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SEMANTIC VARIATION AND TERMINOLOGICAL CONVERGENCE IN MULTILINGUAL UNITED NATIONS DOCUMENTATION

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Abstract

Multilingual United Nations documentation represents a complex institutional environment in which specialized concepts are expressed through different linguistic systems while being expected to preserve a high degree of semantic and terminological consistency. The present study examines the relationship between semantic variation and terminological convergence in multilingual United Nations documents. The central problem addressed in the study concerns the coexistence of linguistic variation and institutional standardization: equivalent concepts may receive structurally, semantically or contextually different realizations across languages, while institutional communication simultaneously requires stable and recognizable terminology. The research adopts a corpus-based comparative approach and analyses multilingual terminological correspondences in official United Nations documentation.

Keywords: semantic variation, terminological convergence, United Nations documentation, multilingual terminology, parallel corpus, institutional discourse, terminology standardization, semantic equivalence.



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Introduction

Multilingual institutional communication requires the simultaneous preservation of linguistic diversity and conceptual stability. This requirement is particularly evident in the documentation system of the United Nations, where legal, political, humanitarian, environmental, economic and administrative concepts are communicated across several languages. Although the conceptual content of a document is expected to remain stable, the linguistic forms through which this content is expressed may differ considerably. This creates an important terminological problem: the same institutional concept may be represented by different lexical structures across languages, while similar lexical forms may not always carry exactly the same semantic scope.

The problem becomes more complex when terminological consistency is viewed from the perspective of actual multilingual usage. In theory, standardized terminology presupposes a relatively stable relationship between a specialized concept and its linguistic designation. In practice, however, official documentation often demonstrates a degree of semantic and lexical variation. Such variation may occur because languages differ in their systems of word formation, phraseological conventions, grammatical structures and patterns of conceptual categorization. It may also arise because specialized terms develop differently across discourse domains or because several competing equivalents coexist during a particular stage of terminological development.

For this reason, semantic variation in multilingual United Nations documentation should not automatically be treated as a deficiency. In many cases, different lexical realizations are functionally equivalent and reflect natural differences between languages. The more significant question is whether these variants preserve the same institutional concept and whether one of them gradually



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becomes dominant through repeated use, terminological regulation and standardization. [1:720]

The concept of terminological convergence is particularly useful in explaining this process. Terminological convergence refers to the gradual movement of different linguistic or translational variants toward a more stable, institutionally preferred system of designations. In multilingual institutional discourse, such convergence does not imply that all languages must reproduce the same grammatical or lexical form. Rather, it means that the conceptual boundaries and institutional functions of corresponding terms become increasingly stable across language versions.

Thus, semantic variation and terminological convergence should not be regarded as mutually exclusive phenomena. They coexist and interact within multilingual discourse. Variation reflects the linguistic realization of specialized concepts in different language systems, whereas convergence represents the tendency toward conceptual and terminological stability within institutional communication.

The main purpose of the present study is to analyse this interaction in multilingual United Nations documentation. The research focuses on the causes and forms of semantic variation, the conditions under which variation remains acceptable, and the mechanisms through which terminological convergence emerges. Particular attention is given to the role of context, institutional usage and corpus evidence in distinguishing legitimate linguistic variation from unstable or inconsistent terminology. [3:89]

Materials and Methods

The study employs a corpus-based comparative methodology combining principles of terminology studies, corpus linguistics and multilingual discourse analysis. The research material consists of official United Nations documents



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representing several institutional domains, including sustainable development, human rights, international cooperation, peace and security, climate policy and international law.

The analysis focuses on terminological units that occur repeatedly across multilingual versions of comparable documents. Such units are examined in their immediate textual environment rather than as isolated lexical items. This methodological decision is essential because semantic variation often becomes visible only in context. Two expressions may appear equivalent when considered separately but may display different semantic preferences, collocational patterns or institutional functions in actual discourse.

The first stage of analysis involves identifying recurrent specialized terms and their corresponding realizations in other language versions. The emphasis is placed primarily on multiword terminological units, institutional designations and domain-specific concepts. Multiword units are particularly important because their semantic structure is often more complex than that of individual lexical items. Their translation may involve lexical expansion, contraction, grammatical restructuring or semantic redistribution.

