

**Lerat, Pierre (2016) : *Langue et technique*. Preface by Alain Rey. (Collection Vertige de la langue). Paris: Hermann. ISBN: 978-2705692117.**

Pierre Lerat is among France's most authoritative writers on specialized communication. As a semantician (Lerat 1983), he has played a key role in assuring that the linguistic component of legal language studies – an area where lawyers generally outnumber linguists – has been adequately taken into account (Sourieux/Lerat 1975, the first of many works on the subject). His publications from the period when he was director of the *Centre de terminologie et de néologie* (1986–1989) played a key role in laying the epistemological bases of terminology studies, in particular in appraising Wüster's contribution to this emerging discipline. His book on LSPs (Lerat 1995), which prefigures the present volume, is notable for positing special language not as a subset but as a particular use of language – or more properly languages – in given specialized situations. All of these threads have been drawn together in this latest book, in which he specifically envisages the relations between language and technology, rather than between terminology and science, hitherto the dominant paradigm.

The thrust of the argument is that linguistics can account for technical discourse only through interdisciplinary collaboration, in particular with the philosophy of technology. The philosopher chosen to represent this field, Gilbert Simondon, is well known in France, but perhaps less so abroad, though translations of some of his relevant works exist in English (cf. Simondon [1958] 2011) and rather more in German (cf. Simondon [1958] 2012). Lerat strongly suggests that linguists, to understand the role natural language plays in technology, need to engage with those involved in semiotic systems other than natural language on the one hand and subject specialists (or field specialists) on the other. The importance of various non-linguistic codes – graphics, charts, formulae, illustrations, gestures, etc. and their interplay with natural language have long been acknowledged (Kocourek 1991), but this crucial aspect has hardly been given the attention it deserves by linguists analysing LSP. By the same token, the role of the expert in establishing a terminology has been a preoccupation of cognitivists such as Christophe Roche (2007), rather than of linguists, with some notable exceptions, such as Otman's 1993 paper. The vectors of communication are also carefully examined in the book, as is the role played by speech and gesture, in particular in situations involving education and training, as well as the changing forms of documentation. This latter aspect is exemplified by the ever-increasing use made by professionals and non-professionals alike of such collaborative tools as Linguee and Wikipedia. This collaborative encyclopaedia is particularly advantageous in situations of communication between specialist and non-specialist, as it routinely exploits a mixture of text, graphics and video.

The book has three parts: languages, technology (referred to throughout by the French word 'techniques') and technical discourse (used here in the plural). The section on languages sets the scene for the linguistic analysis to follow in the two later sections. European linguistics, following Saussure, have traditionally limited study to language of and by itself, thereby minimizing the relationships between language and the world, including specialized knowledge. The plural used in the title of this first chapter draws attention to the fact that different languages use different means to convey knowledge and exchange know-how, and examples are cited in a wide variety of languages: French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Polish and Arabic, a welcome return to multilingualism in an era where English alone tends to serve for both explanation and exemplification.

Linguistics then in its Saussurian mould does not suffice, and it is necessary to turn to other viewpoints, notably the philosophy of language exemplified by Frege's distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*. As Lerat puts it (p. 33, our translation):

The linguist's view of the extralinguistic (i. e. reality) is skewed if the basics of the philosophy of language is not taken onboard. One should beware of any approach to 'LSPs' which simply equates what is said (particularly in the media) and what subject specialists actually know.

The linguistic analysis is based on Harris, but the perspective is broad, and such classics as Benveniste and Halliday, and even Matoré, the founder of French cultural lexicology, are also called upon as needed. The relationship between grammatical and logical analysis are clearly delimited – both are necessary and need to be correctly articulated. The issues involved in naming are also investigated, in particular the role of standardisation, one of the specificities of technical vocabulary. The importance of technical popularisation (perhaps a narrower term than the French *vulgarisation*) and the challenges that this entails are briefly but cogently assessed.

The second section, devoted to technology, turns to Simondon to underline the importance of the genesis of the technical object. The relationship between science and technology is examined, in particular how they are apprehended by LSP specialists, who, in France at least place science above technology. This does not seem to be the case in German-speaking countries, to judge by the two leading LSP handbooks (Fluck [1976] 1996, Roelcke ([1999] 2010), which focus specifically on the latter. Certain forms of terminology are of course shared by both science and technology, though in differing forms, in particular nomenclatures: in both fields these establish "explicit links between things, concepts and words associated with them" (p. 50). The roles of such differing vectors as measurement, gesture and the visual element in general are also examined. The relationship of terminology to ontology, a major overlap and at the same time source of misunderstanding, is also discussed. One example of the obstacles to closer collaboration between the two fields is given by the definition of "definition". What the terminologist considers to be a definition is merely a description to the ontologist, who needs a formal language to attain this aim.

