



# Consistency in Terminological Choice: Holy Grail or False Prophet?

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## Summary

The aim of this contribution is to problematise the notion of consistency in relation to terminological choice in the context of technical writing and translation. It is argued that the conventional wisdom of terminological consistency can be nuanced through an understanding of ‘motivatedness’ which is rooted in textuality.

## Terminological consistency: Some possible perspectives

There is a clear common-sense notion that using the same designation for a particular referent on all occasions can help to avoid confusion when communicating specialist, or more narrowly, technical information or instructions. In practice, this means that in discussions of good and bad practice technical authors are enjoined to use the same term for the same referent throughout a particular communication, and even throughout all communications within a particular organisation if a terminology policy is in place.

Consistency of terminological choice has been seen not only as a characteristic of good technical writing in itself (see, for instance, Göpferich 2002:185) but also as an advantage of machine translation over human translation: for a particular source-text term, a machine-translation system always chooses the same equivalent (Vasconcellos 2001:697), i.e. is consistent in its automatic interlingual substitution of one form for another. Whether, by contrast, the implied *inconsistency* of human translation can be viewed as a matter of judgement which is exercised as a part of translation competence, or as a matter of carelessness is hard to resolve outside the context of a text-based study, as terms used in translation are an integral part of “textuality” (Beaugrande/Dressler 1981) or “texture” (Halliday/Hasan 1976). This is an aspect of terminology use which is rarely mentioned within terminology studies itself, but which does merit some attention in the context of specialist translation (see, for example, Horn-Helf 1999:168-174; Schmitt 1999). We return to issues of textuality below in an attempt to problematise more common-sense notions of consistency.

## Some views from the shop floor

A brief review of one well-known discussion list for translators reveals some concern with the issue of consistency. The problem is perceived as follows by one translator:

Dear proz-colleagues,  
I would be very interested in how you handle source texts, the terminology of which is not consistent. I'm not talking of literature, marketing or stuff like that, but of texts like user manuals, technical descriptions etc.  
When you realise that in the source text different terms and expressions are used for the very same thing, do you keep the variety in your translation or do you prefer consistency and therefore use the same terms and expressions throughout your translation?  
In fact, I think most of the languages prefer consistency (why else should we use TM's), but I also wonder, what you think about it and how far one should go to keep / create consistency in your opinion.  
TIA for any comments!  
[Translator's name]

(Source: <http://deu.proz.com/topic/56698>)

Another translator sees the problem in a similar way, pointing out the two basic options open to the translator: maintain the inconsistency of the source text or introduce consistency in the translation where none exists in the source text:

If, for example, the author uses 'folder' and 'directory' just because he cannot make up his mind which word he likes better, I might translate them with 'Ordner' and 'Verzeichnis', keeping up the variety as well as **consistency regarding the source**, or I call them both 'Verzeichnis' (or 'Ordner', whatever looks better in the context or is determined by the client), to keep up the **consistency regarding the meaning**.  
[Translator's name]

(Source: <http://deu.proz.com/topic/56698>; emphasis in the original)

The conventional wisdom of standards is to be consistent in both authoring and translating: if the use of terminology in the source text is consistent, then the first option of maintaining inconsistency in the translation falls away:

Pay attention to terminology: "compliance with specific domain and client terminology, or any other terminology provided, as well as terminology consistency throughout the whole translation"  
(Source: *Translation services – Service requirements*. European Standard, EN 15038:2006, p.11)

Translation tools are also promoted as a means of supporting consistency in translation.

Can your own staff work with **translation** memory tools, which allow for greater speed and better **consistency** at reduced costs? (Source: Medialocate at <http://www.medialocate.com/pitfalls.html>; emphasis in the original)

In addition to or in interaction with translation memory, a termbase can be used to support the consistent use of terminology by indicating, for instance, preferred and deprecated terms. And rule-based machine translation systems incorporate lexica which will always translate a source-language term or a set of source-language variants and synonyms in a particular way. But is this always the optimum solution, and what is so bad about inconsistency in the use of terms that it worries translators, is deprecated in standards and can be eliminated by the use of translation tools?

