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CROSS-LINGUISTIC TERMINOLOGICAL ALIGNMENT IN A SPECIALIZED PARALLEL CORPUS OF UNITED NATIONS DOCUMENTS

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Abstract

The multilingual documentation system of the United Nations represents a highly complex environment in which specialized concepts are simultaneously expressed through several linguistic systems. This creates a significant terminological problem, since lexical similarity between corresponding language units does not always ensure conceptual or institutional equivalence. The present study examines cross-linguistic terminological alignment in a specialized parallel corpus of United Nations documents and focuses on the relationship between terminological equivalence, semantic variation, contextual realization and institutional standardization. The study adopts a corpus-based comparative approach in which parallel textual segments are examined in order to determine how identical institutional concepts are represented across different languages.

Keywords: Parallel corpus, United Nations documents, terminological alignment, terminological equivalence, multilingual terminology, institutional discourse, terminology harmonization, corpus linguistics.



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Introduction

The multilingual character of the United Nations makes terminological consistency one of the most important conditions of effective institutional communication. United Nations documents are produced within legal, political, diplomatic, humanitarian, environmental and administrative domains, and each of these fields employs a relatively stable system of specialized concepts. Since the same institutional content is communicated in several official languages, terminological units must retain a sufficiently consistent conceptual meaning across linguistic versions. The problem, however, is that direct lexical correspondence between languages is rarely absolute. Languages differ in their lexical organization, grammatical structure, derivational mechanisms, phraseological conventions and semantic categorization. As a result, one institutional concept may be represented by a single word in one language, a multiword expression in another language, or by several contextually differentiated variants. [1:47]

This issue is especially significant in the analysis of United Nations documentation because the language of international institutions is characterized by a high degree of conceptual precision. Terms occurring in resolutions, conventions, reports and policy documents do not function as ordinary lexical units. They usually refer to established legal, administrative or political concepts and therefore possess an institutional status. Expressions such as sustainable development, human rights, peacekeeping operation, gender equality, rule of law and international cooperation are not merely combinations of commonly used words. Within the United Nations system, they function as relatively stable conceptual designations associated with particular institutional meanings and patterns of use. [2:66]



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For this reason, cross-linguistic terminology research cannot be limited to the identification of formal equivalents. A term found in one language must be analysed in relation to the specialized concept it denotes, the context in which it occurs, the collocations surrounding it and the established institutional designation used in another language. The central problem of the present study is therefore the distinction between lexical correspondence and terminological equivalence. Two expressions may appear to be direct translations of one another while differing in semantic scope or institutional function. Conversely, two structurally different forms may represent the same concept with a high degree of terminological accuracy.

Parallel corpora provide an important methodological basis for analysing such relationships. Since they contain corresponding versions of the same documents in two or more languages, they allow researchers to compare how identical communicative content is linguistically encoded. In this context, a specialized parallel corpus of United Nations documents is particularly valuable because it reflects authentic institutional usage rather than artificially constructed examples. The corpus makes it possible to observe the actual behaviour of terms in resolutions, reports and other official documents and to identify patterns that cannot be detected through isolated dictionary entries. [6:76]

Materials and Methods

The study is based on a corpus-oriented comparative methodology. The research material consists of multilingual United Nations documents representing institutional discourse in areas such as international law, sustainable development, human rights, peace and security, climate policy and international cooperation. The parallel structure of these documents allows corresponding textual segments to be compared across languages and provides a suitable basis



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for examining the behaviour of specialized terminology in authentic institutional contexts.

The analytical procedure begins with the identification of specialized terms in the source-language texts. Particular attention is given to recurrent noun phrases, institutional designations and multiword terminological units because these forms constitute a substantial part of United Nations terminology. The identified units are then located in corresponding parallel segments and compared with their target-language realizations. The analysis does not treat formal similarity as sufficient evidence of equivalence. Instead, each pair is evaluated according to the concept represented, the semantic scope of the designation, its contextual function and the extent to which it corresponds to established institutional usage. [10:25]

This method is important because one of the central characteristics of multilingual terminology is structural asymmetry. A concept expressed through a compact lexical form in one language may require a more descriptive construction in another. Similarly, a nominal structure may correspond to a prepositional or derivational structure in another linguistic system. Such formal differences do not necessarily indicate conceptual divergence. What matters is whether the terms refer to the same specialized concept and perform the same institutional function in comparable contexts. [11:16]

