

Observations on the Changing Language of Accounting¹

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1

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Abstract

The meaning of words can change over time. In addition, new words may enter a language, sometimes replacing other words. This paper extends prior literature on language change in accounting by drawing to a larger extent on theories from linguistics, and by placing greater emphasis on mechanisms of and motivations for change. Particular emphasis is placed on the need to verbalise new concepts, and socio-cultural change. The latter is illustrated with examples from the development of accounting as an occupational interest group, and the adoption of Anglo-American accounting terminology and culture. The paper concludes that language change in accounting, including transmission between languages and cultures, can inform accounting historians about the transfer of technical developments, as well as about socio-economic, political or ideological processes, power relationships, and the importance of terminology in jurisdictional disputes.

Key words: language change, terminology, accounting, history, profession, jurisdiction, culture

Observations on the Changing Language of Accounting

Introduction

The meaning of words can change over time, and depending on context. This is relevant for historians, including accounting historians, because words have to be “understood in their historical context” (Mills, 1989, p. 22). Accounting language also represents a special “register”, or “language for a specific purpose”, the vocabulary of which is associated closely with the discipline (cf. Mills, 1989).

Prior literature with a focus on language change in accounting is limited. Yamey (1961) explores the origins of the English word *ledger*. Mills (1989) argues that a proper understanding of accounting history requires examination of key terminology over a period of time and especially during specific historical periods. She proposes a conceptual framework for analysis, suggests suitable sources and provides examples by exploring the changing meanings and usages of the terms *ratio* and *le compte*. Unlike Yamey’s, her approach “ignores the origin of words and their transmission from one language to another as subjects of study. Rather it seeks to clarify their sense within particular historical contexts” (Mills, 1989, p. 23).

Walton (1991) draws on linguistic theories, and in particular on Saussure (1915/66) when examining the change from the term *true and correct* to *true and fair* in the UK’s Companies Act 1947. He suggests that the change occurred because the meaning of this phrase had already shifted as a result of changes in company law, and the wording was then changed to better reflect this.

Parker (1994, p. 71) focuses on the introduction of new accounting terminology into English and suggests three reasons for the introduction or *coinage of new words*: a requirement for (i) new technical terms; (ii) terminology for discourse with non-accountants; and (iii) for “enhancing their [accountants’] prestige”.

Potter (1999) draws on Mills (1989) to explore definitions, interpretations and usages in terminology employed in discourse surrounding Australian Public Sector reforms, which permitted the accounting profession to extend its jurisdiction. Labardin and Nikitin (2009) explore semantic shift (see below) and evolution of accounting terminology occurring both recently and, in greater detail, with reference to the French term *comptabilité* from the 18th century until today.

The present paper builds on and extends this prior literature by suggesting further avenues for exploring language change in accounting. It makes the following contributions: Firstly, by drawing to a greater extent on theories from the discipline of linguistics, it offers a stronger, more coherent and more structured approach to accounting scholars for the exploration of language change than is provided by earlier (often exploratory) papers which do not make use of such existing theories, or do so to a lesser extent. Secondly, it explores the importance for accounting historians of investigating not only changes in meaning, but also other mechanisms for innovation, as well as motivations for language change. In this it goes beyond Mills (1989), and suggests that accounting historians can benefit not only from knowing the earlier meaning of the words, but also the origin of words and the conditions/motivations surrounding changes in meaning. Exploring motivations and mechanisms can provide a theoretical framing for changes as well as, more significantly, the societal and cultural contexts of change that may otherwise remain under examined or misunderstood. This applies particularly to transmissions between languages, which are likely to be of considerable relevance to historians where they tell us of contact with other accounting cultures and the socio-economic and political factors which affect adoption of new concepts and terminology.

Finally, this paper explores the implications of accounting language as a “language for specific purposes”, as a special case of socio-cultural change, considering the motivations of occupational interest groups.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: the next (second) section introduces reasons for and mechanisms of language change in general. The third section explores linguistic and social features of “languages for specific purposes”, such as accounting language. The fourth section links the theoretical considerations of the previous sections with prior literature and additional evidence informing on language change in accounting, in particular where this is motivated by the need to verbalise new concepts and by socio-cultural change. The fifth section summarises and concludes the paper.

Reasons for and mechanisms of language change

Reasons

Language change affects all aspects of language, including pronunciation, syntax, and the lexicon. Natural language change (i.e. language change that occurs naturally¹) is not teleological (Keller, 1994), and there are no inherent tendencies such as, for example, for “simplification” (Blank, 1999). So why does language change happen? One obvious cause, in particular for changes in the lexicon (i.e. vocabulary, words), is contact with other languages and cultures (Thomason, 2006). This is likely to be of particular relevance to accounting historians. For instance, double-entry book-keeping originated in 13th and 14th century northern Italy. Like this technique, much of the lexicon of accounting and banking spread from Italian to many other European languages (see e.g. Hendriksen and Van Breda, 1992). For example, early authors of English language books on double-entry adapted “from Italian such words as journal,

folio, capital (replacing stock), cash (replacing money) and bank” (Parker, 1989, p. 11).

Languages however also change without such obvious influence. According to Blank (1999, with reference to Coseriu, 1958), language is dynamic: “While communicating, we reify what is in our mind and thereby reinvent language every time we speak” (Blank, 1999, p. 61). Change occurs because, and as, we use language; it is “a consequence of inherent characteristics of man’s mind and human social interaction” (Blank, 1999, p. 63).

