

Representing Expert Disagreement in the Terminology of Sexual Identity*

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Abstract

The terminology of sexual identity is characterised by a high degree of definitional diversity and conceptual tension, which has previously been described under the label of “concept instability”. This paper argues that, upon further analysis, such a characterisation is unsuitable to account for the nature of the conceptual issues observed. Rather than being the result of natural conceptual variation or evolution, many of the definitional contradictions affecting the terminology of sexual identity stem from domain-expert disagreements rooted in broader sociopolitical and epistemological debates. To support this claim, the paper analyses competing definitions of two highly contested concepts – <Sexual Identity> in the legal domain and <Sex> in the medical domain – showing how incompatible conceptualisations coexist within the same language and domain, often in mutually exclusive ways. These case studies illustrate how expert disagreement produces definitional conflict that cannot be reduced to differences in scope or emphasis. Subsequently, the paper examines how such disagreements can currently be represented in terminology resources, focusing on FAIRterm 2.0, IATE, and bistro as examples. The analysis highlights structural limitations in existing systems and finally outlines future perspectives for extending terminological models to represent expert disagreement explicitly, thereby enabling a more transparent and socially aware treatment of contested terminologies.

Keywords

Terminology, Sexual Identity, Expert Disagreement, Gender and Queer Studies

1. Introduction

In the past few decades, the terminology of sexual identity has increasingly become a subject of interest for society at large, and more recently, for terminology science as well. The reason behind this interest lies in its politicised nature, the political discourse around it, and the terminological issues it is characterised by. Previous works [1, 2, 3, 4] have already explored how the new developments in gender studies and terminology science can meet. However, the focus of these studies has primarily been on the linguistic dimension, analysing translation issues, terms, term variants, and their representation in terminology resources, only briefly mentioning the underlying problems that lay in the conceptual dimension, i.e. the existence of multiple definitions for the same concept and unclear boundaries between closely related concepts.

At this point in time, to our knowledge, the only attempt to describe and group the conceptual issues present in the terminology of sexual identity as a whole in the framework of terminology science has labelled them as part of a broader phenomenon called “concept instability” [1]. This denomination points directly to cases in which incompatible conceptualisations coexist in the same domain, resulting in definitional contradictions rather than simple differences in scope or emphasis. This term harkens back and contrasts the assumption of stability that underpinned the General Theory of Terminology (GTT) [5] and explicitly addresses the idea of contradiction in the scope of conceptual variation or conceptual evolution, i.e. the variation of a concept’s characteristics leading to new concepts, which have been discussed in previous works (e.g. [6, 7, 8, 9]). However, this particular view implicitly claims that the coexistence of multiple and/or conflicting definitions for the same concept is a by-product of its natural evolution, which is not exactly correct. On the contrary, it would be more logical to assert that the causes of these different

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and conflicting definitions are found in the contrasting political views of the experts that have formulated them, and that they are the expressions of. Therefore, in this case, it would be better to speak of domain-expert disagreements [10], underlining the importance and influence that the sociopolitical discourse around sexual identity has on its terminology.

We can define domain-expert disagreement as a form of terminological and conceptual variation that arises when recognised experts within the same field (i.e. sharing comparable training, epistemic authority, and object of study) assign mutually exclusive definitions to the same concept. This variation is grounded in different theoretical frameworks, methodologies, or evidentiary standards, meaning that while other types of variation can typically be reconciled into a shared framework, even provisionally, domain-expert disagreements cannot [5, 9, 10].

Therefore, in the context of the terminology of sexual identity, the domain-expert disagreements are not only descriptive of finite issues but also of deeper epistemological and sociopolitical tensions. In particular, in the terminology of sexual identity, it can be observed that conceptual boundaries are strongly influenced by political, ideological, and institutional forces. Terms such as “sex”, “gender”, “transgender”, etc., are defined divergently across fields, sometimes in mutually exclusive ways [11, 12]. These contradictions expose how the politicisation of identity terminology and the multitude of definitions that are caused by it lead to issues in the application of said terminology, and its translation and representation in terminology resources, producing terminological systems in which coherence is constantly negotiated and redefined.

Therefore, in the remainder of this paper, we will explore two different cases of expert disagreements in the terminology of sexual identity. By analysing competing definitions, we pursue two main objectives: (1) showcasing the practical manifestations of expert disagreements, and (2) exploring how the nuances of expert disagreements can be incorporated in terminology resources such as FAIRterm 2.0 [13], IATE [14], and bistro [15, 16] with the necessary tools to prevent the understandable confusion or uncertainty that users may encounter when dealing with resources that incorporate multiple and contrasting definitions for the same concept.

