

# They've Got a Word for It

TERMINOLOGY MANAGEMENT AT ERICSSON

BY GARY JAEKEL

In a business environment, terminology work always has a rocky road to travel. We might even go so far as to say that work with terminology is highly problematic in any environment, even in those rare and hallowed instances when it has been officially sanctioned by an organ of the state. However emphatically government, industry, academia, the military, the professions, and the general public may agree on the importance of clear-cut terminology, it always seems to cost too much, take too much time, and require a depth of analysis, observation, and experience that can wither its most dedicated proponent.

## Term Management Gains Visibility

Several factors have contributed to heightened awareness about terminology. The first is the well-known move toward globalization. The rapid transfer of information and the promptness with which decisions must be made require removing as many barriers to understanding as possible, and this includes clear terminology.

The second is the increasing awareness of language as the cornerstone of national identity. The third is the ever-growing complexity of our world in a technical sense. We use and/or are affected by an array of systems and products—from the worldwide telecommunications network to the automobile—that must be accompanied by large quantities of information to insure efficiency and safety. The fourth and most important factor is that products must be adapted for local markets if they are to be successful. While the localization of products involves many issues, one of the most basic is having access to and being able to use consistent and correct terminology.

In my years of working for Ericsson, the multinational telecom giant, I got to deal first-hand with the application of terminology management in consumer-product development. The suppliers of telecommunications technology—increasingly a subset of IT—use marketing slogans that downplay the technology and emphasize that they are really providing improved human communication. “It’s about communication between people. The rest is technology” (Ericsson). “Connecting people” (Nokia). “Let’s make things better” (Phillips). In spite of this non-technical marketing message, I attempt to demonstrate below the critical role played by terminology management in masking the complex technology that lies beneath the surface.

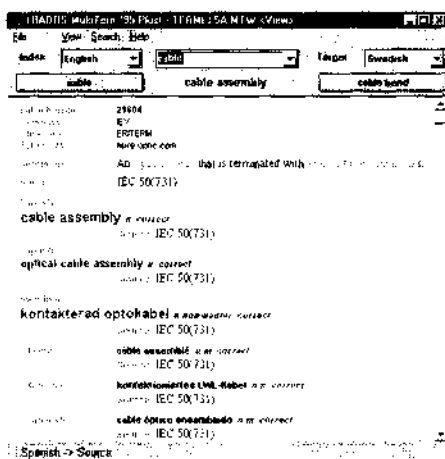
## Why Terminology Matters

In any global corporation, correct terminology is important not only in the organization’s interface with its customers, but also in its internal communications. The following was related to me a few

years ago by someone who was on the scene: one of the world’s telecommunications giants was preparing to invest in a project that required the cooperation of the American and British parts of the company. A meeting was arranged in England between design representatives from both sides of the Atlantic. The meeting started off briskly in the morning and gradually sank into total chaos by lunch. Not until then, in the relaxed atmosphere of the corporate dining room, did the participants arrive at the source of their communication gap: the Americans and British were using different terms for the same thing, and these terms were sufficiently similar to create confusion. It had never occurred to any of them that these things could be called, in English, anything other than what they were called on their respective sides of the Atlantic. The first item of business after lunch was defining terms and making terminology a standing point on future agendas.

My experience working with terminology is largely in the area of telecommunications. From about 1980 to 1985, a group of translators at Ericsson worked to publish a telecommunications glossary in five languages called Eriterm. Eriterm was published in book form in 1985, and featured Swedish terms and their equivalents in English, French, and Spanish. Each of the approximately 13,000 term records contained a domain, but no definitions.

Eriterm gradually became quite well established within the Ericsson world, although it was not afforded the status of a standard. At the same time, there was a database called TERM on a mainframe administered by what was then the standards department. This database included



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most of Eriterm, as well as a large number of other terms submitted by various units within Ericsson, at their own discretion.

In the late '80s, under my management, a new project was begun to republish Eriterm in five volumes: each proceeding from one of the five languages, including German. Around this time responsibility for the TERM database was transferred from the standards department to Ericsson Language Services. Aside from the need to update the material in Eriterm, the idea of being able to use any of the languages in the original data as a source language created problems of which we were not originally aware. Since the original Eriterm was from Swedish, several alternative terms in the other languages were sometimes given which did not necessarily apply when the records were reversed.

We also initiated further development of the database so that we could get print-ready copy directly. This project continued until the publication of the new Eriterm—containing about 15,000 terms—in late 1992. Aside from more terms, the new edition included better domain information, but still no definitions.

