The issues of translating development terminology in Vietnam: empirical evidence from the perspective of Translation Studies

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ABSTRACT

In Vietnam, the meanings of contemporary well-established catch words in development in the local context are observed and contested by many as problematic to perceive and translate, and hence, bring about impacts to the multidirectional communication of ideas and terminology. This study seeks to answer two primary questions: (1) What are indicative cases of different translations of development terminology in Vietnam; and (2), How Translation Studies (TS) can contribute to addressing terminological issues in development work? By adopting the methodological tool in TS of empirical corpus and textual analysis, this study introduced a dataset compiled from development texts being used in Vietnam. Fundamental steps to identify, search and compare occurrence frequencies of original terms in English and their equivalent in the corpus were undertaken, and a case study of translating *Wellbeing* was reported. From the perspective of TS, findings demonstrate the potential impacts of terminology translation in development work, while it is argued that the introduced TS methodology might be useful in handling development terminology for those who engage and translate terms in development practice.

KEYWORDS

Translation, terminology, development work, Vietnam, corpus-based textual analysis, wellbeing

1. Introduction

The objective of this study is to relate terminology and translation with the forms of development knowledge theorised in Development Studies (DS). Doing so responds to an increasing awareness in Translation Studies (TS) of the need to address translation and terminology issues in development work. This study presents an experiment to provide concrete examples of translated terminology in development in Vietnam and understand terminological issues that users of these terms face as part of specialist communication. To set out the problem space and context of research, the paper starts with an overview of terminology and/in development and the role terminology plays in specialised communication between development stakeholders. It then outlines the challenges in handling development terminology in the context of Vietnam amidst problems of translation and different bodies of knowledge. By using corpus and textual analysis as a methodological tool, the case of the development concept *wellbeing* and its multiple translated equivalents are analysed in the context of from an

English – Vietnamese parallel corpus built from development texts. Lastly, the paper demonstrates the potential impacts of adopting the TS analytical model introduced in this study to assist in terminology translation in development work.

2. Terminology and/in development: the problem space

Terminology can be understood and used in many different ways. Traditionally, terminology might be defined as a collection or glossary of terms of a specific domain and area of language for specific purposes (LSP) as opposed to that of language for general purposes (LGP) (Pavel and Nolet 2001; COTSOES 2003). Contemporary terminology, however, has three key features. First, terminology is defined as a set or a group of specialised words or multiple-word expressions, or *terms*, that belongs to a particular field of knowledge. For example, we can speak of the terminology of Development Studies, or sustainable development terminology (Glavič and Lukman 2007)*.* Second, terminology is used by a group of specialists (such as development practitioners) and can also be used by a social entity (for instance, within a development programme) therefore can essentially serve as the basis for specialist communication (Horváth 2016).Third, terminology also refers to the study and the methodology of dealing with concepts and terms (Horváth 2016).

So what role do terminology, and in particular, the translation of terminology, play in development practice? The general view is that development dialogue is often distracted by a vocabulary that creates more ambiguity than brings comfort to lives in distress, and the opacity in terminology adds to the fog that often surrounds its use (Chinsman 2007).

Although the literature on terminology translation in development contexts remains limited, there have been initiatives aimed at drawing attention to its importance. In fact, research on contextual terminology and/in development can be viewed from a variety of thought-provoking angles. For example, the early work of Markee (2002) is such an angle to explore terminological issues in development, with a focus on the non-neutral and context-based meanings invested in country descriptors such as *the Third World*, *developing*, *underdeveloped*, *developed*, *rich*, *poor*, *low income* and *high income*. Taking another angle, Glavič and Lukman (2007) attempted to clarify ambiguity and classify around 51 (monolingual/English) terms that are used in sustainable development based on a review of definitions. Similarly, contested meanings of well-established "buzzwords and fuzzwords" in development have been investigated by Cornwall and Eade (2010). These contributions primarily highlight the need to engage with challenges concerning development discourse, the ambiguity of development vocabulary and the production of meanings with examples of critiques on keywords in conceptualising the link between terminology and/in development.

