

From lexicography to Terminology: a Cline, not a Dichotomy

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Abstract

In a paper presented at the Euralex 2012 conference, ten Hacken (2012) discusses the OED's problematic claim to be the "definitive record of the English language". He argues that what distinguishes the OED from other dictionaries is the information it provides about English words and the range of problems this information can be used to solve. Dictionaries are not descriptions of a language, he claims, but tools with which users of the dictionary solve problems of a particular type. The nature of the dictionary therefore determines which types of problems it can solve.

In this paper, I would like to extend the parallel made by ten Hacken between general dictionaries, learners' dictionaries and historical dictionaries such as the OED to what is traditionally perceived as a dichotomy, namely the distinction between dictionaries and terminological databases. Instead of viewing term bases as a totally distinct type of linguistic product, I would like to argue that they should rather be seen as a specific kind of tool which provides information that specific users will use in order to solve specific linguistic problems, usually related to translation. In the course of their careers, translators will indeed need to make use of a whole range of dictionaries, starting from learners' dictionaries when they learn foreign languages, to monolingual dictionaries and bilingual dictionaries to learn translation techniques, to term bases as soon as they start translating highly specialized and technical texts. We will focus on terminology databases such as IATE, the European Union's interinstitutional term base, which is the natural tool to which they turn to obtain information about technical terms in the medical, legal, environmental, chemical fields, to cite only a few domains covered by this resource. With 8.7 million terms covering the 24 official languages of the European Union, including 1.4 million English terms and half a million abbreviations, this database is a highly popular tool in the translation world (44 million queries in 2013).

In addition to general term bases such as IATE, we will also discuss other specialized EU terminological databases such as ECHA-Term, a term base compiled for the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) to help industry comply with the legal requirements of the REACH Directive and of the regulation on the classification, labeling and packaging of chemicals. We will show how user requirements have been taken into account to meet the needs of the users of the database, who resort to ECHA-Term to obtain reliable, coherent and up-to-date multilingual terminology in the chemicals field, a sine qua non for clear specialized communication.

The description of these databases will make it clear that the distinction between 'traditional' lexicography and terminology is more a cline than a dichotomy, insofar as the types of linguistic information included in the respective products created by both disciplines all correspond to the specific needs of their users.

Reference

Ten Hacken, P. (2012) 'In what sense is the OED the definitive record of the English language?', Fjeld, R. and Torjusen, J. M. (eds) *Proceedings of the 15th EURALEX International Congress*, University of Oslo, 834-845.

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