Terminological Problems and Language Management for Internet Language Professionals in Hong Kong

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Introduction

The incredible development of the Internet presents today's companies with the opportunity to reach around the world to find new markets for their products. In order to grasp this chance, many companies develop their own web sites to make access for their customers easier. Since the development of the web industry has been so rapid, the number of new words for new concepts in technical computing and acronyms have been increasing immensely. Due to the growing internationalization of business, new English terms are exported to other countries where English is not the usual language. The technical computing terminology causes communication difficulties among Internet language professionals, in particular for those translators, web editors and technical writers who do not have much knowledge of technical terminology.

These difficulties also exist in Hong Kong. Therefore, the following questions and concerns are timely:

(1) What are the terminological inadequacies and problems actually encountered by Internet language professionals in Internet business firms in Hong Kong?
(2) In what situations do they encounter these terminological problems?
(3) What adjustments are made for those term inadequacies that occur on-line in the process of discourse?
(4) What solutions are found for those term problems that are referred off-line?

This paper will collect and report on Internet language professionals' first-hand experiences with term problems in an Internet business in Hong Kong.

Model of Individuals' Management of Language in Discourse

A theory of language problems explains the relationship between discourse and people's behaviour towards discourse. The theory of problems focuses on how participants in processes of language management note and evaluate features of language and of language systems (Jernudd and Neustupný, 1987). The language management model postulates that in discourse participants:

(1) produce utterances (in written language, sentences);
(2) monitoring the language that constitutes these messages, *note* a potential deviation from norm (which includes a gap, say, of vocabulary);
(3) *evaluate* the deviation from norm in the noted item, thus determining whether the noted deviation constitutes an inadequacy;
(4) *select an adjustment*;
(5) *implement* the adjustment by (re)producing the utterance (rewriting the sentence).

The discourse management process is interactive between self and other; and it may stop at any step in the modelled process. It is ever present in any communicative act and enables continued communication. The demand for precise and untroubled specialist communication makes it rather more likely than in general conversation that overt attention will have to be paid to terms. New vocabulary requires dissemination and collective, possibly authoritative, endorsement as terms, and current in-group usages, require continuous affirmation of the constancy of their forms and definitions. Thus, *term problems* arise when individuals bring up noted deviations for deliberate attention in the discourse community, thus *talking about* their specialist language. They engage in meta-communication. Specialists may, for example, be unable to agree on an adjustment to an inadequacy that both recognized in their discourse. The adjustment may concern how to express a new concept, how to disentangle an abbreviation, or how to render an English term into Cantonese. They therefore ask colleagues for help, look up sources, or, depending on the felt severity of the issue and on the degree of organization of language management of terms for the particular discourse community, they may refer the matter to the relevant term management organization.

Data Collection

Two opposite forces govern term management in today's Internet industry in Hong Kong. On the one hand, Internet language professionals' communications require explicit and stable agreement on the expressive forms of terms and on their definitions to capture and communicate concepts precisely. This process is not supported by organized language management in Hong Kong but is for the moment largely confined to collegial consultations in the workplace. On the other hand, they seek new knowledge and develop new practices, therefore running into discourse problems with existing terms and definitions. Therefore the need arises for the coining of new ones.

Two types of data have been collected in this study: (1) records of potential deviations by asking volunteer participants to keep a record of queries that arose during their work; and (2) transcription of a focus group discussion, conducted for confirming the evidence that was collected from the records. The subjects, three males and two females, aged from twenty-five to twenty-eight, were volunteer participants. They are the web editors from two local Internet Content Providers (ICP). These two ICPs were launching two portals, both with English and Chinese versions. Web editors were chosen because they are mainly responsible for writing and editing the contents of these web sites. However, they are not very familiar with technical computing terminologies, compared to other employees of the ICP, such as web designers and web developers.

The Records

The subjects were requested to record any doubts, difficulties and queries concerning technical computing vocabulary as they came up at their workplace, in written or spoken, English or Chinese, discourse. Records were kept for about one month. Each subject was given 31 record sheets based on

the sample query record of the Catalan Language Service, University of Barcelona. (Cabré, 1999: 152)

Focus Group Discussion

A half-an-hour focus group discussion was conducted right after the subjects had finished record-keeping. It was divided into two parts, the individuals' term and discourse management and corporate discourse management. The first author guided the discussion. The discussion was unobtrusively taped and transcribed.

Findings

Records of Query

There was a total of 80 records received from the subjects. In the following, each vocabulary item that was noted so as to produce a record was called a query. We will account for the queries by grammatical category.