These inquiries accompany prominent investigations on the changing role of English in many development projects from being an essential support to a possible threat and obstacle (Savage 1997; Appleby et al. 2002; Méndez García and Pérez Cañado 2005; Coleman 2017). Mixed perspectives regarding language and the role of English point to the urgency to study the relation between development and translation. Leaving this issue of largely unaddressed risks perpetuates a number of problems. For example, translation is often made invisible and therefore undervalued and underresourced (Lewis and Mosse 2006; Bernacka 2012; Delgado Luchner 2018; Roth 2018) when the task of translation is embedded in the day-to-day responsibility of bi- and multilingual development workers and their roles to facilitate effective communication with other actors. This is largely, due to a shortage of effort to make adequate policies about translation in development practice, especially in the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector (Schäffner, Tcaciuc, and Tesseur 2014; Footitt 2017; Tesseur 2018).

Some terminology issues arise from the nature of development work itself. Due to the interdisciplinary perspectives of development theory and practice (Rassool, Heugh, and Mansoor 2007; Kotzé and Kotzé 2008; Kalman 2009; Brett 2009; Moreno-Rivero 2018), inquiries of knowledge often necessitate the building of new terminology for communicative competence, hence a need for acquiring a working knowledge of terminology and concepts (Repko 2008). Addressing the implications of translation and terminology in development reflects the on-going struggle of contemporary development practice which, according to Ferguson (1994), is built on different realities expressed through different disciplinary knowledge and formalised Western-centric practices and interventions brought by Western institutions. This argument is echoed in the illustration of Escobar (1995) of knowledge in development which specifically concerns (1) the knowledge through which development comes into being then elaborates into objects, concepts and theories, (2) the system of power that regulates the practice of development, and (3) the subjectivity fostered by the discourse of development. More recently, to approach this line of questioning about development knowledge from the perspective of translation, Marais (2014) calls attention to the need to mediate power tensions created between different knowledge systems.

There is little doubt that development work is not regarded as work in only one but rather many specialised fields and disciplines, for example, sociology, anthropology, humanitarian actions, politics and peace promotion, along with others. In many cases, these fields are highly interlinked and overlapped. It is crucial also to take into account the technical knowledge being introduced into local contexts by development programmes and projects. With development work and doing development research bringing in specialist and technical knowledge, communication in development work can be regarded as specialist communication in which translating terminology plays an essential role. In this respect,

communicative competence in development work might become a burden because it requires the ability to comprehend and translate disciplinary-specific terminology to make it accessible to others, regardless of their fields of expertise (Klein 2010). Overall, the literature from both DS and TS indicates a strong rationale to study the translation of terminology and its impact to development work, whether the task of translation is undertaken by professional translators or other actors.

In the context of Vietnam, those who undertake translation-related tasks in development work all need to deal with terminology, whether they are professional translators, bilingual or monolingual project officers, coordinators, field staff, and so on. By sharing and joining the communication of knowledge, their work is highly cross-disciplinary, their practices are highly interconnected, whether or not they have similar professional backgrounds or work experiences. The terminologies they engage with come from the many active fields that would be considered under the umbrella of development, such as sustainable agriculture and rural development, disaster management, poverty reduction education, climate change, ethnic minorities, landmine clearance and many more.

The translation of terminology in development work in Vietnam has significant real-life impact. While most textbooks and policy documents in development obtainable in Vietnam are mostly available in English with limited translations (Salemink 2006), much terminology coined in English gives rise to few agreed-upon and translation equivalents and many alternative versions among users. The result is that the different equivalents are used interchangeably among different specific domains or not even translated at all. Among these are key terms such as *wellbeing* and *resilience.* Such terms are being introduced into local contexts as core values and as development goals promoted by institutional and development aid donors as well as development think-tanks (Aménagement, Recherche, Pôle d'Echanges [AREP] South Asia 2018). However, it is not always the case that these values and principles could be conveniently adopted in the local contexts. Take *resilience* as an example. Until November 2017, the term was reported as never mentioned in any official government documents or speeches in Vietnam due to the lack of official explanation of the concept so far, hence *resilience* was absent in the practical activities of local experts or in policy-making.

To stimulate the interdisciplinary engagement between DS and TS within the identified problem space, this study addresses two research questions: firstly, what are indicative cases of different translations of development terminology in Vietnam; and secondly, how TS can contribute to addressing terminological issues in development work? The answer to these questions is achieved by following the empirical line of TS methodologies (Baker 1995; Kenny 1998; Olohan 2004). Empirical inquiries have by and large particularised textual and contextual features of terminology in specialised communication (Cabré and Sager 1998; Temmerman 2000), and taken into

account both the smallest details (such as keywords) as well as the largest cultural patterns (such as cultural elements and concepts) (Tymoczko 2007).

