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Linguistic Insights
Studies in Language and Communication

Roger Berry

Terminology in English Language Teaching

Nature and Use

Peter Lang

Based on original research and novel concepts, this book investigates the nature and use of terminology from linguistic and applied viewpoints. Throughout, problems with terminology, such as overuse by teachers and cases of synonymy and polysemy, are considered and solutions are offered.

Part One looks firstly at some basic concepts, then draws important distinctions between pedagogic and scientific terminology, and between transparent, opaque and iconic terms, before examining the historical, lexical and grammatical nature of terms.

Part Two attempts to estimate the value and relevance of terminology in language teaching and describes the use and knowledge of terminology in various language-teaching-related constituencies: learners, teachers, textbooks, grammars and research. It concludes with a discussion of the criteria for evaluating terms and an analysis of terms used in ELT.

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Terminology in English Language Teaching



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Conventions and Abbreviations Used in this Book

- Words and morphemes that are being cited as metalinguistic items are shown in italics.
- Where terms are being referred to as terms (i.e. as metalingual items, see Chapter One) bold is used. Iconic/eponymous terms are therefore referred to using both bold and italic, e.g. ***-ed participle, used to***.
- Extracts of text, whether of one word or longer, are shown in inverted commas.
- The names of the three grammars in the METALANG corpus are indicated in capitals, as are the concepts introduced in Chapters Three and Thirteen, e.g. UTILITY.
- Underlining is used with words in numbered examples that are being focused on.
- An asterisk in front of an example indicates that it is erroneous.
- ELT stands for English Language Teaching
- MTS stands for the Metalinguistic Terminology Survey.
- SEGT stands for Standard ELT Grammatical Terminology.

Introduction

1. People and terminology

People have mixed feelings about terminology. On the one hand they are generally wary of it, feeling that it is a barrier, something designed to keep them out. On the other hand terminology does carry with it an atmosphere of scholarship and assurance. And if terminology is something people use in their daily work then they are likely to have a positive attitude towards it.

But to the majority of people terminology carries a warning sign: keep out, this is not your property. And there is a suspicion that terminology can be used as an offensive device, to attack and humble the uninitiated, or as a defensive mechanism, to hide the user's ignorance. In other words, terminology is political.

Douglas Adams captures these sentiments well in this passage from 'So long and thanks for all the fish' where a scientist is talking to the hero about someone who can make rain:

If we find something we can't understand, we like to call it something you can't understand, or indeed pronounce. I mean if we just let you go around calling him a Rain God, then that suggests that you know something we don't, and I'm afraid we couldn't have that.

No, first we have to call it something which says it's ours, not yours, then we set about finding some way of proving it's not what you say it is, but something we say it is.

And if it turns out that you're right, you'll still be wrong, because we will simply call him a...er, 'Supernormal...' – not paranormal or supernatural because you think you know what those mean now, no, a 'Supernormal Incremental Precipitation Inducer' We'll probably want to shove a 'Quasi' in there somewhere, to protect ourselves... (2002: 738).

The quote points to another facet of terminology, namely the idea of dispute over ownership. Terms are usually ‘owned’ by a particular community of users which will guard them jealously.

Against this we must set the reassurance that comes from the use of a term by an expert. When a doctor does so, it absolves the patient of all responsibility. Of course, there is often a less deliberate reason for the use of terminology: experts can be so bound up in their field that they simply do not realise that they are not being understood.

These issues all find echoes in the field of language teaching. However, I will suggest (in Chapters One and Two) that there are some special characteristics of English Language Teaching which distinguish its terminology from that used in other academic fields.

2. What this book is about and who it is for

Strictly speaking the title of this book should be ‘*Grammatical Terminology in English Language Teaching*’; I will be concentrating on grammatical terminology since this, it seems to me, is the most extensive and perhaps controversial area. I will not be looking at other non-linguistic areas of terminology that might enter the classroom, for example, that to do with methodology (‘Now we’re going to do some ‘pairwork’), or other areas of metalinguistic terminology, such as that to do with pronunciation.

One of the main points of this book is that terminology is not given enough attention in language teaching: teachers assume that their learners know all the terms used in class; similarly, teaching materials do not make enough effort to help learners learn them.