Grammatical Category of the Queries

Most queries were nouns (92.5%). 30 out of 80 collected queries were acronyms. Only 6.25% of the queries were verbs and one was an adverbial. Not surprisingly, most queries concerned the English language (97.5%), only 2.5% Chinese. Table 1 summarizes the types of queries, in terms of pronunciation, spelling, usage and meaning.

Most queries would be regarded as terminological problems. The records show that the subjects consulted others or consulted terminological sources in order to solve the problems that had arisen. This may be a result of the highly conscious manner in which the data was collected but does not in our opinion invalidate the items. Observation or prior training of record-keepers would have produced many more queries and among them many more discourse inadequacies that would have been adjusted by the subjects themselves.

In the immediately following sections, we offer selected examples of terminological problems according to the categories in the table.

Table 1: Types of Queries

Types of Query	*Number of Queries*	*Percentage (%)*
Pronunciation	2	2.5%
Spelling	4	5%
Usage		
* Homonyms	1	1.25%
* Synonyms	1	1.25%
Meaning	72	90%
Total	80	100%

Pronunciation

Example: sync.

Situation:

In a project meeting, the marketing director and the web editor asked the programmer for details about the database of a project. The programmer replied that two database systems can be [si?] on a regular basis by making use of some programming methods. This was the first time the web editor heard this word and she queried it with the marketing director after the meeting.

Adjustment:

In order to adjust for her problem with [si?], the editor consulted a colleague. She learnt that [si?] is short for "synchronize." In fact, short forms for many technical terms are a common practice.

Spelling

Example: netvigation

Situation:

A record-keeper noted that "netvigation" occurred many times in drafts of reports, agendas and minutes, and evaluated it negatively.

Adjustment:

The adjustment is "navigation" to refer to different sections and sub-

sections of a web site. However, the record-keeper did not overtly correct the documents nor discuss the item with others.

Usage

(1) Homonymy

Example: ASP

There are two entries for "ASP" from the same record-keeper.

Situation One:

In the first entry, the web editor reported that she heard "ASP" in a sales meeting and was not sure what it referred to.

Adjustment:

She asked the BD manager for the full form after the meeting and learnt that in this project "ASP" refers to "Application Service Provider."

Situation Two:

In the second entry, the web editor reported that a programmer had recommended a solution for "ASP," a new project while answering e-mail for technical advice. The web editor was puzzled to note that this "ASP" must have a different meaning.

Adjustment:

They checked the expression with the programmer and learnt that it stands for "Active Server Pages," thus confirming her guess that this "ASP" is different.

(2) Synonymy

Example: plug-in, web-based tool

Situation:

The web editor and her colleagues disagreed on using the terms "plug-in" and "web-based tool." They checked with a programmer in the same company.

Adjustment:

Generally speaking, the meanings are similar. However, "plug-in" is a kind of "web-based tool."

(3) *Meaning*

Under this heading, we divide terminological problems into two kinds: acronyms and terms.

Examples of acronyms as noted trouble-items are: ERP, CRM, EPS, CSS, SET, SSL, GIF, FAT, FTP, and PKI. From the acronym itself it is very difficult to infer a meaning, and context often does not help. People who note acronyms generally ask others for adjustments or they look for them in dictionaries.

As for terms, in many cases the record-keepers had no idea what they meant. A good example is "upper fold." This expression refers to the "most eye-catching position of the web page." It is borrowed from journalism and is not yet in general use. In this case, its use may be company specific.

Selected Problems Reported from the Focus Group Discussion

An Acronym

Example: SKU

Transcript:

> The most impressive one should be the SKU one [...] When we, *The Avenue*, were having a summer sale promotion recently, I always urged my colleague to confirm the details with me. She was so busy that she didn't make up her mind until very late. She later on told me that there were around 50 SKU designated for the promotional sale. So I told my man about this. [Noting and evaluation:] *He didn't understand what SKU meant and* [Initiation of adjustment:] *asked me what that was.* [Adjustment:] *I then told him that the full name of SKU was Stock Keeping Unit, and that we'd focus on one category which included something like napkin,*

handbag. I said there were around 50 units of products as they said 50 SKU.

Different Pronunciations of Acronyms

Example: SKU
Transcript:

However, [The problem:] *not everyone pronounces the word SKU in the same way*. Some people might pronounce it like "skill" and I would not be aware of the word. I think that acronyms should not be pronounced as a word. Instead, that [Suggested solution:] *they should be pronounced separately by letters like, S, K...*

Definition of a Term

Example: site map
Transcript:

Taking the site map case as an example. From the viewpoint of a designer or a programmer, a site map should be made in that way. But to us, a site map can be as simple as a handwritten rough draft. [Noting and evaluation:] *We had very different perception towards the term site map.*

The subject points to the problem that different people on the same project in the same firm assign different meanings to a specialized vocabulary item. This is probably a result of previous misunderstandings.

