# Figurative Terminology in IATE: Analysing the Needs of Professional Users

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### Abstract

The paper aims to evaluate the need for changes in presenting figurative terminology in IATE – the main terminology database of the European institutions. By figurative terminology, we mean terms that are either fully or partly metaphorical, such as '*whistleblower*' or '*shadow* economy'. So far, no special attention has been paid to such terms in the database, although they often pose considerable challenges in the course of secondary term creation and interlingual transfer. Based on surveys conducted among English, French, German, Italian, Finnish, and Estonian terminologists, translators, and lawyer-linguists, we shall analyse the needs of professional users of the database. In the light of sociocognitive terminology theory, proposals are made to achieve a more coherent approach to figurative terms in IATE. This would make it easier for language professionals to find a term best suited to the target audience, the type of text, and the specific communicational context.

### Keywords

Figurative terminology, metaphorical terms, terminological variation, IATE

## 1. Introduction

Inspired by previous research [1, 2, 9, 13], the present paper will focus on a specific type of terminology: figurative terms. It has been shown by several authors that the terminology of emerging and rapidly developing disciplines (among others, gene technology, nanotechnology, computer science, environmental science, and education) often relies on metaphor as an important element of term formation. Figurative language – including metaphorical terminology – is a powerful tool also in public communication. Faced with a choice between a figurative and a non-figurative term, language professionals need to know which one to choose for which type of text. This paper will tackle terms that are fully or partly metaphorical. By fully metaphorical terms, we mean terms in which all components are metaphorical, as in '*whistleblower*' or '*shoulder surfing*'; in partly metaphorical terms, literal and metaphorical elements are combined, as in '*shadow* economy' or '*soft* skills'. The paper is part of the author's doctoral research on the role and effect of metaphorical terms in European terminology.

## 2. Method

In the summer of 2021, a survey was conducted among English, French, German, Italian, Finnish, and Estonian terminologists of EU institutions contributing to IATE. The survey aimed to find answers to the following questions:

- Do the users feel the need to change the way figurative terms are presented in IATE?

- Should figurative terms be complemented by a literal variant, if existing?
- Should they be accompanied by notes on usage, e.g., on whether they are easily understandable or should be explained or defined in texts aimed at the general public?
- Should they be marked 'figurative' in IATE, to make it possible to search for figurative terms, or to draw users' attention to their figurative nature, as opposed to literal terms?
- Should the terminologists of the anchor language provide some background information on the etymology of fully metaphorical terms, to help the terminologists of other languages find a suitable equivalent in the target languages and to inform the users?

With more than 8 million terms in 25 languages and public users in over 200 countries, IATE is one of the biggest European terminological databases. The main contributors to the concept-oriented database are terminologists of 10 European institutions who have used it since 2004 for the collection, dissemination, and management of EU-specific terminology. The main professional users of the termbase are translators, interpreters, lawyer-linguists, and other language professionals working for the European institutions.

Such a huge terminological resource provides ample material for linguistic research. In the past ten years, a number of distinguished scholars and linguists have drawn from IATE and studied it from different aspects, such as the dynamics of terminology in multilingual communication [14], multilingual primary term creation [16], terminological variation [4, 5], technical development of the database [17], and institutional terminology management [6, 7, 11].