On a different level, I believe that teachers do not receive enough (or any) help from educators. There is nowhere for them to go to find out, for example:

- which terms are most frequent in ELT
- what terms their learners are likely to know
- which terms to be wary of because they may mislead learners

- how to choose between competing terms
- how to make up their own terms if they feel they need them
- whether using terms at all is advisable
- in what circumstances terminology is most useful.

This book aims to offer answers to all these questions; thus it is aimed principally at teachers. However, anyone involved in the process of language pedagogy will find something of relevance in it. There are several such constituencies: writers of pedagogic grammars, textbooks or self-access materials; teacher trainers; language researchers. All of them may make use of terminology in one way or other. The book would even be of interest to writers of scientific grammars (though they seem to live in a world of their own, as far as terminology is concerned). Issues covered include:

- whether terminology helps or hinders in language teaching and learning
- how much terminology is included in textbooks and grammars
- whether it is consistently used
- whether terminology is an appropriate tool for research into language learning.

In addition I will try to explain (in Part One):

- why arcane (scientific) terminology is necessary sometimes
- what the difference between scientific and pedagogic terminology is
- what types of terminology are available in language learning and teaching
- why synonymy and polysemy are so frequent in grammatical terminology (without trying to justify them)
- how history has influenced the choice of terms and how they have got to be the way they are.

Above all I want to help readers understand what terminology is all about and to suggest that there is no need to be afraid of it. It is to help clarify and offer assistance in all these areas that this book has been written. To my knowledge, nothing like this has been attempted before.

3. How to read this book

The book is divided into two parts:

- Part One: ‘The Nature of Terminology’, which deals with terminology from a (micro-) linguistic point of view
- Part Two: ‘The Use of Terminology’, which deals with terminology from a (macro-) linguistic viewpoint, considering the various ways in which it is used and applied.

This division is somewhat artificial, of course, and factors from each side intrude into the other.

The two parts can be read separately, without reading the other. Alternatively, if both are to be read, there is no need to read them in the prescribed order. Some readers may wish to head for the key Chapter Seven (‘The Place of Terminology in Language Teaching’) first; and then, if their mind is made up, return to find out what terminology is all about in the first part. Those who follow the prescribed order may find, however, that the explanations in the first part do have some bearing on the second.

A word about the distinctiveness of the book is perhaps in order here. There are, of course, the usual features of tables and linguistic examples, but one aspect that sets the book apart is that many of these are derived from a unique corpus of pedagogic grammars, ‘META-LANG’, which is described in Appendix 1. There is further original research reported on here for the first time. Another distinctive feature, particularly in Part One, is the use of case studies which examine or compare particular terms.

PART ONE. THE NATURE OF TERMINOLOGY

This first part of the book examines what terminology is basically like in linguistic terms. Chapter One examines the basic systematic nature of terminology, and investigates the differences between

- terms and concepts
- words and terms
- terms and jargon
- terminology and metalanguage.

Thereafter, Chapters Two and Three introduce different taxonomies of terms, namely pedagogic versus scientific terms (and the factors that distinguish them), and transparent vs opaque vs iconic terms. These form a basis for understanding the nature of terms and how they are applied in language learning and teaching.

Chapter Four then looks at the historical and modern-day development of English grammatical terms, while Chapters Five and Six examine two specifically linguistic aspects: their lexis and their grammar.

CHAPTER ONE

Some initial concepts

1. Introduction

In this chapter I want to describe some of the attributes of terminology, discuss its meanings, distinguish it from some related words, and work towards a definition of it for the purposes of this book.

2. Terminology as system

A question about the meaning of ‘terminology’, asked of learners of English, might elicit the simplistic answer ‘a collection of terms’. Setting aside for a moment the issue of what ‘terms’ are, it must be said there is more to terminology than this; it is not just a random collection of words – although this is sometimes how it appears to learners. It is essentially a system of terms. By ‘system’, I mean generally the way interlocking pieces together create an entity which has a specific purpose; in other words, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Machines such as cars are systems.