3. Method and Data

The model to analyse the development terminology being introduced in this study is based on a method called corpus-based textual analysis (Williams and Chesterman 2002) which has gained much popularity in translation research. The text analysis tool Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al. 2004) has been used to facilitate analytical procedures.

The data drawn on in this study consists of a digital corpus – a collection of ten pairs of full bilingual texts – made up of authentic and naturally-occurring policy documents used in development in Vietnam during a period of approximately ten years (2009 – 2019). The original English texts and their Vietnamese translations are equally valid and important in use because they are representative of the population of such texts in several popular domains of development work in Vietnam. The profile of the corpus is described in detail in Table 1.

Corpus name: DEVETEXT		
Type: Bilingual parallel corpus of English – Vietnamese		
Domain: Development		
Sub-domains: Rural development, Climate change, Poverty reduction, Sustainable livelihoods		
Number of input texts: 10 pairs		
Current counts	English	Vietnamese
Tokens	318,086	447,949
Words	259,096	382,624
Sentences	15,125	15,367
Current lexicon sizes		
word	18,671	9,919
tag	63	
lempos	12,798	
lemma	11,803	
lempo_lc	11,562	
lemma_lc	10,204	
lc	16,630	8,156

Table 1. Corpus profile

This line of translation-oriented terminology work often faces two main methodological challenges. The first challenge relates to the unclear boundary between terminology and general language, or the linguistic specifications of terminology which makes the task of defining a term highly speculative (Daille 1994; Bowker 2008). The second challenge points to the lack of datasets of parallel and comparable corpora for many specialised and emerging domains (Vintar 2001; Terryn, Hoste, and Lefever 2019).

Given the lack of resources, this terminology-driven study presents an attempt not only to create but also to analyse such a dataset.

Despite the challenges, the general design of a task of terminology identification by means of domain-specific corpus analysis has gained increasing popularity, and generally involves three steps: (1) identifying candidate terms from one language, (2) searching for their translation equivalents from a bilingual/multilingual corpus based on an alignment mechanism or occurrence frequency, then (3) comparing frequencies of the equivalents in the translated texts to observe how many different equivalents a certain term may have. The following section demonstrates the experiment conducted with *wellbeing* to explore the term's relevant equivalence features as a case study in order to acquire knowledge from a specialised subject field (Laviosa et al. 2017).

4. Case study: translating *Wellbeing*

The term *wellbeing* and its equivalents were identified through queries operated on Sketch Engine by means of parallel concordances, Key-Word-In-Context (KWIC) and frequency distribution.

Results of terms are displayed side-by-side with the key words highlighted in both English and Vietnamese. The queries yielded that *wellbeing* was translated in different ways and presented an example of inconsistency in translation and of different uses in different contexts depending on the specialised domain of the texts.

More specifically, with only a small number of occurrences, or hits, of totally 7 of the key word *wellbeing* in the English texts, the researcher was able to retrieve 4 different Vietnamese equivalents in the Vietnamese texts (Table 2). In particular, *phúc lợi* (*welfare*) has the highest frequency of use.

translation of *wellbeing*	hits	equivalents in English
phúc lợi	4	*welfare*
sự phát triển kinh tế - xã hội	1	*socio-economic development*
mức sống	1	*life standards*
đời sống	1	*life conditions*

Table 2. Term list for translating *wellbeing* from English into Vietnamese

It should be noted that the aim of this particular analysis was not to measure precision or to count any correct terms because it will be challenging to define a correct translation for a term. Ideally, there would be gold standard data and a gold-standard corpus which contains "correctly translated terms", but unfortunately that type of data and corpora have not been established yet for development as a subject field. To take this shortcoming into consideration, results aimed to isolate mentions in the corpora of translation and translation-related concepts, then systematically

interrogate the contexts of certain target key words to showcase that in the Vietnamese language, there are more than one translation equivalents for *wellbeing*.

