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Language in Web Communication: A Crash Course

How to raise the linguistic awareness of non-linguist professionals in the workplace

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Abstract

Having taught and carried out research in LSP and business communication for many years, I have come across, again and again, the problems arising from the inferior status of language in the business environment. Being convinced that it does not have to be so, instead of going on trying to convince non-linguistically trained colleagues of the importance of language via the usual arguments, I suggest that we let them experience the problems arising from the non-recognition of the importance of language via a Web communication crash course, inspired by a course taught to BA students at the University of Southern Denmark, Kolding.

For years a debate has been going on in the LSP (Language for Special Purposes) and business communication community on two issues:

(1) Why do non-linguistically trained professionals in the workplace not realize the importance of language in general and of terms in particular?

(2) Is it possible to raise their awareness of the role played by language and terminology?

As to question (1), it is hard to understand why professionals with an academic background in LSP should earn less than, say, legally trained professionals with comparable educational backgrounds, and why terminology management is not considered an integral part of information and knowledge management (cf. Toft 1996).

It seems that little progress has been made over the past quarter of a century or more when it comes to providing an answer to question (1). We still do not understand why *they* do not realize what seems so obvious to *us*. Not even financial arguments seem to convince them, considering the amount of publications dealing with the financial aspects of this issue (Koller 1994, Kjeldgaard 2004 and 2008, Grinsted & Erdman Thomsen 2008 and 2011, to mention a few).

Thus Koller (1994) shows that considerable savings on variable costs can be achieved with even a modest terminology management effort, and Kjeldgaard (2004) gives practical examples of the extra cost involved in the translation of particular documents without having access to a term bank.

As to question (2), we seem to be likewise groping in the dark. But do we have to accept our colleagues' lack of awareness? In other words, are we doomed to continuing our debate and to wringing our hands in despair?

My answer is *No*, and in this article I intend to indicate a rather simple way out of the deadlock in the form of a crash course called Language in Web communication. I intend it to be a short, but challenging, course comprising competitive and playful elements that appeal to the target group. In that way, I am sure that their awareness of the role played by language and terminology will be raised substantially.

My optimism is based on my teaching experience, which I shall briefly introduce before presenting the crash course.

The Teaching Experience on Which the Suggested Crash Course is Based

At the University of Southern Denmark in Kolding, we offer study programs comprising various combinations of International Business communication, Web communication, Web technology, and Information science. As a lecturer with a background in LSP and terminology, I have taught terminology courses as such, but I have also taught several course modules, introducing BA and MA students of Web technology and Information science programs to the communicative and knowledge representation aspects of their study fields.
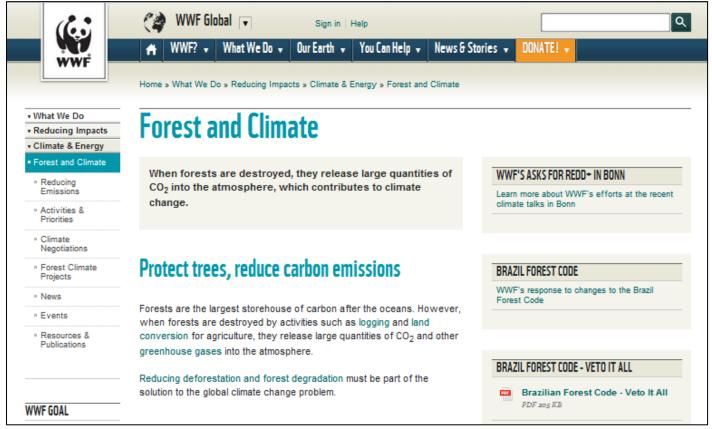
In many ways, I think that those students represent the prototype non-linguist professional, at least the non-linguist professional whose job involves the handling of information and knowledge; and in today's business environment the majority of jobs do so.

However, my prime source of inspiration is a course taught from 2009 to 2011 not to the group mentioned above, but to first year students of a BA study program combining International Business communication and Web communication. It was called Terminology management, but it ought to have been called Terminology in Web communication. Its main focus was on the role played by language in general, and by terms in particular, when creating and using Web pages.

The course definitely raised the students' awareness of the role played by language and terminology, so I have based the following crash course on the experience we gained from developing and teaching this course.

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I am convinced that such a crash course should be offered not only to students, but also to professionals of subject fields where the handling of information and knowledge plays a major role. Thus the course is aimed at a broad target group of BA and MA level students as well as professionals within those fields.

The presentation of the crash course takes the form of a list of themes where the target group tends to lack awareness. For each item on the list, I suggest three awareness-raising course elements. In the list, I refer to two Web page examples: example 1 from the homepage of the World Wildlife Fund[1] and example 2 from the homepage of Amazon.uk[2].