Thus the main motivation for change/innovation relates to speakers’ pragmatic goals, i.e. their aim is to achieve or obtain something or to exert influence; this requires successful communication (Blank, 1999, citing Zipf, 1949 and Keller, 1994). Perhaps somewhat simplistically, Keller (1994) applies Adam Smith’s theories to linguistics: Languages are defined by a ““phenomenon of the third kind”, a product of social interaction, created through a series of “invisible-hand processes” by speakers whose main purpose was to “get something”” (Blank, 1999, p. 63, citing Keller, 1994). Once a change has been initiated it may be adopted by other speakers for sociolinguistic reasons, such as the innovating speaker’s prestige or status, or for pragmatic reasons, i.e. because of “the innovation’s good cognitive performance” (Blank, 1999, p. 62).

The focus of the present paper is lexical change, i.e. changes in our “lexicon” (our words, vocabulary). Causes of, or motivations for, lexical change have been widely discussed (e.g. Ullmann, 1962; Blank, 1997, 1999; Grzega, 2004)². Like language change more generally, they result from speakers’ desire to achieve successful communication. Blank identifies specific motivations or conditions for innovation, which can be summarised as:

- the need to verbalise new concepts
- socio-cultural change
- cognitive motivations³
- speakers' usually unconscious attempts to reduce complexity or irregularity in the lexicon
- psychological causes, where euphemisms can be used to verbalise “emotionally marked concepts” (Blank, 1999, p. 80) (such as sex, death etc.).

The first two of these are particularly relevant to the context of commerce and accounting and will be explored in more detail in the main part of this paper.

Mechanisms

There are essentially three ways of finding a word to express a (perhaps new) concept:

1. Semantic⁴ change, where an existing word is applied to a new concept; i.e. it changes meaning or adopts additional meanings (Matthews, 1997; Grzega, 2003)⁵;
2. loanwords or borrowing from another language (Grzega, 2003; Traugott, 2006);
3. word formation/new coinages/“neologisms”, i.e. “creating a new word with the material offered by the speaker’s language” (Grzega, 2003, p. 22).

Semantic change occurs gradually, and old and new, sometimes actually contradictory meanings may exist at the same time, perhaps in different contexts, text types or communities (Traugott, 2006)⁶. Semantic change has been explored in an accounting context inter alia by Mills (1989) (see above).

Where language change results from contact with other languages and cultures, it often takes the form of “borrowings” (Thomason, 2006, p. 340). According to Crystal (2003, p. 126) “English, perhaps more than any other language, is an insatiable borrower” (Crystal, 2003, p. 126). This has increased with the development of English as a world language because this has facilitated increased contact with other languages and cultures (ibid.). Especially where foreign influence leads to the borrowing of foreign concepts, loanwords are frequently used (Blank, 1999). However, when new concepts are adopted from a different cultural context, semantic change also seems inevitably to occur, and the borrowed meaning may not be equivalent to the meaning in the original language. For example, *weltanschauung* or *sushi* have taken on a slightly different meaning in English from that in their respective original languages (Traugott, 2006).

An alternative to borrowing a foreign loanword is “loan translation”, or “calquing”, where a foreign expression is “translated into native forms with roughly equivalent meanings” (ibid.) – for example French *surhomme* and English *superman* are calques of German *Übermensch*. Finally, another way of creating a word to express a new meaning is through new coinages or neologisms, for example by means of affixation and compounding (e.g. *non-current assets*).

These motivations for and mechanisms of language change are relevant also to the language of accounting and commerce. Exploring them can provide theoretical, societal and cultural contexts for studying changes in meaning and thus can contribute to a better understanding of accounting history (cf. Mills, 1989) and the wider genealogy of calculative practices, which, according to Miller and Napier (1993, p. 639)

“put[s] much more emphasis than do traditional approaches [to accounting history] on the contemporaneous existence of a particular language or vocabulary, and how this enables particular calculative technologies to be endowed with definite meanings and deployed for specific ends”.

An exploration of examples of language change in accounting will therefore form the main part of this paper. A brief comment is however required first on the particular features of accounting language, as different from everyday language.

Accounting as a Language for specific purposes

“As with other professional fields of knowledge, accounting in both its theory and practice is, and has been throughout most of its recorded history, peculiarly dependent on a specialized vocabulary or terminology, both to transact its business as expeditiously as possible and to differentiate it from other disciplines” (Mills, 1989, p. 21).

Accounting language is a highly specialised “dialect” of a “natural” language (such as English). Such special varieties occur where communication serves specific purposes⁷. They are characterised mainly, but not exclusively, by specialised terminology (as for example, in accounting, terms such as *asset*, *liability*, *true and fair view*, *materiality*). In the linguistics literature such varieties are referred to as special “register”, “functional variety” (Salmond, 1998), “genre” (Beier, 1998, with reference to Biber, 1986; Swales, 1990); “languages for specific purposes” (e.g. Engberg, 2006), or even “jargon” (Crystal, 2003; Allan, 2006)⁸.

Such registers or jargon can have a number of functions and implications. They facilitate communication among members of a group, such as a profession, by allowing economical, efficient and precise expression (Crystal, 2003; Allan, 2006). This they achieve by “standardizing the use of words (lexis) and the denomination of concepts, ... so that they are optimal for scientific or professional communication” (Engberg, 2006, p. 681). This allows them to “capture distinctions not made in the ordinary language” (Allan, 2006, p. 110). With regard to accounting, Mills (1989) points out that the link between accounting and its vocabulary is sufficiently important for terminology (such as the elements of financial statements) to be identified and defined in conceptual frameworks.