2. Expert Disagreements in the Terminology of Sexual Identity

In this section, we examine multiple existing definitions of two concepts within the terminology of sexual identity in two different domains in order to illustrate the practical consequences and terminological issues caused by expert disagreements. Here, when referring to concepts, we adhere to the following graphical notations: concepts are always capitalised and between chevrons (<>). Also, the full list of a concept’s characteristics is referred to as “intension”. The analysis focuses on (1) the concept <Sexual Identity> as used in the legal domain (see Table 1), and (2) the concept <Sex> within the medical domain (see Table 2). These two case studies demonstrate how definitional contradictions emerge even in domains traditionally perceived as highly regulated or epistemically stable, if the concepts are highly politicised and/or the subject of sociopolitical discourse.

The first concept under analysis is <Sexual Identity> in the legal domain under British law, acknowledging that legal terminology is system-bound and that the definition of a legal concept may vary across legal systems. However, it is important to note that <Sexual Identity> is not defined in any statute and therefore does not appear explicitly in statutory terminology. Despite this, it surfaces in broader legal terminology and even more prominently in legal discourse.

Table 1

Comparison of the Definitions of <Sexual Identity> in the Legal Domain

Definition	Intension	Source
<Sexual identity> is one of the different components of sexual orientation, along with sexual behaviour and sexual attraction, and it refers to an individual's own perception of themselves, regardless of the other two components.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Component of <Sexual Orientation>. • Refers to an individual's own perception of their sexual orientation. • Is independent of all other components of <Sexual Orientation>. 	Measuring Sexual Identity Evaluation Report [17] used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to run a survey with the aim of collecting data on sexual orientation to meet U.K. legislative requirements to pass the Equality Act 2010, which ultimately left out <Sexual Identity>, defining other related concepts such as <Sexual Orientation> and <Gender Identity> [18].
<Sexual Identity> is the inherent self-identification with one sexual orientation and the related sexual behaviour.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is an inherent trait. • Refers to an individual's self-identification with one sexual orientation. • Has relation to sexual behaviour. 	Legal discourse around Family Law [19].
<Sexual Identity> is the self-identification with one of the sexes defined by law.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refers to an individual's self-identification with one sex. • The sexes defined by British law are the binary male-female. 	Legal discourse around Marriage Law [20].
<Sexual identity> is a composite reality made up of physical sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is a composite reality. • Its components are physical sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity. 	Definition with origins in psychology and queer and gender studies that has been adopted in legal discourse [21].

As can be observed in Table 1, the four definitions attested in the legal domain not only highlight different conceptual dimensions but also stand in direct contradiction with one another. Moreover, these divergences in the definitions muddle the hierarchical relationships and, more

broadly, the boundaries between <Sexual Identity> and closely related concepts such as <Sexual Orientation> and <Gender Identity>, thereby creating issues regarding the usage of the terms that designate these concepts, as they could be considered synonymous by some experts, and in their representation in terminology resources.

The second concept considered is <Sex> in the medical domain. Despite the common assumption that medical and biological terminology are less influenced by sociopolitical forces than other domains – such as the legal domain addressed above – this concept is also subject to expert disagreements.

Table 2

Comparison of the Definitions of <Sex> in the Medical Domain

Definition	Intension	Source
<Sex> is the clinical classification of an individual as male or female, typically assigned at birth on the basis of external genital anatomy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clinical classification. • Is binary. • Assigned at birth. • Based on external genitalia. 	Definition anchored in clinical usage [22].
<Sex> is a biological classification determined by the type of gamete an organism produces: males produce small gametes (sperm), females produce large gametes (ova).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biological classification. • Is binary. • Based on the type of gamete produced by the organism. 	Definition originated in Biology [23].
<Sex> is a multidimensional classification based on chromosomal, gonadal, hormonal, and anatomical traits involved in sexual differentiation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multidimensional classification. • Based on chromosomal, gonadal, hormonal, and anatomical traits. • Is not binary. 	Definition developed to be more encompassing of sexual differentiations and to be more inclusive of intersex people [24].

The definitions included in the table can be grouped into two mutually exclusive conceptualisations: those that define <Sex> as binary, and those that conceptualise it as a complex, multidimensional biological reality that cannot be fully captured by the traditional sex binary.¹ These opposing definitions reflect an ongoing division within the medical and biological fields regarding the appropriate conceptualisation of <Sex> [12]. This division can be attributed to the relatively recent emergence of intersexuality and individuals with intersex traits at the forefront of biological and medical debate [23], with one side looking at intersexuality as proof of the inadequacy of the binary conceptualisation of <Sex> [24] and the other as proof of its reaffirmation [25]. As a consequence, experts who adopt one of these definitions may reject the validity or applicability of the alternative [24, 25], therefore exemplifying the form of definitional conflict caused by expert disagreements. This case further illustrates the connection, outlined previously,

¹ Although Table 2 shows only one of these definitions for the sake of conciseness, in truth there are multiple definitions that list different criteria on which to base the classification of sex.

between terminology and broader sociopolitical debates, which exert significant influence even within domains conventionally perceived as epistemically objective.

