to the entry term in all contexts. Real synonyms are rare.
<i>Variants</i>	These include terms with almost identical meaning, but which cannot be substituted to the entry term in all contexts, and spelling variants, developed or short forms of the entry term.
<i>Abbreviated form</i>	Term resulting from the omission of any part of a term while designating the same concept. Types of abbreviated forms include: short form, abbreviation, initialism, acronym, clipped term.
<i>Comments</i>	e.g. regional usage, level of speech
<i>Term status</i>	e.g. normalised, official, obsolete, neologism, preferred, tolerated, deprecated
<i>Subject field</i>	Field of human knowledge to which a terminological record is assigned. Unless the domain of your terminology is extremely narrow and/or the number of entry terms is very small, you probably need to distinguish between several subject fields within your domain.
<i>Related terms</i>	e.g. "part of...", "type of..." (e.g. in taxonomy), "product of...". Depending on your domain, this field can include several types of related terms, or be divided into several fields.
<i>Equivalent in other language(s)</i>	In the case of bi- or multilingual terminologies (see 9.)
<i>Partial equivalent in other language(s)</i>	In the case of bi- or multilingual terminologies (see 9.)
Management fields	
<i>Identification number</i>	A unique number for each terminological record
<i>Language</i>	The language of the entry term
<i>Date of creation</i>	
<i>Date of modification</i>	
<i>Creator of the record</i>	(If you are not the only creator)
<i>Record status</i>	Code indicating the level of completeness and accuracy of an entry within a terminological database. Especially useful if you are not the only creator or if you collect terms in a foreign language or in a subfield you are not very familiar with.

In addition, you may find the following fields relevant or useful:

<i>Grammatical note</i>	e.g. plural and declined noun forms, irregular verb forms. This is usually not necessary if your terminology is intended for translators.
<i>Context</i>	Text or part of a text in which a term occurs, taken from the literature, not from dictionaries!
<i>Note</i>	Statement that provides further information on any part of the terminological record. Especially useful for students.
<i>Cross-reference</i>	Category or pointer field or record used in a database for navigation (chaining or jumping) to another related location, e.g. another record.
<i>Illustration</i>	Photograph, drawing, diagram, chart, mathematical formula, etc.

6. Where to start and where to stop?

There is no common agreement on the scope of any one subject field; decisions on which terms to include are left up to you, depending on the time available to you, the degree of “terminological exploration” in your domain and the purpose of your terminology. If it is used only by you, your close co-workers and/or a specialised translator, you certainly can restrict its scope to core concepts. If it is used by students, you may have to add concepts from neighbouring domains.

Terms from the general vocabulary may be included if they are sensitive and relevant to your domain, e.g. “damage” in the domain “forest health”, or if they require cautious translation, e.g. “prehistoric”.

In most cases, it is much more productive for subject specialists to restrict their terminological activities to a small set of very specialised concepts.

7. Original or borrowed definitions?

In addition to definitions inspired from your own experience and knowledge of the domain, you can find terms and definitions in scientific and technical literature, textbooks and reports in original language, preferably to any translation, or in dictionaries (see 1.). These documents constitute your *corpus*.

If you intend to create a comprehensive terminology of your domain and/or if your terminology is used by non-specialists (e.g. students, translators), include all the terms occurring repeatedly in your corpus, even if you do not consider them to belong to a specialised vocabulary *stricto sensu*.

The information collected from your corpus can be used in several ways:

- You can include existing definitions or use them as a source of inspiration to build your own definitions.
- If you aim to follow a descriptive approach, include all the variants that you encounter in your corpus.
- If you aim to harmonise the use of certain terms for your own purpose or that of your partners, include all the known variants and define their status (e.g. recommended term vs. deprecated term, synonym).

8. One or several records per term? One or several terms per record?

The next stage consists in deciding which terms will be included in the final collection, and in structuring the available information into terminological records.

As a rule, always create **one record per concept**. If a given term refers to more than one concept, a separate record should be created for each concept. However, this situation is rare within the limits of a domain, especially if this domain is narrow.

The next question is whether each term should be assigned its own record, or whether all the variants and synonyms of a term should be grouped under one single entry. This decision is theoretically left up to the author of the terminology. We recommend the first solution – **one term per record** – because all synonyms and variants should be fully documented with a mention of their source, usage and status. However, all the synonyms and variants of a given entry term should also be listed in the relevant fields in the terminological record of this entry term. For example:

Term	biological diversity	Term	biodiversity
Status	not recommended	Status	recommended
Synonym(s)	–	Synonym(s)	–
Variant(s)	biodiversity (recommended)	Variant(s)	biological diversity bio-diversity

Equivalence

When there is equivalence between two languages, concepts correspond completely in these two languages, i.e. they are fully identical: there is only one concept, and the term in the source language and the term in the target language designate this one and only concept.

Partial equivalence

Often, rather than being totally equivalent, concepts in different languages correspond only partially. Where partial equivalence occurs, it is essential to determine the extent to which the term of the source language can be rendered by the term.

Among several variants, which one is the "proper" term?

In practice, the co-existence of variants is unavoidable and practically necessary, e.g. short forms of compound terms, trade names of equipment, etc. Among several variants, the one regular and proper term for a concept is defined by one of the following criteria (in this order):

- It has been defined by an international standard
- It has been recommended by an international body of experts
- It is the most widely used
- It is locally used.

9. What about multilingual terminologies?

"Good terminologies reveal differences, bad ones conceal them."

(Ford-Robertson, 1971)

- *Equivalence* is or should be the principle underlying any bi- or multilingual terminology. Terminological records in different languages can be matched only if equivalence is fully verified.

Another strict principle is the collaboration of *native-speaker subject specialists* and the use of a corpus of original texts, not of dictionaries nor translations.

Even more than in monolingual terminology projects, the establishment of multilingual terminologies strongly relies on teamwork. Depending on how ambitious your project is, your project may need the participation of a *terminologist*.

In practice, establishing a bi- or multilingual terminology means that you:

- create terminological records for each concept in each language, based on information from your corpus or on the expertise of native speakers;
- once you have defined a concept in a language A, **do not just translate the definition** into a language B of your terminology project, unless language B has exactly the same concept. Use original definitions instead;
- once the monolingual terminological records are complete, each record can be matched with records in other languages whenever and only when the principle of equivalence is verified. In practice, the equivalent(s) of a given entry term may then be mentioned in the field "equivalent".
- do not try to "force" a concept into other languages. Remember that a concept in a given language may be slightly different or even unavailable in other languages. In the absence of equivalents, mention partial equivalents in the relevant field. If possible, add a note to point out the difference between the concepts in the two languages.

In short, your project should include the following steps – in this order:

- 1. Inventory the existing terminologies**
- 2. Identify your audience**
- 3. Open a project diary**
- 4. Decide how the information will be stored, managed and distributed**
- 5. Create the structure of your terminological records**
- 6. Set the limits of your work and of your terminological domain**
- 7. Collect information**
- 8. Create records**
- 9. In case of multilingual terminologies: identify equivalences and partial equivalences and match them**

We will gladly try and help you if you need further information:

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