There is often an overlap between terminology in everyday/lay usage, institutional usage, and usage for academic purposes, theory and science; however meanings for the same terms differ among these different usages (Hundt, 1998). For example, Hundt discusses the differences in meaning in these different contexts for the German terms *Bank* (“bank”, i.e. financial institution), *Geld* (“money”) and *Kosten* (“costs”).

Registers or jargon as expressions of “occupational linguistic distinctiveness, or identity” (Crystal, 2003, p. 370) can also serve to demarcate group identity, in that they can express “professional awareness (“know-how”) and social togetherness (“shop-talk”)” (Crystal, 2003, p. 174). Their use can mark an individual as a member of “an intellectual or technical elite” (ibid.). Individuals can join these elites by becoming specialists in the respective domain, “through education, training, or experience” (Engberg, 2006, p. 679). Occupations may lay claim to titles, or the right to define terminology, in the context of jurisdictional disputes (cf. Abbott, 1988).

Registers or jargon can also augment the speaker's self-image, and make seem important what is in essence trivial, especially where s/he draws on a Graeco-Latinate lexicon (Allan, 2006). This "achieves a double-whammy by also mystifying and intimidating the clientele" (Allan, 2006, p. 110). Thus registers or jargon also serve to exclude non-members by creating communication barriers, i.e. deliberately ensuring that outsiders won't understand (Crystal, 2003; Allan, 2006).

For the register of accounting we use specialised terminology, but we also share "everyday" words with non-accountants. We need to be aware that, firstly, terminology may have different definitions in everyday usage as opposed to our special register, and secondly, even where we agree on a definition, terminology may still be interpreted differently by different groups of persons (lay persons, practising accountants, regulators and legislators, and academics). Such differences in interpretation have been well established (see inter alia Haried, 1972 and 1973; Oliver, 1974; Belkaoui, 1980; Houghton, 1987). Further, as argued in this paper (and elsewhere), terminology and meaning change. This affects also the differences in meaning between the specialised register of accounting and everyday language.

Language change in accounting and commerce

The above sections introduced theoretical frameworks for motivations and mechanisms in language change, and the characteristics and functions of languages for specific purposes. This section links these theoretical frameworks with prior literature and additional examples/evidence illuminating language change in accounting. It argues that exploring motivations and mechanisms can provide a theoretical framing for changes in meaning as well as, more significantly, the societal and cultural contexts of change that may otherwise remain underexplored or

misunderstood. These include inter alia contact with other cultures, and the motivations and politics of occupational groups.

Mechanisms

Special registers use the same mechanisms to satisfy the demand for new terminology as other language areas. However, they use, and combine, some of these methods more frequently (Beier, 1998, with reference to English). Semantic shift frequently occurs in the accounting registers of languages. It is explored by Mills (1989) when tracing the changing meaning and connotations of French *le compte*. She argues that this shift suggests

“that the idea of the account, and thus of accountability or responsibility, was changing, becoming more closely associated with concepts of enumeration and losing, as a result, the pervasive sense of legality and stewardship that had characterised it earlier” (Mills, 1989, p. 30)

Neologisms (new coinages) have been employed productively in special registers, including accounting language, especially in terms of combinations of different words (i.e. compounding) (Beier, 1998), as for example in “non-current assets”. According to Labardin and Nikitin (2009) the increasing division of labour among French accountants in the second half of the 19th century resulted in the combination of adjectives with the term *comptabilité*, to create terms such as *comptabilité agricole*, *comptabilité industrielle*, *comptabilité commerciale*, *comptabilité générale* and *comptabilité auxiliaire*.

Where concepts are imported from foreign language areas, non-translation, or the adoption of “loanwords” appears common, as do new coinages based on foreign components (Beier, 1998; Kirkness, 1998) (cf. for example the large number of words of Italian origin in accounting and banking). This can however be problematic, because the meaning is likely to shift between the source and target languages. This also occurs when a special register uses “loanwords from everyday language” or from other disciplines (Beier, 1998, p. 1407, with reference to Klasson (1977) and Savory (1967)). Examples of the former, in English, may be “reserve”, “prudence”, or “realisation”, which have different meanings in accounting as compared to “everyday language”.

The latter is well illustrated by Parker (1994), who explains that British accountants had no generic terminology describing the debit and credit sides of the balance sheet before the late eighteenth century, but with attempts to formulate the balance sheet equation such terminology was needed. Thus the word “assets”⁹, which was in eighteenth century English, “a concept and a word in the English law of executorship” (Parker, 1994, p. 79) became employed in the nineteenth century in a commercial context and approximating its modern meaning (ibid.).

Such semantic shift resulting from borrowing from everyday language or another discipline is illustrated by Crystal (2003) with regard the semantic field of economics (in its widest sense, encompassing accounting¹⁰). Crystal distinguishes between lexemes which have always had an “economic” meaning in English (e.g. *account, tax, revenue* or *cheque*) and lexemes where such a connotation was at some point added to originally more general meanings (e.g. *wealth, pay, bull* and *bear*). The former group dominated until the 15th century, while from the mid-16th century until approximately 1700 growth occurred largely in the second group, suggesting a large

increase in terms which adopted a specialised meaning. This also appears to be the case in more recent times: In the semantic field of economics the need for new terminology is predominately satisfied by familiar terms adopting new meanings (i.e. semantic change) (ibid.). This is also the case for accounting, and differs from science and technology, where neologisms dominate.