## 3. Background

At present, figurative terms appear in IATE entries either standing alone or together with their non-figurative equivalents, if existing. To the detriment of the users expecting to make as few clicks as possible to retrieve the necessary information, it often happens that in the initial results of a query the user sees that all terminological variants proposed in an entry have the same level of reliability and no preferred term is indicated, as in the English-Italian search result below:
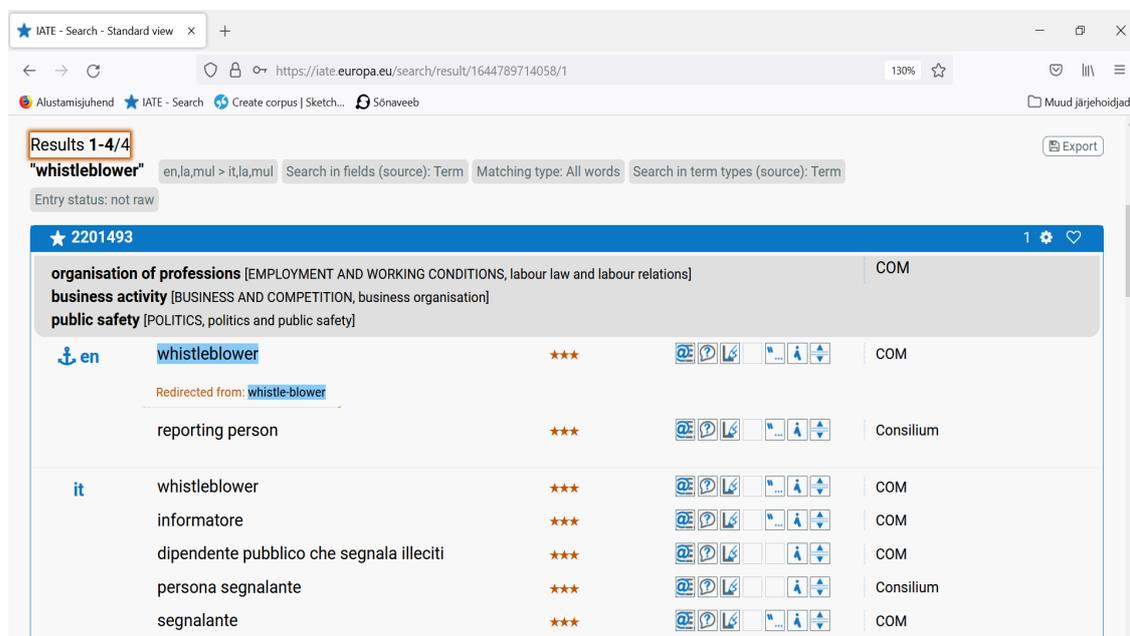


**Figure 1**: Example of a search result from IATE

It should be noted that it is currently not possible to mark metaphorical terms as 'figurative' in IATE, although the results of the terminologists' survey indicate that many of them would favour the idea. Neither is it possible to search for figurative terms or filter them out in the database. For the purposes of this research, several domain-specific term extractions have been made from IATE and figurative

terms have been identified, using the Metaphor Identification Procedure of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (MIPVU) [8, 10] with the necessary adaptations.

The current aspiration of EU institutions to reach the citizens in a more accessible language has opened up the prospect of adopting a more descriptive approach and fine-tuning IATE to the needs of its users. The latest step in this direction was to provide a choice between the standard view and interpreters' view. Owing to the different roles and functions of the European institutions, the needs of professional users vary to a considerable degree. The lawyer-linguists of the Court of Justice of the European Union, working mostly with legal texts, are likely to be less interested in figurative language than the translators and intercultural and language professionals of the European Parliament, for the latter advocates the novel concept of 'citizens' language' and puts great effort into producing reader-friendly texts meant for the general public.

In line with sociocognitive terminology theory [12] and previous research on terminological variation [3], one of the issues to be considered is the possibility to enhance terminological variation in IATE by adopting a more coherent approach to figurative variants of terms. This would enable language professionals to find a term best suited to the target audience, the type of text, and the specific communicational context. On the other hand, translators using the termbase in combination with a CAT tool might prefer to see a limited number of terminological options. Indeed, the results of the survey show that although most terminologists are in favour of a wide selection of term options in IATE, some of their colleagues would prefer to see just one (the preferred) term for each concept. In the case of such a huge multilingual terminological tool with a wide range of internal and external users, it could be expected that their needs are sometimes clashing. Referring to the thorough analysis of Temmerman [15], it appears that the conflicting interests of users reflect the need to make a conscious choice between the principles of traditional terminology theory (with a focus on prescriptivism, standardisation and univocity, ruling out synonymy, figurative language and the importance of the communicational context) and sociocognitive terminology theory (with its descriptive approach, focus on context, considering figurative language as a factor contributing to better understanding).

## 4. Conclusions

91 terminologists of the English, French, German, Italian, Finnish, and Estonian language units of ten EU institutions participated in the survey. The results indicate that most of them support the idea of enriching IATE entries with information on the etymology of fully metaphorical terms. In all six language communities, most respondents agree that notes could be provided on whether a figurative term should be explained or defined in texts aimed at the general public. Opinions vary on the usefulness of marking metaphorical terms as 'figurative' in IATE. To provide a more thorough analysis of professional users' needs, another survey is being conducted among translators and lawyer-linguists. Initial results confirm the need for etymological information on fully metaphorical terms. There is no consensus on the idea of adopting clarity indicators in IATE to mark the level of understandability of different term variants. As for the possibility to add informative visual content to figurative terms, most respondents do not find it necessary.

The author hopes that the information gained from the surveys will help to adjust the content of the termbase to ensure better user satisfaction.

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