

Symposium: Terminology in Communication Sciences and Disorders – A New Approach

Title: Rationale for a new approach to terminology

Presenters

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This paper will be presented by members of the International Group on Terminology Frameworks – Communication Sciences and Disorders (IGOTF-CSD). IGOTF-CSD was formed after the terminology forum at the 26th World Congress of IALP in Brisbane in 2004. Currently, Speech Pathology Australia leads a group of 11 participating associations. IGOTF-CSD is exploring new approaches to improving the appropriateness, accessibility and consistency of terminology for the field.

This paper addresses the first aim of the symposium:

- To provide the background and rationale for a new approach to terminology issues in the field of communication sciences and disorders.

This paper is not a research paper; its aim is to stimulate discussion and innovative thinking about an old issue. It draws on an extensive review of the literature as well as the ongoing work of the IGOTF-CSD aimed at improving the terminology of the field. For this paper the following terms will be used:

- *Terminology* refers to the whole broad area of clinical terminologies, definitions, classification, nomenclatures, ontology, and to the critical study of terms themselves
- *Term* refers to words with specific meaning in a specific context;
- A *definition* is a statement which manifests what a thing is or what its name signifies.

The professional area of communication sciences and disorders has an extensive, variable and sometimes confusing terminology. Extensive effort has been made by many people over the years to improve terminology. The enormous amount of work expended over the last 50 years provides an indication of just how complex and challenging is the aim of developing a comprehensive and useful terminology which can be used consistently by all professionals. Work on terminology at any level is complex, demanding and time-consuming. Cultural and regulatory frameworks also influence the priority given by members of the profession to addressing terminology issues.

An historical review undertaken by IGOTF-CSD of terminology commentary and projects (covering the last 50 years) illustrates that extensive work has been

undertaken, including dictionary projects, classification projects, translation projects and involvement in broader systems of terminology such as SNOMED-CT® and ICF©. The main focus of terminology projects over recent decades has been to seek agreement on formal definitions for terms in professional use; terminology problems have been seen as an issue of scientific definition. Sonninen & Hurme (*Journal of Voice*, 1992, 6 (2), pp188-193) suggested that at least two strategies for developing shared definitions of terms were possible, a consensus model or a dictation model. However they saw problems in either approach. The consensus model requires that a large percentage of the community participate in the definition process and afterwards accept the new definitions; the dictation model may succeed only if those who 'dictate' have enough power on the community. Neither of these conditions have been realised to date.

However, this extensive work in defining terms does not seem to have impacted significantly on the inconsistency that is a characteristic of the field, although the reasons for this are not clear. It could be, as Sonninen and Hurme mused, that it is just 'too difficult'; it could be shortcomings in processes to engage the profession with recommendations; it could be that 'solutions' to inconsistent terminology are based on an inadequate understanding of the nature of the problem, or it could be something else again.

While it may seem logical to address a terminology problem with better definitions of the terms, this may not be the case. There is a widespread perception amongst professionals that this is indeed the only approach to terminology and terminology issues. However, Bain (*Advances in Speech-Language Pathology*, 2005, 7 (2), pp 94-97) stated that while it may seem intuitively appealing or logical to address a terminology problem with more or better defined terminology, this may not address the actual problem. Lists of 'approved' terms do not necessarily 'connect' with the users of the terms. He appealed to Systems Theory to suggest that the consideration of terms within the broad professional practice schema is necessary for valid and useful terms. Without this, Bain suggested, we just tend to see terminology proliferation. Making better or sanctioned definitions is an understandable impulse to 'sort out the mess of terms'. Unfortunately, it seems to appeal only to terminologists! While a necessary feature, a scientific definition is not sufficient to ensure that a term is appropriate for the function for which it is used, and is used consistently by all. It is also likely, given human nature, that 'recommended' terms are unlikely to be broadly adopted in response to a decree from an authority.

The lack of significant improvement in consistency across the field of communication sciences and disorders, despite extensive effort, indicates the need for a new approach. Such an approach to terminology would view terms as much more than a list of words; it would view terms as a dynamic expression of the professional schema. Terms reflect the underlying philosophy of the profession and it is necessary to explore this in order to address issues in terminology. Such an exploration is difficult and potentially deeply challenging to existing ways of using terms.