Furthermore, to confirm the status of expert disagreement in the context of sexual identity as a widespread phenomenon with notable breadth and not just a contained issue strictly tied to specific concepts, we have taken into consideration 54 different concepts. Out of all the concepts analysed, 22 of them (meaning just over 40%) were found to have multiple definitions that either showcased conflicting characteristics or outlined discordant relationships/unclear boundaries with other closely related concepts.

3. Representing Expert Disagreements in Terminology Resources

The cases discussed above highlight the need for terminology resources to accommodate contradictory conceptualisations rather than merely documenting variation in scope or emphasis and to address the connection between sociopolitical discourse and the different conceptualisations that derive from it. However, currently, to our knowledge, there is no terminology resource that is able to fully achieve this. In this section, we take into consideration three different terminology resources, FAIRterm 2.0, IATE, and bistro, to showcase the general situation in terms of expert disagreement representation. FAIRterm 2.0 and IATE largely follow a one-definition-per-concept model that is rooted in the ISO 16642 (TMF), ISO 1087 and ISO 704 concept-oriented model (i.e. each concept entry in the resource presents one definition per language considered), which presupposes conceptual unification within a domain. Based on this alone, disagreement representation should not be possible at all. However, we can highlight possible ways in which these resources may still express and communicate these data by circumventing current limitations.

In FAIRterm 2.0, a concept-oriented terminology resource designed to support the creation, management, and publication of terminologies in compliance with the FAIR principles, it is actually possible to input more definitions for the same concept entry. However, these are tied to the language level, meaning that the platform allows one definition per language. This means that, in reality, the only way to address any eventual expert disagreements is by making use of the note data category present underneath the definition data category. Although this method can be effective to capture the general nature of the disagreement in question, it may prove unsuitable to fully express the nuances of more complex cases like the ones showcased in the previous section. Alternatively, it is possible to create a new concept entry with the same verbalisation but different definition. However, in that case the only way to create a connection between the two concept entries would again be by using the note data category.

For IATE, the interinstitutional terminology database of the European Union, developed to support multilingual communication and translation across EU institutions, we can observe that it largely adheres to a one-definition-per-concept model, relegating potential disagreements to notes or parallel entries much like FAIRterm 2.0.

By contrast, bistro allows multiple source-based definitions to coexist, particularly in legal domains, but does so without explicitly modelling disagreement, leaving conceptual conflicts to be inferred rather than formalised. In particular, definitions are linked to sources (e.g. legal acts, case law, doctrinal texts), not enforced as a single canonical definition and a concept can be associated with multiple sources within the same legal system/jurisdiction, which may conceptualise and define the concept differently. This means that bistro allows more than one definition to coexist as long as they are attributed to different authoritative sources. Therefore, bistro comes really close to representing expert disagreements in a fully satisfying way; however, it is limited by the fact that it strictly deals with the terminology of the legal domain and that it does not express the idea of expert disagreement more overtly.

4. Conclusions and Future Perspectives

The analyses presented in this paper show that definitional contradictions in the terminology of sexual identity cannot be adequately captured by existing notions of conceptual variation or evolution alone but need to be put in relation to the phenomenon of domain-expert disagreement. While current terminology resources offer different ways of documenting definitional diversity, to our knowledge, none of them explicitly model expert disagreement as such, particularly when it occurs within the same language and domain.

Future work should therefore focus on developing terminological models that focus on expert disagreement as an essential factor to take into account to fully express the scope of terminologies that are tied to active sociopolitical issues. A promising starting point is the source-based approach adopted by *bistro*, which allows multiple definitions to coexist without enforcing conceptual unification. Extending this model beyond the legal domain and integrating a wider multilingual support – along the lines of resources such as FAIRterm 2.0 or IATE – would make it applicable to a broader range of contested terminologies and would allow for interesting cross-domain analyses to take place. For example, it would be possible to observe effectively how the sociopolitical debate around sex and gender affects their definitions across more or less related domains, also allowing us to collect data on which domains are more susceptible to sociopolitical developments and which ones tend to be more conservative. In addition, we propose the addition of new data categories to make expert disagreements explicit rather than implicit. These may include information about the theoretical orientation or approach underlying a definition (e.g. the sex binary vs sex non-binary frameworks in biology and medicine highlighted before), explicit relations of contrast or incompatibility between definitions, and indications of whether a definition is part of an active expert debate. Encoding such information would enable terminology resources to communicate not only definitional content but also the epistemic positions and the social tensions that shape it and may, in time, produce true conceptual evolution.

Although users typically access terminological resources for the purposes of finding one single authoritative definition and encoding domain-expert disagreement would defy this expectation, by addressing it directly, future terminology resources could provide a more transparent and informative representation of highly contested terminologies, supporting users in navigating definitional conflict rather than obscuring it. Also providing a useful tool to use terminology in a way that is socially conscious and aware of the implicit connotations that accepting one definition rather than another may have.

Declaration on Generative AI

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT (OpenAI) in order to: Grammar and spelling check. After using this tool(s)/service(s), the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the publication's content.

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