Motivations

A number of possible motivations for language change (including semantic change) were identified above (e.g. Blank, 1999). In accounting and commercial language, the strongest specific motivations appear to be the need to verbalize new concepts (because of technical developments or foreign contact; cf. also Parker, 1994) and socio-cultural or socio-economic change. As will be discussed below, these motivations can often not be clearly distinguished. As noted above, change can adopt a number of different mechanisms, but unlike natural sciences and technology, accounting appears to favour semantic shift (or new coinages involving semantic shift of the components).

The need to verbalise new concepts

Any external social changes (e.g. conquest, trade, migration, institutional changes, social movements etc.), but especially contact between different cultures, can lead to changes to the communication systems (Blank, 1999). When a foreign concept is imported, the receiving language/culture will not have an appropriate or equivalent term for this (because if such a term existed, the concept would also have had to exist). For example, because of the importance of North Italian banking in the development of the history of banking, most banking terms in German (and other

European languages) were borrowed from Italian (e.g. *Konto, Giro, Bank, Kredit*¹¹) (cf. above). Other reasons for borrowing are explored below. However, as noted above, borrowing (semantic loan) usually brings with it semantic change, suggesting that the borrowed terminology and meaning are not quite equivalent to the originals.

Prior literature on translating true and fair view (TFV) into the legislation and languages of EU member states illustrates this: The findings suggest for example that the translations of TFV are not, as a rule, literal translations of the English original (Rutherford, 1983; Nobes, 1993; Alexander, 1993; Aisbitt and Nobes, 2001) nor applied equivalently (e.g. Nobes, 1993, Aisbitt and Nobes, 2001). Kosmala MacLulich (2003) finds that a variety of translations appear in Polish, which reflect a lack of consensus on the concept's role. She argues that this is due to the fact that the Polish translations are incompatible with the meanings associated with TFV in English. The translations of TFV as well as its national implementations demonstrate that countries managed to impose their own culture on an alien concept (Nobes, 1993; see also Parker, 1989). In summary: neither the concepts nor the terminology are equivalent.

New concepts may also arise as a result of technical developments. An interesting example is the introduction of TFV into the UK Companies Act. Walton (1991) suggests that the decision to replace the previous term *true and correct* with *true and fair* may merely have reflected the legislature catching up with a meaning which had already changed – i.e. a semantic shift. According to Walton, changes in the accounting treatment prescribed by the Companies Act, for example the development relating to the form and content of financial statements, give evidence that a change in the meaning of this phrase had already taken place – the words were changed to reflect this. The newly coined term was created, as had been the old one,

by borrowing and combining words from everyday English and giving them a new and specific meaning.

For a technical term of a special register of language it should not have mattered what the term was, as long as the members of the relevant (occupational) group using this term agreed on its meaning. Blank (1999, p. 84) points out that “[t]he efficiency of language change has not necessarily to be of panchronic validity” – it is sufficient if innovations are perceived to serve the communicative goals of a group of speakers (ibid.) who accept a shared understanding (Edwards, 2006). However, it appears that the occupational group was concerned that the meaning of the technical phrase *true and correct* had become too far removed from the meanings of *true* and *correct* in everyday language. In other words, the interface or overlap between everyday language and the special register interfered with the desire to communicate (or appear to be communicating) with non-members. Specifically, *correct* may have been seen to be incompatible with estimates (Rutherford, 1985) and the materiality concept (de Paula, 1948). Such communication with the wider public, for example by “revealing to the public some of its professional terminology and insights” is important for an occupational group because it provides a means of publicly claiming/extending and supporting its jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988, p. 61).

More recently, the IASB’s change of the titles of financial statement components has puzzled some observers. As argued by the European Accounting Association’s Financial Reporting Standards Committee (2006)¹²:

“... we note that the IASB proposes to change the titles of statements that have several hundred years of history and, therefore, a high degree of common understanding, such as the balance sheet, which the IASB

proposes to rename to “statement of financial position”, or at least decades such as the cash flow statement, which the IASB proposes to rename to “statement of cash flows”.

The IASB’s rationale for the changes may perhaps be construed as an example similar to the one of TFV. The Basis of Conclusions (IAS 1 BC16) for *IAS 1 Presentation of Financial Statements* argues that “the title ‘statement of financial position’ not only better reflects the function of the statement but is consistent with the *Framework for the Preparation and Presentation of Financial Statements*, which contains several references to ‘financial position’”. This seems to suggest that the function of the balance sheet has changed, and therewith the meaning of the term *balance sheet*. This semantic shift then prompted the regulator to coin a new term to better signal the changes in the concept.

