An Interview with Barbara Inge Karsch, Terminologist and Chair of ATA's Terminology Committee

Men ever had, and ever will have leave,
To coin new words well suited to the age,
Words are like leaves, some wither every year,
And every year a younger race succeeds.

—Horace, poet and satirist (65-8 BC)

These ancient words tell a story that is still true today. Translators delve to some extent into the field that Horace refers to, the field of new names for new things. But terminologists spend all their time there, immersed in that intriguing baptismal process.

Barbara Inge Karsch, my guest for this edition of *OWOW*, has been a terminologist for over 15 years. She has a BA and MA in translation and interpreting, and has done PhD-level research in terminology management. Now, as a consultant and trainer for BIK Terminology, she assists clients with terminology projects. She also teaches at New York University and is a U.S. delegate to ISO Technical Committee 37 for Terminology and Other Language and Content Resources. She was recently appointed chair of ATA's Terminology Committee. Her blog (http://bikterminology.com) addresses terminology issues. Contact: bikterminology@gmail.com.

I'll start by referring to something you said that helped me get a better grasp of terminology as a field. "Every product, whether a physical, software, or information product, consists of ideas which, in terminology management, we call concepts. Concepts are reflected in text through terms and names. So, when we as terminologists or translators research terms and names, we research the concepts at the root of a product." That seems to sum up what you do in general terms. Now, can you give us a brief day-in-the-life? Someone asks you to consult on a terminology issue. What happens next?

Barbara Inge Karsch

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My day-to-day projects depend on whether I'm working on a consulting and training project or whether I'm doing terminology work in an established terminology management system (TMS). I'll start with consulting work. If clients want to manage their terminology, they must identify processes and the people involved in these processes. For example, product developers come up with new features and brainstorm names for them. Maybe others, such as marketing and branding specialists, are included in those discussions. If the result of their conversations is not recorded somewhere the knowledge is lost. Therefore, we need a terminology management system to document the names that have been proposed. So, we figure out how names and terms get established at the company, capture these processes, and make sure

they follow best practices. Then we establish a centralized system where the terminology is documented so that people can use it to look up terms and names and their underlying concepts.

When I do terminology work, I may receive a few files, run them through a term extraction program, and then research the most important concepts. Once I have researched and understood the concepts and figured out the correct—and sometimes also the incorrect or, at least, less preferred terminology—I fill the database with the terminological information that people, and machines, need.

How did you get into the field? How does one become a terminologist?

Many terminologists learn by doing. But as with translation, formal education helps you to leap ahead. A student who had taken my terminology course in the translation master's program at New York University still needed over a year to understand the tools, the processes, the different people, and the company culture at a client organization for which I consult. There are just so many different scenarios that can come up. And the more you understand the people involved, the easier it is.

I had a master's degree in translation and interpreting from the Monterey Institute[1] and had taken a terminology course while I was working on my bachelor's degree in Munich, Germany. In my first job at J.D. Edwards,[2] we decided that each translation team needed a terminologist, and I "was volunteered." We brought in former ATA Terminology Committee Chair and Kent State Professor Sue Ellen Wright as a consultant and trainer. I studied all the available literature and then learned by doing. Actually, as a translator, I really liked terminology research. So, to research and document full-time seemed fun and exciting. And it still is today.

The terminology field is not very old. Please tell us something about the emergence of the discipline. Was the spread of computer technology the driving force?

Or you could say that the terminology field is very old. Think of Carl Linnaeus (the "Father of Taxonomy") establishing the modern system of naming plants. The organizational principles behind concept systems go back to Greek philosophy. Though the underlying methods are old, we've certainly seen changes in how the work is done and who does it. In the past, subject matter experts were the keepers of their terminology and the documentation thereof. Today, communication specialists are often the ones who do this part of the job. And while some of us were still working with index cards 25 years ago, the profession of terminologist has changed considerably with the advent of powerful networked computers.

Though terminology work is not entirely geared toward the support of translation work, let's focus on that. Technology has evolved to help us in many ways. It allows us to identify term candidates semi-automatically rather than having to use a highlighter to mark new terms and names in a printed document. It allows us to do wide-ranging searches over corpuses rather than having to visit a subject matter expert. It allows us to store the results of these two steps in a database rather than on an index card so that many people can use the information, not just the person with the index card. So, yes, the job has changed due to technology. Yet, many of the best practices have been around for some time. A good terminologist uses technology to combine the knowledge of the processes and the knowledge of how to support these processes for maximum results.

Would you say that terminology, as you understand it, is still in its infancy?

I would say no. Right now I'd love to see terminology management skills used more widely in the U.S. and in American companies. We focus a lot on tools. Today's tools aren't perfect, but until we have more people who understand the nature of a good naming process, how to

efficiently research a concept, and then how to document that accurately, and do it all quickly, we probably won't convince tool providers that they need to do better. Tool providers maintain that translators don't want to do terminology work, even though they're engaged in it throughout the translation process. Naturally, translators would like to do terminology work more efficiently. I believe that improving research and documentation skills to reuse the knowledge they identify is key. So, no, I don't think terminology management is in its infancy. It's a nicely developed field and we could use more people who are proficient in it.

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Terminology seems like a more tightly focused branch of translation, with similar or perhaps greater emphasis on organizational skills and attention to detail, but with a mechanical side in data management. Please tell us about the human, intuitive side of terminology.

Let me focus on two aspects of your question: researching existing terminology and the creation of new terminology; and working with subject matter experts.

Every translator does a lot of terminology research to find out how to refer to an existing concept correctly in the target language. That requires a great deal of intuition: you have an idea, a hunch about what to call something, and then you confirm that hunch through parallel reading and other research methods. That's a very intuitive process. Creating a new term or name is even more interesting. Although we have guiding principles in terminology best practices, and many people know them intuitively, they may not be aware of the underlying methods, and therefore can't repeat them consistently.