Once Ericsson Language Services had been assigned responsibility for the TERM database, we felt that the next step would be to make the database more accessible to our in-house operations, making it easier to upgrade future releases of Eriterm in whatever form. To this end, we began looking at various terminology-management products on the market, while not completely dismissing the notion that we might develop our own application in cooperation with, for example, Oracle. In the end we opted for

Trados's Multiterm as the tool that best met our needs. It was on this platform that we began developing Termelsa, our in-house database.

A new edition of Eriterm in book form has not been released since 1992, and new book versions in the future are unlikely. On the other hand, Eriterm PC was developed, first in DOS and then in Windows, in the mid-nineties. Eriterm PC includes definitions or context for most of the term records.

### Setting Up Shop

The fact that none of those involved in terminology projects at Ericsson Language Services were by education or previous experience terminologists provides interesting insight into how a terminology operation can be set up.

Once the dust had settled after the release of the new edition of Eriterm in 1992, we began to take a more structured look at how we intended to build up and maintain our terminology competence, as well as keep our product as up-to-date as possible. We found we had to:

1. Clearly define who was responsible for terminology for each language and who would manage operations both strategically and operationally.
2. Establish routines for database management and input of new terms, both from market and in-house perspectives.
3. Ensure that all aspects of terminology operations were well documented.
4. Plan for further competence development for all involved.
5. Work out plans for future development, including resource availability.

### Role Definitions

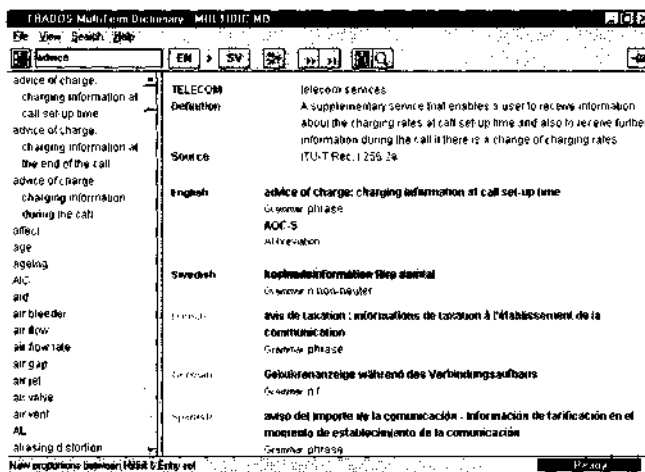
As we had five languages in which to maintain competence, one person for each language was formally appointed as terminologist in Swedish, English, French, Spanish, and German. One person in the team took responsibility for database management, and yet another for management of terminology. Initially, terminology was treated as a separate unit within the organization, but was later merged with translation operations.

Well-documented working routines for all involved are absolutely necessary to maintain an in-house database of value to the user and, in our case, to ensure that our product would remain up-to-date and attractive to our customers.

#### The Translator/Terminologist

Our first responsibility was to identify and establish working routines for the people who would be collecting the raw terminological input—the translators. This was no easy task, considering the hit-and-miss nature, which involved ransacking individual card indexes, hard-copy lists in binders, the odd flat file on our PCs, and the brains of people whose expertise we trusted. That done, the next step was to see to it that new terms were entered into the database with a fair degree of regularity. For the translators, this involved doing two jobs in parallel: handling the translation projects that came in, and extracting from each project terms that they felt warranted being saved in Termelsa. Naturally, terms from new areas of technology were of particular interest, as were terms which, for one reason or another, seemed to be in vogue with our customers at any given time.

As we have all experienced, certain topics and their accompanying terminology tend to flow in waves through any large company, even if the flow seems at first to be



sluggish. Typically, an area such as competence development gradually generates a demand for the production and translation of documents, as awareness of the subject's importance grows. This results in a universal attempt to come up with new ideas and approaches, and one fine day, without warning, a flood-tide of consciousness breaks over the company, washing up terminology that may be excellent or questionable by turns, but is nevertheless in common use. At Ericsson Language Services, we realized early on that these "beachcomber" terms would not only enrich the database, but would provide the raw material that we could later refine into new releases of Eriterm. Besides, these terms and their equivalents in other languages would clearly be of help to other translators working on similar projects, even if the terms had not been formally approved or fully specified.

The terminology group—made up of the translators, the database administrator, and the manager—met once a month to go over the terms put into the database during the preceding period. The group then sorted out the terms judged to be of interest, and made efforts to find equivalents in the languages not already represented, as well as applicable definitions or contexts.

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It was up to the database administrator to compile a log of terms that were queried in the database during the course of the month (a function available in Multiterm). This log was then examined to see if it contained any terms of particular interest, a judgment that was based partially on the number of searches related to it.