As these examples also illustrate, technical accounting developments cannot be understood in isolation from the socio-cultural context (including foreign influence) in which they occur. This is because accounting is socially constructed (e.g. Tinker, 1985). Accounting is not a neutral technical practice, but often serves more to legitimate behaviour of individuals or organisations than to aid decision making (Power, 2003). Language can be a tool in this. Linguistic relativism would suggest that the language we use can influence thinking, or at least perception and memory (see e.g. Evans, 2004; Györi, 2000, Crystal, 1987). Therefore a change in terminology may be intended to alter perceptions (for example, to encourage “political correctness”) (Jones and Wareing, 1999). Potter (1999) suggests that “[i]n placing certain kinds of language beyond question, we allow ourselves to “think what we say, rather than say what we think” (Potter, 1999, p. 60, citing Kramer, 1993, p. 53). Thus

the wording of new regulation (including the national implementation of supra-national regulation) may reflect intentions of regulators which only become apparent on closer investigation.

Potter (1999) illustrates this power of language as a tool of legitimisation and control in the context of Australian Public Sector reforms. There, changing definitions and interpretations of the terms *accrual accounting* and *asset* were employed to drive accounting change and allowed the accounting profession to extend its jurisdiction.

Young's (2003) close examination of the text of selected FASB standards shows the standard setter's rhetorical efforts to persuade readers to accept its perspective. These texts construct a standard as good and the FASB as a good standard setter and attempt to "maintain the myth of accounting objectivity" (ibid., p. 621), while silencing alternatives and criticisms.

A critical interpretation of the IASB's terminology changes may equally suggest an attempt to influence and direct policy. By creating or changing terminology and definitions, boundaries are set within which we can think about accounting¹³. Labardin and Nikitin (2009, p. 149) suggest that the semantic shift from *International Accounting Standards* to *International Financial Reporting Standards* may not be innocent, since "financial markets have recently taken over financial accounting harmonization and they just need financial reporting, not accounting".

Socio-cultural change and occupational interest groups

Like accounting, language is social behaviour (Blount and Sanches, 1977). As was pointed out above, language change occurs because of "human social interaction" (Blank, 1999, p. 63); because humans wish to exert influence, which requires successful communication (Zipf, 1949; Keller, 1994; Blank, 1999). Any social theory

of language has to consider the influence of ideologies (individual or shared), social positions and power of speakers, and the prestige that comes with the acquisition of new languages or registers (Blount and Sanches, 1977; see also Bargiela-Chiappini, 2006).

Examples of language change motivated by social or socio-cultural change include the development of an occupational group (or the extension of its jurisdictions – cf. Labardin and Nikitin, 2009). Change may arise because new technical concepts develop and require to be named (see above), but also for social and ideological reasons. According to Thornborrow (1999, p. 142) “[p]eople often have to work to establish their own identity categories, to name their particular social group, and to stake their claim in owning their representations of themselves”. This can be done through the use of a specific register by its speakers: “... speakers’ choice of linguistic code, or variety, plays an important role in establishing their group identity” (Thornborrow, 1999, p. 142).

This is particularly relevant for professional registers, such as accounting language. Registers can serve to demarcate group identity and belonging to a special elite, and to exclude other individuals. They can instil the speaker with the social capital of belonging to a special group and having special skills. Non-members can attempt to join such groups through training and education and a process of socialisation, which “incorporates the transmission of both cultural knowledge and social skills and thus involves learning how to speak and behave within a given society” (Johnson, 2006, p. 51).

Parker notes that one of the reasons for the adoption of new words by accountants is “to enhance their prestige” (Parker, 1994, p. 71) and describes how “[t]he word accountant has been upgraded in relation to the words “bookkeeper” and

“clerk”” (ibid., p. 74). Similarly, Labardin and Nikitin (2009) describe how the French term *tenue des livres* (book-keeping) gradually lost prestige during the 19th century, while *comptabilité* (a term initially only used in the context of Royal/Public Finances) became considered superior.

Such changes are particularly likely when a professional group attempts to lay claim to new jurisdictions or greater status. Miller and Napier (1993, p. 641) suggest that the “far from insignificant shift in terminology” from *cost accounting* to *management accounting* “was of crucial importance in assisting accounting as an occupational category in its rise through the corporate hierarchy”.

Similar status-related factors can be observed in the adoption and adaptation of terminology elsewhere. For example, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the nascent German audit profession¹⁴ attempted to raise its status by creating a public perception of equality with older professions.

Both the German legal profession and the better-established Anglo-American professions served as models in this (see Evans, 2005). One way to stress the association with the Anglo-American professions was by using terminology that would imply such a link¹⁵. By using terms such as *Deutsche Chartered Accountants*, a strong signal was given that the German profession considered itself equivalent to that of the UK; or was striving for equivalence. English language terms such as *accountant*, *auditor* and *trustee* etc. were sometimes used interchangeably with the German *Buchprüfer*, *Bücher-Revisor* or *Treuhänder*, the denotations of members of competing professional associations¹⁶.

These borrowings and usages often suggest misunderstandings (as identified by e.g. Raschenberger, 1929) or sometimes deliberate misrepresentations (as alleged e.g. by Herrmann, 1927). In either case they reflected the different ideologies and

aspirations of competing groups of auditors during a time of intense intra-professional conflict: *beeidete* or *vereidigte Bücherrevisoren* (“sworn-in” auditors), who were usually sole practitioners, and audit firms originally set up as *Treuhandgesellschaften* (trust companies), which tended to be organised as corporations (Markus, 1997; Evans, 2003, 2005; Evans and Honold, 2007). The German term *Treuhandgesellschaft* (trust company) thus extended its original meaning (much beyond, for example, the meaning of the English *trust company*).

