INTERVIEW WITH

FOLKERT ZIJLSTRA

SENIOR TERMINOLOGIST AND HEAD OF THE NATO TERMINOLOGY OFFICE

"A NATION THAT MANAGES ITS TERMINOLOGY CORRECTLY WILL NOT ONLY BE PERCEIVED AS A TRUSTWORTHY MEMBER OF THE ALLIANCE, BUT ALSO ENRICH AND REINFORCE ITS OWN LANGUAGE AT THE SAME TIME"

Folkert Zijlstra studied English and International Relations in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. In 1989, he joined the Dutch Ministry of Defence as an English translator and later became head of its translation service. In 2005, he joined NATO as a terminologist, subsequently becoming Senior Terminologist and Head of the NATO Terminology Office, part of the NATO Standardisation Office. In November 2018, he attended the conference on the achievements and challenges of military terminology in the Slovenian Armed Forces. During his lecture and workshop, he presented NATO's Terminology Programme and the process of approving and managing terminology in NATO. In the interview, we talked about the importance of terminology management, some of best terminology practices and tools available in NATO, and several other terminology challenges.

Mr. Zijlstra, you are Head of the NATO Terminology Office within the NATO Standardization Office. What is the role of terminology management in NATO and its member states?

In NATO, the use of NATO Agreed terminology in the two official languages, English and French, is considered to be one of the main enablers of 'interoperability'. For this terminology to be available, however, it must be produced, maintained and updated through the NATO Terminology Programme, in which member states approve the various terminology proposals. In NATO, therefore, terminology management serves to complement and support all the efforts to enhance 'interoperability'. However, I like to think that the consistent use of terminology in NATO documents also goes beyond this. I think it also helps NATO boost its image as a transparent and reliable organization by speaking with one voice. A nation that manages its terminology correctly will not only be perceived as a trustworthy member of the Alliance, but also enrich and reinforce its own language at the same time.

Considering the age of the Alliance itself, the standardization of terminology in NATO is quite a recent phenomenon. What were the steps that have led to the standardization of terminology in NATO and what does it mean today?

Towards the end of the 20th century, some 50 years after NATO was established, different definitions started to be used for the same concept. Sometimes these definitions even contradicted each other. Therefore, in the NATO Policy for Standardization that was approved in 2000, the member nations decided that NATO documents must use NATO Agreed terminology in order for this issue to be solved. Although in the standardization policy that was revised in 2016, this level of ambition was unfortunately reduced to the use of NATO Agreed terminology in NATO standardization documents only, in the NATO Terminology Office (NTO) we see on a daily basis that most senior committees take the development of their terminology very seriously and work hard to bring it in line with the existing rules, going way beyond NATO standardization documents.

Today, NATO Terminology Office forms a part of the NATO Standardization Office. Has it always been the case and what was the reason to place terminology within the sphere of standardization?

As far as I am aware, the predecessors of the NATO Standardization Office (NSO) and its forerunner, the NATO Standardization Agency (NSA), also had someone in charge of terminology, the so-called 'NATO Terminology Coordinator' - nicknamed the 'Terminator'. This was because many people who submitted terminology proposals had a feeling that nothing happened to their proposals... Today, however, we have a completely transparent process in which everyone who contributes to the NATO Terminology Programme can use the 'TTF Tracker'

database to follow the processing of their proposal through the NATO Terminology Programme. The main reason for standardizing terminology in the Alliance is the need for the forces from the member and partner nations to be 'interoperable'. Given the fact that they come from different backgrounds and systems, they need common terminology in their communications in order to achieve the objectives of the NATO Alliance.

In 2015, NATOTerm database was introduced. Can you explain what NATOTerm is, how it functions and what is its general purpose?