A hundred years ago Ferdinand de Saussure stressed the systematic nature of language: the way ‘everything holds together’ (‘*où tout se tient*’). The different components of language, such as the phonemic system, are systems too. The vocabulary of English in general is a system, though not as strong a one as terminology; relationships such as sameness of meaning are common.

Two important features of a system are that the parts are interconnected and that one part cannot be taken away without changing

the system (or stopping it from working); in other words the parts, or terms, are dependent upon one another. If one is removed, others are affected. This is particularly true of terminology. If **plural** did not exist, there would be no need for **singular** – the one exists because it is not the other. If **passive** and **active** did not exist, there would be no need for **voice**. Chapter Five below will look at the specific lexical relationships (such as oppositeness and inclusion) which exist between terms and which help to make them a system.

The strong systematic nature of terminology can be seen in the glossaries of terms that accompany textbooks on English grammar for university students, where definitions of terms regularly contain cross-references to other terms. For instance in Greenbaum/Nelson (2002: 267), the definition for **adjective**, which is six lines long, contains the following terms: **modify, noun, attributive, pre-modifier, noun phrase, predicative, subject complement, object complement and central adjective**. In a dictionary for learners such an overload of potentially unknown words would not be allowed, even if a full picture of the concept were desirable, but a glossary functions to emphasise the links between terms and concepts as well as to explain individual terms.

3. The meanings of terminology

Terminology as a collection of terms is the meaning of the word that language teachers and learners are familiar with. However, like many of the terms referred to in this book, ‘terminology’ is not as straightforward as might be assumed. For many academics it refers to the *study* or *science* of terms – as with any ‘-ology’ – as well as to the system of terms themselves. So ‘terminology’ is the study of ‘terminology’, just as ‘grammar’ is the study of ‘grammar’. Indeed, finer distinctions can be made. Sager (1990: 3) gives three meanings:

1. the terms (as above)
2. the practices and methods in standardizing terms

3. a theory of the relationship between terms and concepts (which underlies the previous enterprise).

These last two may be seen as different poles of the study of terms.

In this second (and third) sense, terminology has become an independent branch of applied linguistics, with its own ‘terminology’ as in the first meaning. Its aims are to investigate the nature of terms, as opposed to words in general, and to establish a standardised terminology for technical disciplines, thereby facilitating clear communication, especially in cross-linguistic situations, by means of translational equivalents (see, for example, Pearson 1998). In this sense it is closely bound up with the fields of Translation and Language for Special Purposes (see, for example, Ahmad/Rogers 2007). There is also a concern with distinguishing clearly between words and terms, as well as between various categories of terms. While it does not deal directly with the terminology of language teaching – though the teaching of technical terminology to non-native speakers is a concern – it does have a number of insights, especially concerning the nature of concepts and terms, which are relevant to this book and which will be discussed below.

4. Terms and concepts

An important characteristic of terminology is its technical nature. Terms do not just denote simple things or ideas, for which the words can be acquired incidentally; they may refer to complex notions, things that have to be learnt with effort. These ‘things’ or ‘ideas’ that terms refer to are ‘concepts’ – the notions that have to be learnt in order to access the knowledge base of an academic community. But access is difficult, if not impossible, without the term. So understanding the relationship between terms and concepts is important.

At first sight, concepts are primary; the idea comes into existence before the name for it. This is a basic tenet in the field of Terminology (Pearson 1998: 10). However, terms give shape to concepts. A concept may exist in someone’s mind without having a term, but in

order for people to talk about it a name is needed. And of course, as we saw in the quote from Douglas Adams in the Introduction, terms can be manipulated and used to refer to an empty concept. So in addition to it being possible to have a concept without a term, it is possible to have a term without a valid concept.

This closeness and mutual dependency of concepts and terms can cause confusion. Problems with terms are often attributable to problems with the underlying concepts (though, as will be seen, terms can have their own problems). Thus the controversy about the ‘future tense’ in English is primarily a conceptual one, not terminological; whatever it was called there would be a dispute about whether it is a valid concept (though the choice of the component parts of the term, ‘future’ and ‘tense’, makes it more problematic).