Working with subject matter experts is intuitive in the sense that you must ask the right questions. If you send off an e-mail with the wrong question, you might be misleading the experts, which may, in turn, cause them to mislead you. So, asking the right questions is a critical skill.

Speaking of the human side, please tell us something about the "soft skills" required of a terminologist and how they're used in dealing with colleagues and clients.

Well, we don't often have the luxury of benefiting directly from an expert's knowledge, so we should treat these resources accordingly, as a luxury. But we must also be able to know when the experts are wrong and, when they don't provide a satisfactory answer, we must diplomatically lead them back along the logical path toward the answer we seek. German has the perfect word, *Fingerspitzengefühl*, which refers to the great sensitivity we have in our fingertips and thus to an ability to execute certain tasks that require delicacy and tact. Push an expert too hard or correct him rudely and you may never be invited back. Prepare well, ask smart questions, and give him the feeling that he is fully capable of solving the question with your help, and you'll both feel successful.

We're living at a time in history when languages are changing dramatically. Technology and social media are unleashing widespread creativity in the field of popular linguistics, creating fertile ground for neologisms. How is terminology affected, how does it handle this tide of new words, and how does it keep up?

We're the ones who must keep up! And we can keep up when we have the right skills, the right processes, and the right tools. Incidentally, one of the processes that would help keep changes to a minimum would be good naming practices. If we named things correctly in the first place, we wouldn't have to keep making changes.

You have said that terminology can affect a company's identity, both internally and in the marketplace. How does that happen?

If companies don't name their new concepts well, their identity will suffer, either because people realize that the name is lousy or because it has been changed five times in six months, or because lots of documentation is required to express what could be expressed through good naming. Two examples come to mind.

When I worked for J.D. Edwards, there was a feature name in the database that had been changed five times in less than five years. And, recently, when doing descriptive terminology work for a client, I encountered a single concept with three outdated names (a long form and two short forms), and three new names we were waiting for the marketing team to confirm. The team confirmed them, but recommended that we not get used to them because they were about to rename the concept. I believe it would be really hard for a user to keep up with this many changes. Usability problems are never good for a company.

You're the U.S. delegate to ISO Technical Committee 37 for Terminology and Other Language and Content Resources, leading the revision of ISO 12616 (Translation-Oriented Terminography). In that role, your job is to "bring to the ISO meetings the real issues that I see day-to-day, and then devise solutions with my ISO colleagues." What are those issues?

One of the issues is that data categories in a database should reflect documentation needs in real-life environments. Of course, anyone can make up a data category. But, in that scenario, data exchange is obstructed. So, at ISO meetings, I can report on what type of data organization needs exist in the real world and how we address them. Those solutions can then be integrated into the Data Category Registry, which is an inventory of document categories.

I can also report on how an existing solution isn't working as well as it could. An example would be the data category called "Administrative Status," which tells us whether a term is preferred or should not be used. But "Administrative Status" doesn't really convey the idea very clearly. The more easily understood

synonym in English is "Usage Status." So, my ISO colleagues and I can decide to stop using the old name and adopt the more user-friendly term to be used from that point on.

Another scenario involves the underlying models. While these models (such as the semantic triangle[3]) are helpful, they're not perfect and must be adjusted. For example, in discussions concerning ISO 704—which is our field's main theoretical standard—we have been reviewing new models, many of which come from my colleagues in academia. I then run these models through my scenarios to see whether they hold up and should consequently replace the existing ones and be taught as part of the standard.

In translation circles we occasionally receive e-mail about "funny" brand names that don't play very well in other cultures. How would a TMS prevent the cost and embarrassment of such situations?

A TMS database would identify *faux pas* as deprecated terminology and offer the user a correct synonym. If the database is connected to a style-checking tool, such as those increasingly being used in American companies, the incorrect name would then be flagged and the writer could thus avoid it.

You've said that automated machine translation or quality assurance processes will play a much bigger role in the future, and claim that this is a good thing. Please tell us something about that expanded role, and explain why it's a good thing.

The questionable brand name scenario we just mentioned is one where automated quality assurance processes would obviously be beneficial. Machines can, and do, free us up to perform more creative functions. If I look back at my own career I can say that, rather than hire me to translate the same software string 500 or 1,000 times—we really did that in the1990s—translation memory now takes care of that part of the work. This means that I can focus on finding the right technical term, which is a more creative process and one where I can add value. The machine is perfectly happy to perform repetitive tasks.

What lies ahead? Will globalization make terminology management an increasingly essential, integral part of the product development and marketing process? Do you see it playing a more dominant role in the broad field of translation?

I do think that translators will work more and more with terminology management systems because, for certain jobs, it's the only way to be fast and have consistent terminology. Whether we will succeed in infiltrating, if you will, the decision-making departments in the U.S. is another question. I think more people need to understand that it makes sense to be more systematic in the naming approach and in the management of an organization's linguistic assets. Maybe our conversation can help encourage others to learn more about terminology management.

Thank you, Barbara. I'm sure our readers will appreciate your enthusiasm for your field and, like me, will come away with a new understanding of terminology management and the role it plays in our world of words. ○

NOTES

[1] Now the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey in California.

[2] An Enterprise Resource Planning software company in Denver, Colorado; now the Oracle Corporation.

[3] The semantic triangle can be traced back to the 4th century BC in Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* (book II), but was first published by C.K. Ogden and A. Richards in *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923). The triangle is a model that describes the relationship between thought (reference), a linguistic sign (or *representamen*), and a referent (the things they try to represent or refer to).

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