The second stage consists of semantic comparison. The corresponding terms are analysed to determine whether they preserve the same conceptual core. The comparison takes into account not only dictionary meaning but also the semantic boundaries created by the institutional context. A target-language term may be lexically broader or narrower than its source-language counterpart, yet function as its accepted institutional equivalent. Conversely, a seemingly direct translation may introduce an additional semantic feature that is absent from the source concept.

The third stage focuses on contextual and collocational behaviour. The study examines whether particular variants occur with the same types of modifiers,



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verbs and related institutional concepts. Recurrent collocations are especially significant because they often reveal the semantic profile of a term more accurately than isolated definitions. If two presumed equivalents systematically occur in comparable collocational environments, this provides stronger evidence of functional convergence.

The final stage considers the degree of terminological stability. Variants are evaluated according to their recurrence, contextual consistency and institutional preference. The purpose is not simply to determine which form is most frequent but to establish whether repeated use reflects the consolidation of a preferred terminology. This makes it possible to observe terminological convergence as a process rather than as a fixed result. [6:156]

Results

The analysis demonstrates that semantic variation is a regular characteristic of multilingual United Nations documentation. Even when corresponding documents represent identical institutional content, terminological forms may differ in their internal semantic structure. Such variation is especially visible in multiword terms, where languages tend to organize conceptual information differently.

One common form of semantic variation results from differences in lexicalization. A concept that is expressed through a relatively compact term in one language may be represented by a more descriptive expression in another. In such cases, the semantic content remains substantially equivalent, but the distribution of meaning across lexical components differs. This type of variation reflects the structural resources of individual languages rather than a difference in institutional meaning. [7:234]



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Another form of variation concerns semantic scope. A target-language designation may be slightly broader or narrower than its apparent source-language equivalent. In ordinary translation, such differences may be considered minor. In institutional discourse, however, they can become significant because specialized concepts often have precisely defined functions. The analysis shows that context plays an important role in compensating for these differences. A somewhat broader lexical unit may function as an accurate equivalent when its institutional context restricts its meaning to the required conceptual field.

The study also reveals variation caused by competing designations. In some cases, several expressions are used for the same or closely related concept within the same language. These variants may originate from different translation traditions, earlier institutional usage or attempts to adapt international terminology to the structural norms of the target language. At an initial stage, such variation may coexist without creating serious interpretative problems. Over time, however, recurrent institutional usage tends to favour one form. [8:90]

This gradual preference represents one of the clearest manifestations of terminological convergence. A variant becomes increasingly stable when it appears repeatedly in comparable document types, maintains consistent semantic boundaries and becomes associated with a particular institutional concept. At this stage, the relationship between concept and designation becomes stronger, while alternative variants gradually lose their status as equally preferred forms.

The results therefore indicate that terminological convergence does not arise solely through formal prescription. It also develops through repeated textual practice. Institutional standardization and recurrent discourse usage reinforce one another. A term may initially be one of several possible equivalents, but repeated use in official documents increases its recognizability and conceptual stability.



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Once this form becomes established, it may subsequently influence new translations and terminology-management practices. [2:95]

At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that convergence should not be interpreted as complete formal uniformity. Different languages continue to represent the same institutional concept through structurally different forms. What converges is primarily the relationship between linguistic designation and conceptual reference. Thus, multilingual terminological convergence is conceptual and functional rather than purely formal.

Another significant observation concerns the role of semantic context in determining whether variation is acceptable. Two variants may both be valid if they are associated with different discourse functions. For instance, a more general designation may be preferred in policy-oriented texts, while a more specialized form occurs in technical or legal documents. Such differentiation does not necessarily disrupt terminological consistency if the contextual distinction is stable and predictable. [4:137]

A problem emerges when competing terms alternate in similar contexts without a clear semantic or functional motivation. In such cases, variation becomes inconsistent rather than systematic. This may create ambiguity for translators, terminology specialists and automated language-processing systems. The distinction between contextually motivated variation and uncontrolled variation is therefore essential for evaluating multilingual terminological quality.

The corpus-based analysis also demonstrates that frequent usage alone is insufficient for identifying a preferred equivalent. Frequency must be interpreted in relation to semantic consistency and institutional function. A highly frequent form may occur across a broad range of meanings and therefore be less suitable as a specialized designation than a less frequent but more conceptually precise



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term. Terminological convergence is thus better understood through the combined analysis of recurrence, context and conceptual stability.