Example 1: *World Wildlife Fund website from:* http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/footprint/climate_carbon_energy/forest_climate/ *(29/08/2012)*

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[1] **http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/footprint/climate_carbon_energy/forest_climate/**
[2] **http://www.amazon.co.uk/books-used-books-textbooks/b?ie=UTF8&node=266239**

Example 2: *Amazon website from:* http://www.amazon.co.uk/books-used-books-textbooks/b?ie=UTF8&node=266239 *(28/09-2012)*

Themes and Corresponding Course Elements

Theme (I)
The crucial role played by words and terms as 'conceptual labels'

Explanation and Details	Suggested Course Elements
As pointed out by Morville & Rosenfeld (2007), individual words and multi-word expressions function as (1) labels or names for the individual items of Web site menus and other navigation and search systems, (2) textual links, and (3) designations of concepts introduced in plain text on Web pages.	The participants are introduced via Web page examples to • the general concept of language labels • the main types of labels and their functions on Web pages
Few, if any, members of the target group are aware of the role played by words and terms as labels, and therefore, they are also unaware of the potential problems caused by this circumstance.	Presented with examples of concrete Web pages, the participants are asked to • find as many examples of each language label type as possible • evaluate the quality of the labels they have selected in respect of understandability and briefness, using a grading scale from 1 - 5

(continued from above).	Presented with a Web page characterized by extensive use of synonymous labels, the participants are asked to • find as many sets of synonyms as possible on the page • select 1 label out of each set, giving sound arguments for why it should be preferred over its synonyms

Theme (II)
The general vagueness and ambiguity of natural language

Explanation and Details	Suggested Course Elements
Virtually none of the target group's members are aware, in advance, of the rather abstract theme of the vagueness and ambiguity of natural language. However, having been introduced to theme (I) and having performed the tasks suggested under it, most of them will accept this vagueness and ambiguity as a fact. This theme is introduced in order to make the participants realize that the creators of Web pages do not just have to accept the adverse consequences of the vagueness and ambiguity of natural language as it is possible to remedy some of them.	The participants are asked to find as many polysemous words as possible in a concrete Web page such as Example 1 (e.g. *logging*, *atmosphere*, *storehouse*, *greenhouse*). Next, they are asked to select those of the polysemous words that are used metaphorically on the Web page in question.
	The participants are asked to name as many senses as possible of 3 polysemous nouns presented to them, e.g. *pitch*, *rate*, and *gear*. For each sense of each word, they are asked to state • the domain in which the sense is applied • the definition of the concept designated • the potential problems caused by the use of the polysemous word in this sense on a Web page
	The participants are asked to search for 5 specific pieces of information via concrete Web pages, using a maximum of 3 search terms of their own choice to retrieve each piece of information. After the search, they are asked • for each piece of information retrieved, to record and evaluate the success rate obtained by means of each individual search term applied • for each piece of information retrieved, to propose as many alternative search terms as possible, over and above the 3 selected ones

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Theme (III)
The theoretical insights and practical tools offered by terminology and I&D (Information and Documentation)

Explanation and Details	Suggested Course Elements
Some members of the target group may be aware of the need for adequate and logically based ordering of the items of menus and other navigation elements of Web pages. Some may even be aware of the need for correct and consistent labeling systems as defined by Morville & Rosenfeld 2007. However, very few, if any, are aware that semantic metadata in the form of key terms and descriptors as well as thesauri and other classification systems are used to link the front and back ends of Web sites, and that Web creators are in fact 'all becoming librarians', as Morville and Rosenfeld (2007) have aptly phrased it. The use of the knowledge, tools, and methodologies offered by library science in particular, and by I&D in general, is very much akin to using the tools and methodologies of terminology. Terminology even applies some tools supplementing those of I&D, including rules for term formation and selection as well as for concept definition.	The participants are asked to find 3 concrete items by means of menu browsing on Web pages such as the one in Example 2, i.e. without applying the search facility. Having performed this task, they are asked to evaluate the overall quality of the menus they have used, using a 1 - 5 point grading scale The participants are introduced to Daconta et al.'s distinction between - semantically weak classification systems such as library or yellow page-type subject hierarchies, an example of which can be seen in the left-hand side vertical menu in Example 2, and - semantically strong classification systems such as conceptual systems (Daconta et al. 2003) After this introduction, the participants are asked to - find 3 examples of each type of classification on the World Wide Web - grade the overall quality of each individual classification from the users' point of view, using a grading scale of 1 - 5 points

(continued from above).	The participants are asked to improve a concrete subject classification, such as the one reflected in the left-hand side vertical menu in Example 2, in the following way: • re-ordering the menu items with the goal of creating a logically consistent classification; this process may include removing and/or adding items • re-naming items, where necessary, with the goal of creating a correctly and consistently labeled menu

The course elements I have suggested are just examples of what may be done to raise the awareness of non-linguistically trained professionals. A variety of other potential 'eye-openers' could be included in a crash course, depending on the particular target group as well as on the resources available in terms of time and money. What is essential is to exploit the huge potential offered by the World Wide Web when it comes to demonstrating the inseparability of language and information, and thus of language and knowledge.

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Birthe Toft is an associate professor at the Institute of Design and Communication at the Kolding campus of the University of Southern Denmark. Since 1984 she has carried out research and teaching within the areas of terminology, LSP, and text production. In recent years, these subjects have to a large degree merged with the area of Web Communication and have increasingly come to deal with various linguistic aspects of the World Wide Web, seen from the Web Developer's as well as the Web User's point of view.

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