To widen the scope of interrogation, the researcher also operated a number of wildcard searches on the Internet with *wellbeing* as the keyword in other contexts. Results show that are also different Vietnamese equivalents being used simultaneously in the media and across government publications and policy documents. For example, in the official Vietnam United Nations website (2020), *wellbeing* in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 is rendered in a simplified manner as *cuộc sống tốt* (*good life*) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Wellbeing* on the Vietnam UN website

This case study has yielded some implications. First, it brings in empirical evidence as a good entrance to further explore the use of the translations of *wellbeing* as a problematic term by those who engage with it on a daily basis. Second, results may also invoke further analysis of the use of different equivalents with larger textual inputs of different levels of importance to the corpus in analysis, such as influential policy documents or the language of development prospectuses. Third and more broadly, to relate to how the terms are translated on the ground, if we bear in mind that there are local approaches and local systems toward understanding key concepts and terms such as *wellbeing* (Q. T. N. Nguyen 2016; Dhiman and Kriger 2018), it will be important to have more empirical evidence of how the term is translated in authoritative texts. This will contribute to addressing the gap related to the embracing of local knowledge or epistemology that could be a base to compare introduced terms and their translations in the local context. These theoretical grounds can also be

beneficial to understand the tension between local popular knowledge systems and technical knowledge systems introduced by development agents which calls for mediation and the apparatus of translation (Marais 2014).

5. Conclusion

This study focuses attention on the identification of terms with different equivalents from an English – Vietnamese bilingual dataset in the domain of development. The problem space signals a gap in understanding of translation in development, hence whether practical steps have been taken to overcome challenges in translating terminology remains an open question. This study refers this gap to the need for systematic analysis of very large bilingual datasets which remain unexplored in the huge amounts of policy documents and development textbooks, however, as Tesseur (2017) asserts, these datasets have huge empirical wealth and theoretical salience for use because of the availability of original/source and translated/target development texts.

The dataset built from selected policy documents was relevant because the documents are considered essential in the work of many development agencies in Vietnam and present concepts and terms being used every day. Presently, as much as the researcher is not aware of any English – Vietnamese parallel corpora built for a specialised domain, there has not been any monolingual or bilingual corpus for the purpose of research in the area development studies in Vietnam. To his best knowledge, this study is also likely the first to introduce the use of an English – Vietnamese parallel corpus built in the specialised domain of development to not only identify translation equivalents, but also to understand why identifying translated terms can be challenging for users, especially "in cases where there is not easy equivalent" (Zanettin 2002, 11).

Using *wellbeing* as only one case study, the study aims to find illustrative cases of different translations of terms and rather than trying to solve them, preliminary results provided good evidence of problematic translations of the terms retrieved from the dataset. Although only at an initial stage of analysis, findings were important because they gave empirical support to the problem space identified in the literature from DS and TS regarding the inter-relation between development and translation. In future, interventions of lexical database processing and the use of larger parallel corpora will be beneficial to better showcase specific patterns of use of terms in different contexts and how development stakeholders deal with challenges when translating terminology. A combination of empirical research and other methodological inquiries may be envisaged to understand the sociological and contextual aspects of translation such as, for example, potential impacts of terminology translation on the communication of development ideas in Vietnam.

To conclude and relate to the second research question, this study shows that corpus-based textual analysis in particular and TS methodologies in general can contribute to the handling of development terminology. In the case of those who deal with terminology in development, they should be made aware of and explore such methodological tools and models already available, not as an academic exercise, but as some real-world contribution to the specialist communication in development.

Lastly, although not the direct focus of this article, there has been evidence that development stakeholders in Vietnam have started to create a learning zone to raise translation issues and discuss solutions for translating problematic development concepts and terminology (such as *resilience*)[1]. It will be useful to promote this aspect of collaborative effort and draw attention to the translation of development concept and terminology as shared learning. From the perspective of DS, how the tasks of translation undertaken by various development actors are made invisible shows that more effort will be needed to fully identify the engagement in translation, therefore further work is needed to support them. From the perspective of TS, shared learning prospects (Wenger 1999; Fox 2000) are meaningful as they emphasize the social role of translation in development and especially the collective roles of those who translate in development work as part of day-to-day practice but might not necessarily identify themselves as translators. With development actors nowadays being recognised as active agents of change (Mokoena and Moeti 2017), the introduced tool and dataset in this study might be helpful to the practice of shared learning not only between professional translators but also broadly for those who engage with translation and handle terminology in development practice.

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[1] In 2018, the French Development Agency (AFD) worked in collaboration with the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union (HCYU) to organise the contest *"Creativity with Resilience – Translating the notion of Resilience into words and by means of visuals"*. This was the first time a collaborative effort was called for at a national level and to focus on encouraging Vietnamese youth to translate (the concept and term) *resilience* into the forms of words, infographic and video clips. This important initiative aimed to raise public awareness of the impact of environmental and social changes in Vietnam, thus calling for the community's joint effort in overcoming the environmental consequences and promoting sustainable development.

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Biography

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