Hyponym

Example: registered user, unique user
Transcript:

S1: [Bringing up a language problem:] I've been corrected by a colleague once recently. I was discussing if there is a unit in use for measuring the number of registered user so as to reflect the value of the portal web site. [Other-initiated adjustment:] *A colleague told me to use the term "unique user"* [Other-initiated noting and negative evaluation:] *instead of using "registered user."*

S2: It reflects no value if you use "registered user" to do the measurement. Many visitors may use various identities to register as users of the web site. One visitor can register for as many times as he wishes!
Both expressions are subordinated to "Internet user" but their definitions differ.

Situations in Which the Queries and Problems Arose

One of the research questions was to find out in what situations the subjects encounter terminological problems. Queries arose in the following situations at their workplaces (the number in the bracket indicates the number of people reporting that situation):

(1) causal conversations/phone conversations with colleagues in the office (32)
(2) attending business meetings (31)
(3) reading/preparing business documents and proposals (5)
(4) reading Internet magazines/journals/articles (5)
(5) Internet search (for work purpose) (4)
(6) reading/replying to business emails (2)
(7) using software/a special computing programme (1)

Subjects mostly encountered the terminological problems during business meetings and (causal/phone) conversations with colleagues in the office. In order to prevent communication breakdown, the subjects adopted various adjustment strategies, which are shown in the following section.

Adjustment Strategies for the Terminological Problems

Subjects reported three kinds of noting and evaluating inadequacies:

(1) self-noting and evaluation of inadequacy
(2) inadequacy noted and evaluated by others
(3) noting and evaluation of others' inadequacy

Self-noting and evaluation usually occurred when reading a manual or magazines, using software, Internet search, attending a seminar, during talks and briefings, or preparing documentation. Others were involved (quite naturally) in situations of two-way communication such as in cooperative work, business meetings and casual conversations in the office.

The following adjustment strategies were adopted for each of the above cases (the number in the bracket following each strategy indicates the number of people selecting that strategy):

(1) Self-noting and adjustments of inadequacies:
  a. by asking/discussing with others
    - immediately (34)
    - after a certain period of time (6)
  b. by checking a bilingual dictionary (1)
  c. by asking/discussing with others and look up a dictionary/ other reference (5)
  d. by guessing the meaning of terms from context (2)
  e. by guessing the meaning of terms from context and asking others (2)
  f. by checking other related subjects reference/materials/Internet (6)
  g. by remaining ignorant of the inadequacies

(2) Inadequacies were noted and adjusted by others:
  a. noting without any adjustment strategies (2)
  b. noting with an explanation given (8)
  c. noting with correct terms given (no explanation) (1)

(3) Noting and adjustment of others' inadequacies:
  a. noting without any an explanation given (1)

  b. noting with an explanation given (7)
  c. noting with correct terms given (no explanation) (3)

A majority of the subjects noted the terminological problems by themselves. They preferred to ask or discuss the problems with others immediately or after a certain period of time. In fact, this is the most convenient way to solve terminological problems.

Management of the Choice of Chinese and English Terms in Chinese Discourse

All the subjects responded that since they have learned and used English terminology, in most cases, English terminology is their first priority. In spoken Chinese discourse, code-mixing is very common. As in written Chinese discourse, common practice is to:

a. simply use the English term, with Chinese explanation
b. use the Chinese term, but glossed with the English one
c. simply use the English term without any Chinese term or explanation.

Interestingly, using pure Chinese terminology in any discourse seems not to be welcomed by the subjects. From their viewpoint, Chinese terminology causes comprehension difficulties. They have to recall the English equivalents in order to understand. An additional concern is differences between Chinese terminologies for China and for Taiwan (cf. Chiu and Jernudd).

Use of Language Resources

The subjects use language resources in order to make adjustments. The most common language resources that they use are:

a. bilingual dictionaries
c. online glossary lists
d. reference books
e. Internet magazines and journals

f. Intranet
g. user menu in the form of a CD-ROM
h. seminar/talk/briefing organized by the companies.

Term Management in the Firms

According to the subjects, few language resources were provided by the companies (although the list below is long). Subjects use their own resources. The following are examples of language resources provided by their companies:

a. user menu in the form of CD-ROM or paper
b. documentation
c. memo/e-mail
d. video
e. Intranet
f. legal consultant (only for drafting contracts or other legal issues)
g. seminar/talk/briefing for the staff
h. training course (not so common).

There exists no particular language policy or language department in the companies which aims to support the employees on language issues. However, subjects would welcome such facilities. Some of the subjects even suggested an enquiry hotline for answering term problems or other language problems that arise at work. This would save a lot of searching time for them to find out appropriate adjustments.

