

TERMINOLOGY STANDARDIZATION OF MONGOLIAN TECHNICAL VOCABULARY

The UB Post · 10 Feb 2017 · By IVAN G. SOMLAI Director of ETHNOBUREAUCRATICA Author contact: <http://ethnobureaucratika.weebly.com> & Ivan.Somlai@INSEAD.edu

Similar to the process of earlier educational evolution in Western countries, technical training in Mongolia was predominantly through formal or informal apprenticeship, thus relying on the vocabulary of particular “masters”. With the emergence of heavy industries around the middle of the twentieth century, an increasing amount of industry-based training came about, tied to industries such as agriculture, heavy machinery, railways, construction, mining, electronics, and so on. It was not until the mid-1980s that the government centralized the policy, planning, and reporting functions of the Ministry of Science and Education; curriculum development, however, remained with the respective industry or group of industries. In this way, curricula varied and terminology emerged from the particular origin of the technology and its associated hardware.



From the last decade of the 20th century and into our present time, the government has made a serious effort to standardize training under the former Technical and Vocational Education and Training Agency (TVET) based in the Ministry of Education, and its successor, the Agency of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (ATVET), repositioned under the Ministry of Labor. That said, with 49 public and 22 private technical training institutions, one essential overlooked component of curricular improvement concerns technical terminology.

There is a dearth of uniformity in technical terms, leading to confusion and potential safety concerns. I became apprised of this issue through my consulting work with Oyu Tolgoi (OT) and discussions with OT internal and provider translators, visits to 10 public and 4 private technical training institutions throughout Mongolia, my own translation team’s efforts, and meetings with higher education institutions and bureaucrats. OT itself has a compilation of human resource and technical terms, while private providers have developed their own glossaries. Conversing with Mongolian technical specialist contacts and perusing definitions from at least six hard copy technical dictionaries, numerous glossaries (from bookstores and academic publishers in Mongolia), as well as a half-dozen online dictionaries, an obvious

challenge with some existing technical dictionaries was that words are often ordered thematically, not alphabetically, making it difficult for non-specialists to find specific terms; and comprehensive indexes are lacking. Additionally, while the same word may vary in its meanings in different sectors or technologies, some translations do not make such distinctions.

Historically, the Mongolian language has also borrowed words from Old Turkic, Sanskrit and Tibetan, although these relate primarily to literature and non-technical domains. More modern borrowings, especially as related to technological advances, have come from Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and, predominantly, English. The present variety of technical terminology is a result of changes in both education and technology, resulting in older technicians being more familiar with Russian terms, while younger ones are current with some English terminology, thus availing translation for one technical term in different ways. Very often, new terminology is formed by translating foreign terms into new words formed with Mongolian roots.

Nowadays, though, with English being compulsory at all school levels and as the country is proactively moving to the use of professionally developed bilingual (Mongolian/English) competency-based curricula with clear outcomes related to the work required by most international companies, there arises increased need for using technical terminology that is standardized at least within an industry and, at best, throughout cross-cutting or allied industries.

For some English terms, though, there is no Mongolian word. Indeed, there may not be a need to translate all technical words into Mongolian; certainly it is common practice globally that a foreign word is acceptable when local language cannot provide equivalent concepts. Some translators try to “Mongolianize” terms, while others favor anglicizing or hybridizing them. Ongoing monitoring of assessment processes which I have been involved with has elicited several terminological errors and the replacement of more common usage terms. Although the Mongolian Agency for Standardization and Metrology (MASM) has a standardization mandate per se, it has up to now focused on sectors other than TVET. The foregoing predicates a need to standardize technical terminology in Mongolia.

Currently there is no coordination of the sponsors and users of technical vocabulary (government, companies, and institutions) in any joint effort to standardize terminology. Each entity works separately. One major multinational in Ulaanbaatar has six translators working on publishing technical manuals from English to Mongolian for their private use. At present, each company develops and tends to retain its own translations.

LOOKING AHEAD

Having had incidental discussions with numerous subject-knowledgeable staff, it became evident that even some safety manuals were found to be deficient in their translation, leading to potential safety issues. The reason for this is that the content in the Mongolian language does not look or sound really Mongolian, but rather is a literal translation without any Mongolian context. While effort had been extended to make the translations identical to the English text, when Mongolians read them, the sentences become unclear, incomplete, or incoherent. In some manuals, what is described in the middle is transformed again by the end. Some of this is caused by some translators “Google translating” to save time and cover up incompetence.

It is timely, therefore, to advocate for a National Technical Terminology Standardization Commission to set the standard for technical terminology so that all institutes throughout Mongolia, especially as they update and expand their curricula, use the same vocabulary. Such a commission could be responsible for:

- Defining process, rules, and principles for accepting and/or translating particular terms while considering cultural relevance
- Reviewing existing manuals with the help of Mongolian linguists and expatriate translators along with firm-specific and other technical experts
- Standardizing industry-specific terminology
- Vetting the accuracy and relevance of translated terms
- Supporting the coordination of inter-company and intra-industry terminology development, thus avoiding duplicative efforts and abetting the sharing of cooperative efforts
- Preparing of specialized trade glossaries
- Revising of glossaries produced by foreign operators and clients
- Storing, managing, and disseminating terminology
- Iterative monitoring of international vocabulary changes for industries active in Mongolia

Properly coordinated, cooperatively managed, and accurately written, updated, and standardized technical terminology would be positively accepted by industry, academia, government, and their respective stakeholders. I foresee Mongolian translation efforts becoming truly globally standard setting.