

Bilingual Terminography for Australian Family Law

Pam Peters

Macquarie University
pam.peters@mq.edu.au

While the focus on users has become central to the design of dictionaries, its applications in specialised lexicography and terminography, and especially in online dictionaries and termbanks, are still evolving in their infinite variety in print and online. This presentation examines how the user focus helps to frame the design of an online termbank in law, in an Australian venture in socioterminology.

Every aspect of the LawTermFinder termbank in Family Law is motivated by its intended users, they being members of the Australian public who need to understand legal terms that impact on their family relationships. This makes them a special category of learner, neither experts nor trainees in the special subject, but lay people involved in legal actions, seeking very particular legal knowledge to understand their situation. This practical need means that the selection of terms for the termbank's macrostructure is not purely those belonging to family law itself, but others relating to Australian legal systems and processes. Since mediation is a preliminary to commencing divorce proceedings, terms relating to the mediation system must be included.

The microstructure of the termbank is designed in line with the fact that its users – members of the general public seeking family law information – may not be either highly educated or literate in English. The definitions of terms must therefore be in accessible English, and they are accompanied by audio-recordings to support users with low levels of literacy. Where possible, diagrams and tables are used to provide alternative paths to understanding, and to illustrate the relationships among sets and clusters of terms so they do not have to be learned in isolation. This use of multimedia provides enriched contexts for acquiring new terminology, in line with good pedagogical practice for language acquisition. It also serves the needs of termbank users whose first language is not English – up to a quarter of the current Australian population. The termbank provides translations into 7 community languages of key elements in on each termpage. The selection of these out of the more than 150 immigrant languages spoken in Australia is again decided on the basis of users' needs, both the size of their community, and their self-professed levels of proficiency in English, as summarized in the Australian census every five years.

The translation of Australian law terms into languages other than English confronts us with numerous cultural differences, in the articulation of law as well as the anisomorphism between languages in crucial areas such as referencing family members. In bilingualising LawTermFinder for L2 users of English in Australia, we are also bridging the gap between two legal systems, so that the termbank users can understand the terms in the Australian context.

In all these ways, LawTermFinder is an initiative in socioterminology as well as descriptive terminography. By illuminating the meanings of Australian legal terms with verbal, audio and graphic means, as well as bilingualisations, we provide fuller access to their meanings for a spectrum of novice users, whether English is their first or second language.