The third part of the book is given over to what are termed technolects, a metalinguistic choice which calls for an explanation. *Technolecte* is mentioned in Dubois' (1991) *Dictionnaire de linguistique*, but the definition refers only to terminology. It is used by French-language ISO standards ISO – TR 22134 (2007), but relatively seldom elsewhere. Its rehabilitation here is motivated by the life's work of Leïla Messaoudi (see in particular Messaoudi 2010), who advocates an approach to the analysis of specialized discourse which is at once multilingual, multimodal and more particularly multiskilled, particularly well illustrated in Lerat's book in the section on so-called ordinary and scientific technolects (p. 74). Here, the usual requirement for lexical items to display univocity and absence of connotation are relaxed. The relations of technolects and terminology are also examined. The specificities of the technological definition, and the associated role of standardisation are mentioned, but the thrust is to the 'equipment' of the language: how to account for the collocations of technical discourse, how to incorporate these into dictionaries, monolingual and multilingual, and from there to the practical outcomes of technical writing and translation. There are indeed so many facets of technical language which are broached here that it is not feasible or even desirable to explore all of them in an introductory volume. It does seem to the present reviewer, however, that some discussion could have been devoted to the apparent inclusion of legal discourse into technical language, and to law as a technique. This specific insight might well have been made more explicit, as there is as

much which separates a text on mechanical engineering and a piece of legislation as they have in common, and who better to compare and to contrast this than an expert in legal language?

The final note of this section is an encouragement to revisit two monuments of the past, which did not receive the welcome they deserved at the time: Wüster's machine tool dictionary (1968) and Quemada's dictionary of new scientific and technical terms (1983).

The conclusion to the book invites further reflexion on the part of linguists on the interplay between language and languages and other semiotic systems in the context of the possibilities opened up by the Internet revolution. This is not a handbook, rather a provocative essay on the changing relationship between language and technology. Many avenues of investigation are opened up, appraised briefly and then left to the reader to follow up, while the text hurries on to the next point. A thought-provoking and a timely invitation to take technical discourse seriously.

---

### References

- Dubois, Jean (1991): *Dictionnaire de linguistique*. Paris: Larousse.
- Fluck, Hans R. ([1976] 1996): *Fachsprachen. Einführung und Bibliographie*. Bern/München: Francke.
- ISO – TR 22134 (2007): *Lignes directrices pratiques pour la socioterminologie*. Geneva: ISO.
- Kocourek, Rostislav (1991): *La langue française de la technique et de la science. Vers une linguistique de la langue savante*. Wiesbaden: Brandstetter.
- Lerat, Pierre (1983): *Sémantique descriptive*. (Col. Langue, linguistique, communication). Paris: Hachette.
- Lerat, Pierre (1995): *Les langues spécialisées*. (Col. Linguistique nouvelle). Paris: PUF.
- Messaoudi, Leïla (2010): « Langue spécialisée et technolecte : quelles relations ? » *Meta*. Montréal : Presses de l'université de Montréal: 127–136.
- Otman, Gabriel (1993) : « Le talon d'Achille de l'expertise terminologique ». *La banque des mots*, numéro spécial. Paris: Conseil international de la langue française: 75–87.
- Quemada, Gabrielle, ed. (1983): *Dictionnaire de termes nouveaux des sciences et des techniques*, Paris : Conseil international de la langue française.
- Roche, Christophe (2007): « Le terme et le concept : fondements d'une ontoterminologie ». *TOTh 2007 : Terminologie et Ontologie : Théories et Applications*. Annecy: Porphyre.
- Roelcke, Thorsten ([1999] 2010): *Fachsprachen*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt.
- Simondon, Gilbert ([1958] 2012): *Die Existenzweise technischer Objekte*. Translation Michael Cuntz. Zürich: diaphanes.
- Simondon, Gilbert ([1958] 2011): "The Essence of Technicity", Translation Ninian Mellamphy, Dan Mellamphy & Nandita Biswas Mellamphy. *Deleuze Studies* 5: 406–424.
- Sourieux, Jean-Louis/Pierre Lerat (1975): *Le langage du droit*. (Col. Le juriste). Paris: PUF.
- Wüster, Eugen (1968): *The machine tool: an interlingual dictionary of basic concepts comprising an alphabetical dictionary and a classified vocabulary with definitions and illustrations*. London: Technical Press.

John Humbley

Université Paris Diderot

UFR d'Études Interculturelles et Langues Appliquées

humbley@eila.univ-paris-diderot.fr