The contextual analysis is therefore conducted at the level of complete parallel segments rather than isolated lexical forms. Concordance patterns are examined to determine which collocations regularly occur with the selected terms, how consistently a particular equivalent is used and whether competing forms are associated with different genres or institutional settings. This enables the study to identify cases in which apparent variation is linguistically motivated and cases in which it reflects inconsistent terminological practice. [9:27]



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Institutional terminology resources are also important for validating corpus findings. In United Nations discourse, an equivalent cannot be regarded as fully established solely because it is semantically acceptable. The preferred designation may already have a recognized institutional form. Therefore, the analysis of parallel texts should be combined with verification through official terminology databases and documentation practices. This distinction between descriptive corpus evidence and institutional validation is central to the methodological framework of the study.

Results

The analysis shows that cross-linguistic terminological alignment in United Nations documents is not based on a uniform one-to-one relationship between lexical forms. Several recurrent patterns emerge, and these patterns demonstrate that terminological equivalence should be understood as a multidimensional relationship.

The first and most stable pattern is direct terminological correspondence. In these cases, terms in different languages refer to the same institutional concept, display relatively stable contextual behaviour and occur consistently across comparable documents. Such terms are usually associated with highly institutionalized concepts that have been used for a long period in international documentation. Their equivalents are often standardized and therefore show limited variation. This type of alignment represents the clearest form of terminological equivalence, but it is not necessarily characterized by identical grammatical structure. [7:79-80]

A second and more significant pattern is structural divergence combined with conceptual equivalence. In many instances, the same concept is realized through linguistic forms that differ considerably in their internal construction. The



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difference may concern the number of components, grammatical relations, derivational structure or word order. This is especially common when structurally distant languages are compared. From a purely formal perspective, such units may appear non-equivalent, but contextual analysis reveals that they perform the same specialized function and refer to the same institutional concept. This finding confirms that terminological alignment must be concept-oriented rather than form-oriented. [6:12]

Another important pattern involves context-dependent variation. The same source-language term may correspond to more than one target-language form across different documents. At first sight, such variation may suggest inconsistency. However, closer analysis often shows that the variants are associated with different contexts, document types or collocational environments. A term used in a legal resolution may require a more standardized and formally fixed equivalent, whereas the same conceptual field in an explanatory report may allow a more descriptive form. Consequently, not every instance of variation should be treated as a terminological defect. [12:348]

The analysis also reveals cases in which several possible equivalents compete for the same institutional concept. In such situations, all variants may be linguistically acceptable, but only one may be preferred in official usage. This demonstrates the significance of institutional standardization. In international organizations, terminology is not shaped exclusively by general linguistic norms. It is also influenced by internal terminological policy, translation practice and long-term institutional convention. A formally accurate translation may therefore be less appropriate than a standardized equivalent that has become established within the organization.

A particularly important result is that the frequency of a variant alone cannot determine its terminological reliability. A frequently occurring expression may



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reflect repeated translation practice without necessarily being the most accurate institutional equivalent. For this reason, corpus frequency should be interpreted together with contextual consistency and terminological validation. The most reliable equivalent is the form that demonstrates conceptual accuracy, recurrent contextual compatibility and institutional acceptance.

The study further shows that multiword terms present a greater alignment challenge than simple lexical units. Their internal elements may correspond differently across languages, and literal component-by-component translation may distort the overall concept. In such cases, the term should be analysed as a complete semantic unit. This is particularly relevant in United Nations discourse, where complex noun phrases frequently function as fixed institutional designations. The equivalence of such units depends on the meaning of the whole expression rather than the isolated meanings of its individual components.

These findings suggest that cross-linguistic terminological alignment operates on several interacting levels. Lexical correspondence provides only the initial indication of a possible equivalent. Semantic analysis determines whether the same conceptual content is preserved. Contextual analysis identifies whether the terms function in comparable discourse environments. Institutional verification finally establishes whether the target-language form corresponds to recognized terminology. Reliable alignment therefore emerges from the interaction of these dimensions rather than from any single criterion. [5:27]

Discussion

The results demonstrate that the main challenge of multilingual terminology is not translation itself but the preservation of conceptual stability across different linguistic systems. This distinction is especially important in institutional discourse, where a term often represents a concept that has legal, political or



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administrative implications. A minor semantic shift may therefore alter the interpretation of an entire document.