Bloor and Bloor (2004) point out that linguistic concepts are abstract entities, unlike the parts of a car, and thus we should not expect the labelling of them to be a simple matter:

Linguistic items, being multifunctional, can be looked at from more than one point of view, and hence given more than one label on different occasions even within the same analytical framework. (2004: 18)

5. Relationship to a particular field

Terms do not just relate to knowledge in general; they relate to a particular field of it. So we have the terminology of medicine, and the terminology of law (and dictionaries explaining them). Lay people can often locate a particular term in its field without necessarily knowing the meaning. And terms that move outside their field may cease to be terms (e.g. ‘quantum’ as in ‘a quantum leap’), as Pearson (1998: 3) points out, although they may be taken up in another field.

However, it would not be entirely true to say that the terminology for such fields is distinct. This is illustrated in the way many writers on terms have attempted to distinguish various categories of terminology; Pearson (1998: 17-20) summarises them. One representative

attempt that she mentions, by Trimble and Trimble (1978), distinguishes three categories of terms:

- highly technical terms
- a bank of technical terms
- subtechnical terms.

The first refers to terms which are discipline-specific, the second to terms which are relevant to more than one field and the third to common words that have taken on a special meaning. There are problems in distinguishing these categories, though. For one thing, terms may have different meanings in different fields. Pearson (1998: 20) cites the example of ‘absolute’, which would not be considered subject-specific since it appears as a term in more than one discipline. However, as she points out, it has different meanings in physics and law, and therefore is just as ‘specific’ as terms which exist in only one domain. Perhaps it is the meaning then that should determine the subject-specificity of a term.

Since this is a book about only one particular area, and since language is very specific as a subject matter, no attempt will be made to draw a similar distinction between subject-specific and non-subject specific terms. The vast majority of terms are considered to be subject-specific. Instead, a distinction based on another dimension, that between pedagogic and scientific terminology, will be made.

Nevertheless, some distinction according to the level of ‘technicality’ may be appropriate; for instance, the label ‘sub-technical’ may be applied to some items such as ‘word’ or ‘sentence’ since they are familiar to the general public. Fortune (2005: 26), in a study of non-native learners’ use of metalanguage (see Section 7 below for a discussion of this term), makes a three-way distinction:

- A Technical terms fundamental to linguistic description.
- B Non-technical terms frequently used in making generalizations about syntax and/or meaning.
- C Non-technical terms frequently used in metalinguistic interactions.

While these categories are useful in Fortune’s study of learners’ ‘language-related episodes’, the use of the word ‘term’ to describe categories B (words such as ‘mean’ and ‘same’) and C (words such as ‘say’

or ‘put’ or ‘use’) is perhaps unfortunate. The frequent use of words in metalinguistic description is not sufficient to qualify them as terms; the proper place to study them is in a discussion of metalanguage (see Section 7). Thus only words from Category A will be regarded here as terms on account of their technical nature. However, some of the words in Fortune’s Category A, such as ‘general’ and ‘specific’, may well come under the heading of terms when they are given a special technical meaning. This is one of the processes by which, according to Lyons (1995: 7-8, with reference to metalinguistic terminology), a word becomes a term, namely ‘regimentation’. By this process everyday words are subjected to strict control or redefined by the linguist; Lyons gives the examples of ‘language’, ‘sentence’, ‘word’, ‘meaning’ and ‘sense’. The other process is ‘extension’, whereby the vocabulary is extended ‘by introducing into it technical terms which are generally not used in everyday discourse’ (1995: 8).

6. Terminology, jargon, and the idea of community

Terminology has a lot in common with the word ‘jargon’ but there are some significant differences. The latter has more casual and pejorative connotations. The Oxford Companion to the English Language gives the following definition for jargon:

An often pejorative general term for outlandish language of various kinds, such as speech perceived as gibberish or mumbo jumbo, slang, a pidgin language, or, most commonly, the specialized language of a trade, profession, or other group. The term is often associated with law, medicine, and the sciences [...]. To non-members of professional, occupational and other groups, their usage is filled with terms and syntax that are not typical of general English and may therefore impede understanding among lay people [...]. (McArthur 1996: 498-9)

As can be seen from this, jargon implies the existence of outsiders – in fact it is usually seen from their point of view. Thus a dictionary of medical jargon would be designed for the outsider, someone who is not a member of the community, whereas a dictionary of medical ter-