An association with the legal profession was also implied through the use of the term *Anwalt* (“lawyer”). This was a means to create an ideological link with the older established professions, and was used frequently. Compounds such as *Organisationsanwalt* (for engineers engaging to some extent in management accounting, Anon., 1911), *Wirtschaftsanwalt* (“economic advocate”; Sorge, 1921) and *Steueranwalt* (“tax advocate”; Anon., 1920) were used.

The importance attributed to terminology, and in the German example particularly to a professional designation, is also apparent in the German profession’s resistance to the coercive influences of linguistic purism¹⁷. A society, the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Sprachverein* (General German Language Society) was created in 1885 with the aim to cleanse the German language of borrowed foreign words, including terms such as *addieren* (to add), *agieren*, (to act), *Agio*, *Akzise* (excise) *Baisse* and *Hausse* (bear and bull market), *Amortisation*, etc. (*Allgemeiner Deutscher Sprachverein*, 1918). In 1916 one of the members of the oldest German audit association, the *Verband Deutscher Bücherrevisoren*, received a letter from the municipal authorities of his city requesting him to replace the foreign designation *Bücher-Revisor* with a more appropriate term (i.e. of German origin), such as *Buch-Prüfer* or *Prüfungsbeamter* (Anon., 1916).

Not surprisingly, the official request was not well received. A contributing factor may have been that some of the synonyms suggested by the *Sprachverein* emphasized the lower skilled mechanical aspects of auditing (such as checking, re-performing calculations) and may have been felt to be degrading to the profession's status. The profession may have feared that a change in title would also have resulted in a shift in the underlying meaning, and affected its jurisdictional claims in the public domain¹⁸. Such a close link between title and jurisdiction was also apparent in a later dispute: The German profession was formally organised in 1931, when the statutory audit requirement was introduced and a new professional qualification, the *Wirtschaftsprüfer*, was created. The title initially chosen for the new qualification had been *Wirtschaftstreuhänder*. However,

“at the last minute and on the insistence of lawyers, engineers and economists who did not wish the word *Treuhänder* (Trustee) to be included in the name, it was changed to *Wirtschaftsprüfer*, a term suggesting functions limited to auditing compared with the more comprehensive duties implied by the title *Wirtschaftstreuhänder*”.

(Markus, 1997 p.34).

This supports the suggestion that exact definition of professional titles and boundaries is essential in jurisdictional disputes. According to Abbott (1988, p. 63), “[t]he legally established world of professional jurisdiction also exaggerates the rigidity of discourse noted in the public arena. Since all terms must be legally defined, reification is absolute”.

Such emphasis on definition also applies to key terminology. The first specialist dictionaries or encyclopaedias of a discipline can be an indication of the emancipation of a new independent (sub)discipline. Thus Rossenbeck (1998) stresses the significance of the publication by Nicklisch (1926) of the first independent encyclopaedia of *Betriebswirtschaftslehre* (business administration) in Germany. This was the first “inventory-taking” and demarcation of boundaries of a new independent discipline developing within the wider *Wirtschaftswissenschaft* (economics). In an English language context, Mills (1989) sees the fact that the key terms of financial accounting were defined in the FASB’s conceptual framework project as an indication of the profession’s dependency on its specialised vocabulary¹⁹.

Socio-cultural change and English as a lingua franca

Foreign influence can take different forms and have a variety of effects. That it can lead to the need to verbalise new concepts was discussed above. As was also shown above (with the example of the nascent German profession), adoption of foreign terminology and titles may offer prestige and play a part in jurisdictional disputes.

Not only the early German profession tried to enhance its prestige by borrowing from other disciplines. The pre-eminence of Anglo-American accounting systems, and in particular of US GAAP, has led to attempts to emulate this, inter alia with the introduction of foreign terminology. This has led to conscious or unconscious adoption of a US accounting culture, with Anglo-American terminology being introduced into accounting discourse in other countries and languages (sometimes, but not always because of a lack of suitable national terminology). Many illustrations could be provided. For example, Labardin and Nikitin (2009, p. 149) see the “ever-growing impact of Anglo-American terms in the French accounting vocabulary” as

reflecting “Anglomania” among French accounting academics. In the context of the implementation of the European Commission’s fourth company law directive, discussions in the German academic and practitioner literature appeared more often to use the English terms “true and fair” and “override/overriding” than their German translations. Other English terms frequently used in more recent German academic discourse would be “peer-review”, “quality-control”, “impairment” or “corporate governance”, to quote just a few examples. These are foreign terms in German, i.e. not loanwords. Kosmala-MacLulich (2003) provides a Polish example.

Accounting historians may wish to explore the motivations for such a linguistic shift, inter alia because it is likely to be symptomatic of wider socio-cultural and socio-economic changes which also affect accounting development. One explanation may be that English has now become the international *lingua franca*, not only in accounting, but in science and academe in general. In accounting it has gained additional status by also being the language of the IASB.

Partly because of this, English terminology may be widely adopted and integrated into professional registers to signal prestige and affiliation with elite academic or professional groups (internationally educated, sophisticated, professionally aware)²⁰. More cynically, it is likely that it is also used by some to “mystify and intimidate” non-members (see above, Allan, 2006, p. 110).