The corpus-based approach makes it possible to examine this problem empirically. Unlike conventional bilingual dictionaries, which usually provide decontextualized equivalents, a parallel corpus reveals how terms actually function in authentic discourse. It shows which equivalents recur, which contexts favour particular variants and whether the same term is translated consistently across different documents. This information is particularly valuable for institutional terminology because usage patterns may reveal differences between theoretical equivalence and practical translation convention.

At the same time, corpus evidence should not be treated as automatically normative. A corpus records what has been used, but not every recorded usage is necessarily terminologically optimal. Translators may adopt different solutions, institutional terminology may evolve over time and older documents may preserve forms that are no longer preferred. Consequently, corpus analysis must be combined with terminological verification. This allows descriptive evidence to be evaluated against institutional standards and prevents frequency from being mistaken for correctness.

The distinction between acceptable variation and problematic inconsistency is one of the most important theoretical outcomes of the study. Some terminological variation is a natural consequence of structural differences between languages. Other forms of variation are contextually motivated and reflect differences in genre, syntax or communicative function. These types of variation do not necessarily undermine terminological coherence. Problems arise when multiple forms are used for the same concept without a clear contextual or functional motivation. Such variation can reduce consistency and complicate translation memory systems, terminological databases and machine-assisted translation.



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This observation has practical implications for terminology harmonization. Harmonization should not be understood as the elimination of all variation. A more accurate objective is the regulation of variation. Legitimate linguistic differences should be preserved where necessary, while competing forms that create conceptual ambiguity should be reduced. The role of corpus analysis in this process is to identify which variants are systematic and which are unstable. Institutional terminology resources can then be used to determine the preferred form.

Another important aspect concerns the relationship between concept and designation. The study confirms that a successful cross-linguistic alignment begins with the concept rather than the word. The researcher must first establish what specialized concept is being represented in a particular context and only then compare its linguistic realizations. This principle prevents formal resemblance from being treated as evidence of semantic identity. It is particularly important in multilingual legal and diplomatic discourse, where apparently equivalent lexical items may have different semantic ranges in different languages.

The findings also suggest that specialized parallel corpora can serve a broader function than conventional translation comparison. They can be used as analytical tools for terminology management. By examining repeated correspondences across large sets of documents, researchers can identify stable terminological pairs, detect emerging variants and observe changes in institutional usage over time. This creates the possibility of developing more dynamic terminology databases in which recommended equivalents are supported by actual corpus evidence.

For translation practice, this approach may improve both accuracy and consistency. Translators can examine not only which equivalent has been



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previously used but also the contexts in which it occurs. This is particularly important when several target-language forms are available. Corpus evidence can show whether one variant is preferred in legal documents, another in technical reports and another in general institutional communication. Such contextual differentiation is more useful than a simple list of synonyms.

The same principle is relevant to machine translation and artificial intelligence systems. Automated systems frequently rely on statistical or contextual patterns, but institutional terminology requires a higher level of conceptual control. Integrating specialized parallel corpora with validated terminology resources can reduce terminological fluctuation and improve the reliability of machine-assisted multilingual communication. In this sense, the corpus does not merely provide training data; it also functions as a source of terminological evidence that can be used to evaluate and correct automated output.

Conclusion

The study confirms that cross-linguistic terminological alignment in United Nations documents is a complex process that cannot be reduced to lexical matching. The multilingual nature of institutional discourse requires the same specialized concept to be represented through different linguistic structures while preserving conceptual and functional stability. As a result, terminological equivalence must be assessed through a combination of semantic, contextual and institutional criteria.

The analysis shows that several forms of correspondence coexist within a specialized parallel corpus. Some terms demonstrate stable direct equivalence, while others are structurally different but conceptually identical. Certain terms exhibit context-dependent variation, whereas others require institutional standardization because several possible equivalents compete within the same



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conceptual field. These differences demonstrate that variation should not automatically be interpreted as inconsistency. The decisive question is whether the variation has a clear linguistic or contextual motivation and whether the concept remains stable.

Parallel corpora are particularly valuable because they provide empirical evidence of actual multilingual usage. They enable researchers to observe terminological correspondences in context, identify recurrent variants and evaluate the consistency of translation practice. However, corpus evidence is most effective when combined with institutional terminology resources, since authentic usage and normative terminology do not always coincide.

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