### Types of inconsistency

Most obviously, terminological inconsistency can be interpreted as the use of different forms for the same referent e.g. synonyms, orthographic variants and geographical variants in the same text or set of related texts, as well as hyponyms. But as Schmitt has noted in support of consistency: “Gleiche Teile sollten [...] gleich benannt werden”<sup>1</sup> (Schmitt 1986:269). In technical writing, precision of reference, i.e. clarity concerning which objects belong to the class of objects designated by the term (in contrast to vagueness), is prized above elegance of expression, given that the function of most technical documents is informative or instructive: the avoidance of monotony is therefore not a priority. However, as we shall see, there may well be a good reason to use alternative forms in some cases. One such case is that of functionally motivated synonymy i.e. the use of alternate forms to emphasise different characteristics of the same item or phenomenon e.g. *language for specific purposes* versus *language for special purposes*, or at different levels of specialist knowledge, e.g. *autocatalyst* versus *cat* (see Rogers 2000, 2007 for discussion).

There are also other types of intratextual lexical ‘inconsistency’ (from another perspective ‘variation’) which receive less attention than synonymy, such as elliptical forms of nominal compounds which appear in texts in a particular sequence, particularly in English. These have been called “reductions” e.g. *small dish earth station* → *small earth station* → *small station* (Nkwenti-Azeh 1994:66), “clippings” or “Textfortsetzungskondensate” (‘text continuation condensed forms’) (see Horn-Helf 1999:172-4). The more explicitly text-based German designation of this phenomenon emphasises its pragmatic rather than stylistic nature, i.e. its roots in textuality, which is constructed cohesively through lexical ties, economy of expression (e.g. ellipsis) and patterns of information structure progressing from given to new. Such constraints on textuality, which nevertheless vary in their instantiation from language to language, are more binding on text authors – whether as technical writers or translators – than stylistic variation in lexical choice.

### A reconsideration of consistency

In this section a more systematic analysis of what consistency can mean in the context of terminological choice in technical translation is presented, taking as a starting point the two basic choices presented by the Proz discussant outlined above: “consistency regarding the source” and what he calls “consistency regarding the meaning” (by which I understand him to mean consistency of reference throughout the target text). These two choices result in four logical possibilities: consistency or inconsistency regarding the source-text patterns of term use, and consistency or inconsistency regarding the choice of term/s in the target text. Tables 1 and 2 show all four possibilities for (1) source texts which are consistent in the use of terms on the one hand, and (2) source texts which are inconsistent in the use of terms on the other hand:

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The same parts should have the same designations’ (my translation).

ST	TT			
Consistent use of term variant in ST	Consistent transfer of ST pattern	Inconsistent transfer of ST pattern	Consistent use of term variant	Inconsistent use of term variant
<i>Pattern</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>
Variant 1 <sup>ST</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 2 <sup>TT</sup>
Variant 1 <sup>ST</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 2 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>
Variant 1 <sup>ST</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 3 <sup>TT</sup>
Variant 1 <sup>ST</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 3 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>

Table 1: Consistency of term use in source text (ST) and possible patterns in target text (TT)

ST	TT			
Inconsistent use of term variant in ST	Consistent transfer of ST pattern	Inconsistent transfer of ST pattern	Consistent use of term variant	Inconsistent use of term variant
<i>Pattern</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>H</i>
Variant 1 <sup>ST</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 2 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 2 <sup>TT</sup>
Variant 2 <sup>ST</sup>	Variant 2 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 3 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>
Variant 1 <sup>ST</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 2 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 3 <sup>TT</sup>
Variant 3 <sup>ST</sup>	Variant 3 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>	Variant 1 <sup>TT</sup>

Table 2: Inconsistency of term use in source text (ST) and possible patterns in target text (TT)

### Consistency

When consistency of term selection is recommended as good practice in technical translation, ‘consistency’ could mean one of three things.

First, it could mean replicating a consistent pattern of term use in the source text (Table 1, pattern C). It is perhaps in this interpretation that ‘consistency’ is most commonly and simply understood: what is considered a well-motivated use of one term for the same referent in the source text is retained in the target text.

Second, it could mean changing an inconsistent pattern of use to a consistent one, as in Table 2, pattern G. For this to be considered good practice, the inconsistency in the source text would need to be unmotivated, e.g. an apparently arbitrary use of synonyms. In this interpretation, the translator ‘corrects’ what seems to be a badly written aspect of the source text.

There is also a third logical possibility, namely the consistent *transfer* of a pattern of term choice from the source text to the target text, whether the pattern in the source text is in itself consistent (see Table 1, pattern A) or inconsistent (see Table 2, pattern E). In the latter case, the target text replicates the inconsistent pattern of the source text. In the former case, consistency is replicated (and pattern A is therefore indistinguishable from pattern C).

### Inconsistency

Just as consistency can be variously interpreted, so also can inconsistency.