There are a number of implications relating to the increasing adoption of foreign terminology: Firstly, like law, accounting is a culture dependent domain²¹. Terminology does not mean the same in different cultural contexts and is not simply transferable (Engberg, 2006). As argued above, the use of loanwords or foreign words inevitably brings with it a semantic shift. Thus there is no real equivalent in English accounting culture and language for the German use of the English language term

controlling, and the English term *corporate governance* is also very likely to mean something subtly different in German accounting discourse from what it means in an Anglo-American, English language context. Secondly, prior literature (Süllwold, 1980; Traxel, 1979; Podder-Theising, 1984; all as cited by Schröder, 1998) suggests that the use of English as lingua franca may lead to a restriction of original thinking or cognitive processes²².

Thirdly, the increasing use of English terminology (as foreign words, rather than integrated loanwords) in accounting discourse may also lead to problems in the communication between experts and lay-persons (Ammon, 1998); between members of different professional groups, and between academics and practitioners. This has implications for professions' jurisdictional claims as well as inter-professional disputes, as for examples between accountants and lawyers over the interpretation of terminology such as TFV.

Exploration of the terminology used/favoured by different groups, its origin and interpretation, and the shift from, for example, French to English in French accounting discourse, is therefore relevant to accounting historians because it can provide evidence of changing fashions, economic and political influence of the source language and motivations of the adopters. It can also illuminate misunderstandings, or the deliberate use of specific terminology, in jurisdictional disputes.

Summary and some concluding observations

This paper builds on and extends prior literature on language change in accounting. It argues that, while explorations of earlier meanings of words are essential for accounting historians (cf. Mills, 1989), motivations and mechanisms of language

change are equally rich sources, illuminating societal and cultural contexts of accounting change.

The paper draws on theories on language change from linguistics. It also argues that accounting language constitutes a “language for specific purposes”, and briefly explores features of such special languages or registers. It then links these theoretical concepts and considerations with examples from prior literature, and with additional evidence from accounting. Emphasis is placed on motivations for language change which are considered especially important in an accounting context: the need to verbalise new concepts, and socio-cultural change. The latter is illustrated with examples from the development of accounting as an occupational interest group, and the adoption of Anglo-American accounting terminology and culture.

Previously, Mills (1989) had effectively drawn our attention to the danger of changes in meaning, where terminology has remained the same. She also provided suggestions on how to address this problem. To study the development of accounting vocabulary, she suggests as possible sources accounting records and literature, including literature with commercial and economic themes, and “dictionaries, encyclopaedias and other kinds of wordbooks” (Mills, 1989, p. 23). She argues that “... they are potentially a valuable form of evidence for the history of the discipline, particularly concerning the social context of accounting” (Mills, 1989, p. 24).

It should perhaps be added that (non-specialist) dictionaries and encyclopaedias are unlikely to capture short-term temporary changes, which are typical for times of transition. Records and literature reflecting specialist discourse are more suitable sources to illuminate such issues. Dictionaries and encyclopaedias have the added disadvantage to reflect changes only with some time-lag. They do, however, have the advantage of being ““a catalogue of received ideas”, expressing the

collective representation of a subject” (Mills, 1989, p. 24, with reference to McArthur, 1986, p. 24), as well as potentially signalling the development of new (sub)disciplines or providing an insight into language change in totalitarian regimes (see above).

Mills’ paper explicitly “ignores the origin of words and their transmission from one language to another as subjects of study. Rather it seeks to clarify their sense within particular historical contexts” (Mills, 1989, p. 23). The present paper, on the other hand, is mainly concerned with the origin of words and their transmission between languages or between different registers of the same language. It argues, *inter alia*, that such transmissions are likely to be of considerable relevance to historians where they tell us of contact with other (accounting) cultures and the socio-economic and political factors which affect adoption of new concepts and terminology. Examples (not necessarily in English) that have been previously explored or could be further explored in this context are *inter alia* the transmission of many commercial and accounting terms from 13th and 14th century Italian banking (see e.g. Parker, 1989); the transmission of accounting terminology from law (e.g. Parker, 1994; also Mills, 1989); the probable link of the discourse on *order* in Colbert’s France (see Miller, 1990) to concepts of *orderly bookkeeping* in German and Nordic accounting cultures; etc. The exploration of such transmissions is important because it can illuminate the history of the exchange of ideas (and the ideologies and politics involved therein) between different disciplines and cultures.

The present paper also contributes by exploring examples of the motivations for and implications of language change in occupational registers, in the context of the sociology and politics of occupational groups. Exact definitions of professional titles and boundaries are essential in jurisdictional disputes. Differences in interpretation, for example between law and accounting registers, are likely to contribute to

interprofessional disputes – sometimes due to misunderstanding. Examining the mechanisms and motivations for change, i.e. why and how occupational groups choose, retain, reject, or defend professional designations, or control the definitions of key terminology (see e.g. Abbott, 1988), is likely to make useful contributions to research on the history of professions. It can throw light on technical developments as well as developments relating to a profession's jurisdiction.

In summary, exploring language change in accounting, possibly in collaboration with historical linguists, can tell us much about the transfer of technical developments and about socio-economic, political or ideological processes and power relationships in accounting change. It is likely, therefore, to contribute yet another perspective to “the crafting of multiple histories from multiple perspectives via multiple methodologies” encouraged by Parker (1999, p. 29).

Notes

¹ As opposed to planned language change, as for example in linguistic purism (see below).

² Sometimes motivations and conditions for, and mechanisms of, change may be confused or treated as equivalent (see e.g. Blank's (1999) critique of Ullmann).

³ Relating to the interconnectedness of concepts in our minds: concepts can evoke other related concepts (Blank, 1999).