Discussion

Terminological Problems Encountered by Internet Language Professionals in Internet Business Firms in Hong Kong

Categories of terminological problems included acronyms, pronunciations, spellings, meanings and usage. In particular, the use of acronyms causes difficulties because the concepts behind these acronyms are still new or unknown. Problems of homonymy, synonymy and hyponymy

also arose. In order to master related problems with technical terminology, Internet language professionals have to first understand the concepts behind the terms.

Internet language professionals in Hong Kong also encounter another macro-problem: Chinese technical computing terminology. Hong Kong is professionally a bilingual city. Using English terminology in Chinese discourse (both spoken and written) is common. Internet language professionals learn the English terminology first. Since they do not have a need to learn their Chinese equivalents, inadequacies are likely to arise when they first come across Chinese terminology.

Situations in Which Internet Language Professionals Encountered Terminological Problems

Most terminological problems were encountered in "casual conversations with colleagues" and "business meetings." Perhaps in these situations people with different backgrounds meet. In other words, the participants bring different technical terminology into the discourse. Therefore, more deviations become possible compared to interaction in other situations such as in close cooperation in a project group.

In fact, the situations do impose some constraints on the adjustment and implementation process. Situations such as business meetings may prevent adjustments taking place. Owing to embarrassment, the presence of VIPs of the company, the priority to attend to the progress of the meeting, and so on, participants hesitate to request or offer adjustment. These external factors should be taken into account in evaluating individuals' term management. People remain ignorant sometimes because of the force of such external factors rather than because of lack of adjustment strategies. It follows that meetings should allow room for questions on terms just as on other matters of substance.

Adjustments and Solutions

Many adjustments in the full data set were simple corrections during discourse, i.e., giving a correct term or by offering an explanation in the flow of an ongoing discourse. The findings match what Jernudd and Neustupný (1987:76) have written:

> A complete process of language management starts from marking in discourse of some aspects of that discourse as inadequate, finished with the implementation of the simple correction design, again in discourse. Simple correction in discourse is thus the most important category of the entire language management process.

Unlike adjustments during discourse, but closely allied with it, the most popular solution to an overt language problem off-line was asking and discussing the problem with others immediately. This kind of adjustment could also be regarded as a side-sequence with the inadequacy as its topic during on-going discourse.

In the focus group discussion, similar comments were found. In addition to seeking assistance from experts, colleagues or friends, some subjects even suggested having an enquiry hotline for answering questions on terminological problems. The data collected in the focus group discussion support findings from the data collected in the record sheets.

Asking and discussing immediately as a query arises with someone who may know the solution (an adjustment) is very probably the most cost-effective way to adjustments in communication.

Similarly, among off-line adjustment strategies, seeking assistance or advice from someone knowledgeable seems to be the most popular one.

Significant Effects of Term Problems on Business

Inadequacies have negative effects. For example, our data shows that when terminological problems occurred during business meetings, people would spend meeting time to explain and discuss the meaning of terms, or would require time afterwards, even a renewed meeting in one case, to sort out the language problem. In other words, a meeting can be derailed which costs money. Even more costly would be the situation when after long discussion, no agreed norm or solution has been found.

Conclusion

Internet language professionals encounter terminological problems.

Terminological problems include technical computing jargon, especially the prolific acronyms. Inadequacies arise in both spoken and written discourse in terms of pronunciation, spelling, meaning and usage.

Subjects encounter terminological problems in a number of situations, including but not limited to, business meetings, casual or phone conversations with colleagues in the office, seminars, talks and briefing sessions, reading technical manuals, preparing business or legal documents, drafting articles for publication on the web, and using software.

The subjects reported that Chinese terminology causes difficulties to comprehension. The subjects have to recall the English equivalents to understand them with the help of context. In order to avoid difficulties with terms in Chinese, they generally gloss in the other language or use an English term in an otherwise Chinese discourse.

The subjects use a variety of adjustment strategies. Off-line, seeking assistance or advice from someone seems to be a common strategy. The results of this study suggest that interactively seeking adjustments immediately an inadequacy arises with someone who may know is very probably the most cost-effective, under present circumstances. It is significant that subjects supported the notion of a hotline to help with solutions to language problems.

Another possibility is to bring together Internet firms, terminologists, and subject experts to agree on a norm for technical Internet terminology, i.e., to *standardize* Internet terminology in Hong Kong for the sake of firms in the private sector. This raises the question which should be the authoritative standardization body and how to get Internet firms actively involved.

This brief study may reflect practices in only a fraction of the entire Internet industry, yet the authors are confident that the issues it raises are general ones. In any case, further research must be conducted so as to reveal more fruitful and reliable facts about language use and language problems in the Internet industry in Hong Kong.

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