Any term records that included at least two languages other than the source-term language and a definition or context would then be assigned a domain, and a possible subdomain, according to an established list. The term record could then be formally approved and the necessary administrative data assigned.

Each translator/terminologist was expected to devote four hours a week to this work, not counting the monthly terminology group meetings, which might be of half-a-day's duration.

#### **The Database Administrator**

Aside from the tasks mentioned above, the database administrator was expected to follow tool and software developments, manage a test database, maintain a log of any changes to the database, keep all documentation up-to-date, and see to it that a back-up copy was always in place.

As the person with the most in-depth knowledge of Multiterm and Termelsa, the database administrator was also very influential in coming up with new ideas to make work more efficient and provide solutions to problems that might arise.

#### **A Structured Approach**

As an Ericsson company, Ericsson Language Services was required to be ISO certified. This meant, among other things, that there had to be clear rules for the documentation of our processes, products, and routines. Specifications, descriptions, user manuals, and reference guides were drafted, discussed, and evaluated by everyone working on the terminology team. In particular it was important to document how we adapted Multiterm to suit our needs. This documentation has been updated several times over as new ideas and requirements arise.

Our approach to terminology was always more practical than theoretical in that we gave foremost priority to examining the methodologies and tools in existence, and then chose those that suited our particular needs and operations. In addition, because Ericsson Language Services was a member of the Swedish Centre for Technical Terminology (TNC), we had access to a

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certain number of hours per year for terminology seminars and the like.

We also attended various conferences and seminars organized by Termnet, and made trips to TNC's counterparts in various countries. We maintained mutually fruitful relations with other companies and organizations with terminology operations resembling our own. Associated with this was training in the various tools we used, database management, translation memory, and machine translation.

#### **Future Development**

Having functioned as an Ericsson unit for many years, and as a company within the Ericsson Group for three years, Ericsson Language Services was bought by Interverbum toward the end of 1997. The primary purpose of the merger was to access a larger pool of language resources, and to secure for future development competence in more language-related technology.

Our plans to upgrade our product—Eriterm—have been somewhat delayed because of a number of considerations. However, we are now looking towards some interesting developments. The first is that we have decided to change the name Eriterm (which has a very strong Ericsson connection) to Techniterm, which more clearly reflects our goal of including terminology from other subject areas. We have also closed down our old Eriterm PC product, and are in the process of moving its contents to a new platform, namely Multiterm Dictionary. We have found this product very easy to use and upgrade, and inexpensive enough to allow us to offer the product at a very reasonable price. Apart from the new platform, we have two to three thousand

new term records ready to be imported into the product.

We are constantly being asked if and when Techniterm will be available on the Web. While this is not technically a problem, we need to carefully examine how we can receive payment for its use. There are several possible solutions available but we would like to be more sure of our footing before we make a decisive move in this direction.

## The Rocky Road and the Superhighway

While I hope it is evident that the rocky road I mentioned at the beginning of this article has now become passably paved, the idea of a terminological superhighway must be seen as something existing only in an imagined future. Awareness has grown and tools are available, but with each new positive step or new development, new problems arise. One seemingly thorny issue is copyright. A company which pays for the development of a glossary pertaining to its area of business is reluctant to see that terminology used by a competitor. I don't pretend to have a ready solution to this problem, but I find it most gratifying that terminology is now considered worth something. A similar problem has appeared concerning the ownership of translation memories. I would maintain that, in the end, the terms you make are equal to the terms you take.

From my point of view, both the biggest problem and the greatest possibility before us is the need to transfer terminology across language-technology tools. Though the ability to do this may create difficulties as mentioned above, the amount of structured terminology in existence as separate islands of competence and reference is simply not supportable in the long run. Admirable work has been done to create standards, and projects are under way to facilitate terminology exchange, so perhaps we are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

The importance of terminology is on the rise in the wake of the growing importance of user guides, maintenance manuals, and specifications needed to accompany the vast array of services and products we encounter in our daily lives. Having devoted a number of years to the elusive goal of harnessing terminology, I find it gratifying to see this field truly come of age.

### About the Case Study

The above is an introductory excerpt from an extensive case study on terminology management at Ericsson, and will appear in full in a book to be published in 1999 by John Benjamins Publishing Co. in the ATA-monograph series. The book, *Case Studies in Language Management*, will feature real-life examples of language-technology and management techniques at global companies, large and small.

### About the Author

GARY JAEKEL, former managing director of Ericsson Language Services, is currently in charge of product development, vendor relations, and PR at Intervendum, a Scandinavian language-services company. Gary was also a founding member and former president (1990-1995) of the Swedish Association of Professional Translators (SFO). He has served on the board of the Swedish Centre for Technical Terminology (TNC).