NATOTerm is a terminology database. It is the official NATO terminology database, because all NATO Agreed terminology is promulgated in NATOTerm. It can be searched in different search modes and you can even make exports from the database and print them off in a glossary-like format. Its main purpose is to share the terminology that was developed by the various subject-matter experts and subsequently approved. In this way, everyone in the NATO community can use the correct (i.e. NATO Agreed) terminology in their documents. NATOTerm enables terminology to be taken out of its source document and to be shared with the rest of the NATO community – and in fact the rest of the world, because NATOTerm can be accessed by everyone on the Internet. Thus through NATOTerm the correct terminology can be used in all NATO documents. Since we have also added almost all so-called 'legacy glossaries', NATOTerm is becoming the 'one-stop shop' for all NATO terminology.

In the process of terminology management, NATO deploys a strict, multi-layered approval process: from Subject Matter Experts to Delegate Committees and Senior Committees. Based on your rich experiences, and insights from NATO, are there any good practices (maybe from smaller systems such as the Slovenian Armed Forces) that could be applied to terminology management in the Slovenian Armed Forces?

I do not know the Slovenian Armed Forces well enough to say that they should mirror the NATO process. I know that several other NATO member states, large and small, do. One of the main things, though, is to take terminology seriously. The fact that Slovenia has organized this conference is ample proof that Slovenia does. Furthermore, terminology should be approached correctly, i.e. by concentrating on the concept behind a term or its abbreviation. This is what I tried to make people understand through the various exercises and games in the terminology workshop. In NATO, terminology is part of writing a document and therefore subject matter experts in the various domains are confronted with the difficult task of having to propose definitions correctly. I am well aware that this takes them out of their comfort zone and is not an easy task. That is why the NATO Terminology Office is there to guide and help them. In the end, terminology is a resource that is developed by specialists and subsequently approved for common use. I think this is a good principle everywhere – including Slovenia!

You are visiting Slovenia and the Slovenian Armed Forces as a guest speaker at the conference on the achievements and challenges of Slovene military terminology. How does the Slovenian Armed Forces currently participate in NATO's terminology standardization efforts and what more could, in your opinion, be done?

I have no overview over what happens in NATO's senior committees and their substructures, i.e. of how individual member nations participate. On the whole, though, my impression is that Slovenia is a positive, contributing force. I have known Tamara Derman Zadravec for many years as the Slovenian representative first to the Military Committee Terminology Conference, which later became the Military Committee Terminology Board. Tamara is a positive force, too. She will speak her mind in a constructive manner and inject some common sense into the discussion if delegates drift off the point during meetings. In short, I would say carry on like this!

In Slovene military terminology, there is an impression that time pressure and different perspectives of linguists and "users" sometimes hinder the process of thorough development and management of terminology. The influence of foreign languages (mainly English) is therefore still overly present. What is your opinion and experience in this respect? What could be possible solutions to streamline the terminology development process and satisfy both requirements – language accuracy and time efficiency?

If I understand you correctly here, you are referring to Slovenian equivalents of (mainly) English terms. I do not think that there will ever be a situation in which translators will have all terms they need in the source language – on-the-spot solutions will always need to be made, if only because a 95%-correct translation delivered on time is better than a 100%-correct translation that is too late. This is simply a fact of life. In linguistic theory, it is the verdict of an educated native speaker of a language that determines whether a sentence is grammatical or not. I think a parallel can be drawn here with terminology. You could say that a subject-matter expert whose mother tongue is Slovenian should determine, in principle, which term or terms in Slovenian is or are correct. I think it was the speaker from the Terminology Section of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts who said so during the conference, implying that the rest is just a problem for the translators to solve, in principle. However, fortunately, in terminology you can make use of synonyms, which should make life easier for the translators. Ideally, therefore, terminology is developed in a dialogue between subject-matter experts and linguists, as it is in the NATO Terminology Programme. In short, I would say: do not be frustrated by the fact that you do not have all the terms in Slovenian, because a perfect situation will never exist and just keep on working steadily at your own terminology – and treasure it!

Iris Žnidarič
Photo: Bruno Toić
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