The field of communication sciences and disorders sits at the interface of linguistics, psychology and medicine and its evolution has been influenced by trends in these disciplines over time. In 1969, Rockey (*British Journal of Disorders of Communication*, 4, pp 166-175) wrote that the profession appeared to be in transition

from professional infancy to childhood and it was usual, and desirable, that the terms that we used would undergo refinement as we mature; this was necessary so that we would have terminology ‘tools’ suitable for scientific communication. Rockey suggested that it is probable that we had inherited erroneous or immature conceptions of many disorders, reflected in the terms adopted, but gave no specific examples. As a developing profession we ‘borrowed’ and evolved our terminology and methodology for using terms from medicine, linguistics and psychology. It is important to investigate if this use of terms is appropriate for communication sciences and disorders. It is necessary then to understand how terms are used in medicine, linguistics and psychology – what dimensions of communication are referred to by these disciplines and if, in fact, they are compatible within the field of communication sciences and disorders. An important tool in this investigation will be an adapted version of the conceptual model underpinning the ICF®.

IGOTF-CSD’s review of the literature and specific professional projects on terminology over the past 50 years suggests that increased consistency is not to be achieved by the creation of a single list of standardised words (no matter how well conceived and scientifically-based) that is imposed by an eminent authority. The review attempts to take some lessons from past endeavours to provide a rationale for a new approach to terminology, wherein consistency in terminology is seen as an outcome of appropriate, accessible and useful terms with stable, clarifying definitions that suit the function and application of the term.

The historical review suggests lead to a number of suggestions for future investigations into terms and terminology. These are:

1. Terms should be regarded as a dynamic expression of the professional schema, operating within a broad culture and a number of specific contexts, for a range of purposes.
2. The ‘expert dictate’ model of developing ‘gold standard’ terms has been attempted on a number of occasions and found to have little measurable impact on practice. The reasons for this, and possible alternative models, should be investigated.
3. The question of terminology has long been considered by the profession as an issue of scientific definition with clear practical implications. The nature of *problems* in terminology should be further investigated, so that efforts to find solutions are based on a more complete understanding of the problems.
4. Given that inconsistency is inherent in human behaviour (along with creativity and flexibility), and there may be a limited value or understanding of the importance of consistent terminology, future terminology projects should work directly with professionals to increase awareness of the underlying issues, to increase understanding of the impact of the problems in terminology and to promote the value of consistency in using terms.
5. Terms in communication sciences and disorders do not ‘belong’ to the professionals alone. Since terms need to be appropriate, accessible and consistently used by all those who need them, a range of stakeholders need to be involved in developmental project work on terminology.
6. Consistency in the use of terms in research is required to overcome a lack of precision which impedes clarity. The importance of greater rigour in the use of terms should be promoted within the professional research community as

necessary to take research forward and to facilitate international collaboration and the sharing of data.

7. Future investigation should consider the functions and features of terms, with the aim to establish shared *meta-terminology* (or perhaps *meta-data*) models and concepts to allow productive professional debate and decisions about specific terms. This would allow decisions about the merit of any term to be based on established and objective criteria, rather than being based on varying personal views. In scenarios where decisions about an individual cannot be made, shared criteria would allow the creation of well-informed guidelines or recommendations.
8. General systems of terminology should be engaged directly, to allow better representation of the work in our field and for increasing our public profile.
9. The science of taxonomy, and understanding how words can be organised, should itself be further investigated as an important step in establishing a useful classification system for the field.
10. The study of professional terminology as a specialty area should be actively pursued. Other sources of information about terminology, including lexicography and philosophy, would inform the development of professionals' knowledge about terminology.

It is clear from this list of suggestions that a substantial amount of research and active engagement is yet required to improve the appropriateness, accessibility and consistency of terminology. The factors that have influenced the development of our current terminology and continue to impact on the resolution of terminology issues must be acknowledged and addressed in projects if they are to succeed. With the benefit of our predecessors' experience and with a broad and inclusive view of the needs of all users of terms in the field of communication sciences and disorders, it is possible to see the way forward.