Discussion

The findings suggest that semantic variation in multilingual institutional discourse should be approached as a structured linguistic phenomenon rather than as an exception to terminological standardization. Languages do not reproduce specialized concepts through identical lexical mechanisms. As a result, some degree of variation is unavoidable even in highly regulated institutional environments.

The main theoretical implication is that terminology standardization should not be based on an expectation of absolute formal correspondence. Such an expectation would ignore the structural diversity of languages and could lead to artificial or linguistically inappropriate translations. A more effective approach is to seek conceptual convergence while allowing justified structural and lexical differences.

This distinction is particularly relevant to United Nations documentation because its terminology often operates simultaneously within several discourse traditions. A concept may have legal implications in one document, political significance in another and administrative use in a third. Consequently, its linguistic realization may vary slightly according to communicative context. Terminological research should therefore distinguish changes in form from changes in concept. [10:156] The analysis also highlights the dynamic nature of institutional terminology. Terminology is often treated as a static system consisting of established concepts and fixed designations. The corpus evidence, however, indicates that institutional terms may pass through periods of competition and gradual stabilization. A new or emerging concept may initially have several translation equivalents. As



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documents accumulate, one of these forms may become more frequent, semantically more stable and institutionally recognizable.

Terminological convergence can therefore be described as a process of progressive stabilization. This process is influenced by translation practice, terminology management, repeated institutional usage and the interaction between multilingual documents. It is not necessarily immediate, and it may occur at different rates depending on the domain. [11:93]

For example, highly regulated legal terminology may converge relatively quickly because conceptual boundaries are narrowly defined. Terminology associated with developing political or social concepts may remain variable for a longer period because the concepts themselves are still evolving. This indicates that terminological convergence is closely connected to the degree of conceptual stabilization within a particular field.

The role of specialized corpora is especially important in identifying such tendencies. Traditional terminology databases usually present the final or preferred form of a term, whereas a corpus makes it possible to observe the process through which that form becomes dominant. It reveals earlier variants, competing expressions and changes in contextual preference. In this sense, corpus evidence adds a diachronic and usage-based dimension to terminology research. Another important implication concerns translation quality. Translators working with international institutional texts must balance semantic accuracy with terminological consistency. A linguistically natural equivalent may not always be the preferred institutional term, while a standardized term may require adaptation to fit a particular grammatical context. Effective translation therefore depends on understanding both the conceptual system and the established patterns of usage. The findings also have relevance for multilingual terminology databases and machine translation systems. If terminological variation is treated only as noise,



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automated systems may incorrectly eliminate legitimate contextual distinctions. Conversely, if every variant is treated as equally valid, the system may produce unstable terminology. A more effective approach requires the classification of variation according to its linguistic, contextual and institutional function. [10]

This perspective allows terminology harmonization to be understood as controlled convergence. The purpose is not to remove all lexical diversity but to ensure that different forms do not create conceptual uncertainty. A multilingual terminology system is therefore successful when it combines linguistic flexibility with conceptual stability.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that semantic variation and terminological convergence are closely interconnected phenomena in multilingual United Nations documentation. Semantic variation arises naturally from differences between linguistic systems, lexicalization patterns, grammatical structures and discourse contexts. Such variation does not necessarily weaken terminological consistency as long as the underlying institutional concept remains stable.

Terminological convergence occurs when repeated institutional usage, conceptual consistency and terminological standardization gradually establish preferred designations across multilingual documentation. This process does not eliminate structural differences between languages. Instead, it strengthens the correspondence between each language-specific designation and the same institutional concept.

The analysis also confirms the importance of distinguishing systematic variation from inconsistent variation. Systematic variation is motivated by linguistic structure, contextual function or genre. Inconsistent variation occurs when



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competing designations appear without a clear functional distinction and may therefore reduce terminological stability.

A corpus-based approach provides an effective means of making this distinction because it allows terminology to be examined in authentic multilingual contexts. Corpus evidence reveals not only which variants exist but also how frequently they occur, in which contexts they are preferred and whether their semantic boundaries remain stable. When this evidence is combined with institutional terminology practices, it becomes possible to identify patterns of convergence with greater reliability.

The principal conclusion is that terminological harmonization in multilingual United Nations documentation should be viewed as a dynamic process of semantic regulation and conceptual stabilization. The aim is not to achieve complete lexical uniformity but to establish stable and predictable relationships between specialized concepts and their language-specific designations. This approach provides a stronger basis for multilingual terminology management, institutional translation, parallel-corpus research and the development of language technologies designed for international organizations.

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