⁴ Semantics is defined as "the study of meaning" (Matthews, 1997, p. 334) and includes lexical semantics, which refers to the meaning of words.

⁵ Types/kinds/categories of such change have been variously classified. The most important are listed and explained by Crystal (2003, p. 138, emphases original) as follows:

- *“Extension or generalization.* A lexeme widens its meaning. Numerous examples of this process have occurred in the religious field, where *office*, *doctrine*, *novice*, and many other terms have taken on a more general, secular range of meanings.
- *Narrowing or specialization.* A lexeme becomes more specialized in meaning. *Engine* was formerly used in a general sense of 'mechanical contrivance'. ... Several of the terms of economics ... also show specialization.
- *Amelioration.* A lexeme develops a positive sense of approval. ...
- *Pejoration or deterioration.* A lexeme develops a negative sense of disapproval.”

Extension is also sometimes referred to as “broadening” or “widening of meaning” (see e.g. Traugott, 2006., p. 125; Matthews, 1997, p. 333-4). In addition, other authors also include metaphor (“using words for look-alikes (resemblars) of what you mean”) and metonymy “using words for the near neighbours of the things you mean” (Traugott, 2006, p. 125, citing Nerlich and Clarke, 1992); see also Matthews (1997)). One example of metonymy provided by Traugott (2006) is the old English word for cattle, *feoh*, which, since used as payment, became modern English *fee*. Other typologies/attempts to classify semantic change include inter alia Bloomfield (1933) and Ullmann (1962).

⁶ For example, *estate* originally meant “condition” or “status”, was later used with reference to “interest in property including land”, and later still for “property”. The different meanings continue to exist, but in restricted contexts, such as religious or philosophical, or legal contexts, respectively (Traugott, 2006). As an example of contradictory meanings, Traugott (ibid.: 129) suggests that : “*dust* can mean ‘remove’, or ‘add’, but usually not in the same context (cf. *I dusted the table* ‘removed dust from’ and *I dusted the strawberries with sugar* ‘added sugar to the top of’). The verb *sanction* can mean ‘approve’ or ‘penalize’” (Traugott, 2006: 129).

⁷ Salmond (1998) points out that special varieties of English, for example for religious, poetic or legal purposes, are already in evidence in the earliest written records, i.e. from the Anglo-Saxon period.

⁸ Although some authors make subtle distinctions between some of these terms (see e.g. Engberg, 2006).

⁹ Originally derived from French.

¹⁰ There are of course significant differences in interpretations of the same terms in the academic disciplines of accounting and economics – e.g. the term *income* (see e.g. Parker, 1991).

¹¹ I am grateful to Nils Langer for drawing my attention to this.

¹² In its comment on the IASB's ED Proposed Amendments to IAS 1 Presentation of Financial Statements. A Revised Presentation.

¹³ See also e.g. Miller and O'Leary (1987) on the discourse on national efficiency, or Miller (1990) on the discourse of *order* in Colbert's France.

¹⁴ There is no equivalent term in German for *profession*, the closest terms being *freie Berufe* (free occupations) or *akademische Berufe* (academic occupations). These however differ from Anglo-American concepts of profession, inter alia with respect to their emphasis on academic training and their relationship to the state (e.g. Jarausch, 1990).

¹⁵ An additional observation in this context is that foreign language skills can denote power and influence – for example the power to (selectively) disseminate foreign concepts.

¹⁶ For example, Hermann (1927) uses terms such as *Accountantwesen* (approximately: “accounting”/ “accountancy”). Other examples of English terms in a German context are *Accountants in Deutschland/deutsche Accountants* (e.g. Herrmann, 1927; Nickel, 1931), *Beruf der Auditors ... in Deutschland* (Aufermann, 1928), and *Deutscher Chartered Accountant* (Müller von Blumencron, 1927; Schreiber, 1931).

¹⁷ For a discussion of purism in linguistic theory, and a review of definitions of linguistic purism, see Thomas (1991).

¹⁸ However, the title *was* changed to *Buchprüfer* during the period of fascist rule.

¹⁹ Totalitarian political ideologies can also be reflected in definitions provided, and omissions in meanings, in encyclopedias, such as Bülow's (1936) encyclopaedia for *Wirtschaftswissenschaften* (business sciences/economics) (Rossenbeck, 1998). Other examples, reflecting the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, relate to the *Ökonomische Lexicon* (1978) and the *Lexikon der Wirtschaft* (1968) (both encyclopedias of business sciences/economics) (ibid.).

²⁰ It can also be observed that in some situations, non-English speakers may use less English and more native terminology. This may be the case, for example, when speaking to older members of the profession, with poorer English language skills. (I am grateful to German delegates at the fifth *Accounting History* International Conference in Banff, August 2007, for pointing this out.) This may be simply out of courtesy or to facilitate communication. It may also be a deliberate shift in code to denote affiliation with a different social/academic/professional group, depending on circumstances (cf. Thornborrow, 1999).

²¹ An example of a relatively culture-independent domain is, according to Engberg (2006), the field of electricity. In that field there is considerably greater overlap in meaning between terms from different cultures than in culture-dependent domains.

²² Others, however (Gauger, 1988; Knapp, 1989; both cited by Schröder, 1998) do not agree with this notion, but argue instead that the impoverishment of cognitive approaches may be due to the power of American research and publishers, rather than the English language.

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