First, a consistent pattern of term use in the source text (Table 1) can be inconsistently translated (pattern D). This could be construed as an inappropriate strategy if it introduces unmotivated variation such as a variety of orthographic forms, regional variants or synonyms in the target text. However, it could also be the case that the form of the term in the source language lends itself to consistent use, e.g. a single-word non-compound term, whereas the target language term is a compound which can undergo ellipsis. In such a case, so-called inconsistency in the translation could be well-motivated.

Second, if the use of terms in the source text is inconsistent (Table 2), then an inconsistent transfer of that pattern *remains* inconsistent, but is different pattern from the pattern in the source text. So pattern F – inconsistent transfer of an inconsistent source-text pattern – contrasts with a consistent transfer of an inconsistent pattern, as in pattern E. In the case of pattern F, the translator might decide to introduce a different pattern of variation for a good reason, e.g. because the form of the target-language term does not lend itself to the same patterns of variation as that of the source-language term. In the case of pattern E, it is possible that the same pattern of variation can also be accommodated in the target text. It is also possible, of course, that the patterns of variation are in neither case well motivated.

It should be noted that the outcomes produced in some patterns are indistinguishable from others in some cases (as also noted above for patterns A and C): in Table 1 and in Table 2, inconsistency of transfer and inconsistency of use both result in inconsistent patterns (patterns B and D, and patterns F and H respectively).

Summing up, the nature of the source-text ‘inconsistency’ in any particular text is an important consideration in evaluating translation strategies. If the source-text author has used different terms for the same referent (Table 2), the source-text variation may be stylistic (i.e. not well-motivated in the context of technical writing and therefore a candidate for ‘correction’) or pragmatic as in the case, for example, of a well-motivated sequence of elliptical forms of a compound. In such cases, a similar pattern of variation *may* emerge in the target text (pattern E), but only assuming that the full target-language term has a similar form and similar reduction patterns. The likelihood of such a situation may vary language-typologically, such that more closely related languages such as English and German are more likely to share formation and reduction patterns than less closely related languages such as English and Russian (see Horn-Helf 1999:318-327 for an elaboration of term-formation patterns in these three languages).

### **Motivatedness**

Figure 1 summarises how consistency and inconsistency in source texts can be viewed from a translation point of view in the context of motivatedness. In fact, rather than suggesting that technical translators produce consistent patterns of term use in target texts as a matter of course, a more nuanced approach seems appropriate, i.e. to evaluate patterns of source-text term use as motivated or unmotivated, and to act on that according to the term formation patterns of the target language and the affordances and constraints of textuality in the target language. Baker (1992:206), for instance, points to the fact that it is generally acknowledged that “networks of lexical cohesion” are impossible to reproduce in translation (see Rogers 2007 for further discussion).

So both consistent and inconsistent patterns could be reproduced whilst still observing good practice, and the logical possibility of the *unmotivated* consistent use of a term in a source text is also accommodated. Such cases might arise, for instance, if a full term e.g. *effective isotropic radiated power* is repeated in its full form throughout a text, meaning that the referent is overspecified for readers who expect items to be referred to by reduced and/or abbreviated forms once they have been introduced, e.g. *effective radiated power* → *EIRP* → *ERP* (term and reduced/abbreviated forms taken from Nkwenti-Azeh 1994:66).

	Inconsistency in ST	Consistency in ST
<b>Motivated selection of terms in ST</b>	TRANSFER TO TL TEXT e.g. <i>Textfortsetzungskondensate</i> – if term formation, and therefore reduction or abbreviation patterns permit.	TRANSFER TO TL TEXT e.g. neither chosen ST term nor TT term is subject to ‘condensation’ (e.g. reduction or abbreviation).
<b>Unmotivated selection of terms in ST</b>	DO NOT TRANSFER TO TL TEXT e.g. non-functional synonyms;  INTRODUCE WELL-MOTIVATED TERM USE IN TT e.g. consistent use of a term which cannot be reduced or abbreviated, or ‘inconsistent’ use of a full term which can be ‘condensed’ in line with cohesive constraints.	DO NOT TRANSFER TO TL TEXT e.g. a ST term which has <i>not</i> but could have been ‘condensed’ in line with cohesive constraints (e.g. given-new patterns of functional sentence perspective) and is repeated in full (overspecification of a known item);  INTRODUCE WELL-MOTIVATED TERM USE IN TT e.g. consistent use of a term which cannot be reduced or abbreviated, or ‘inconsistent’ use of a full term which can be ‘condensed’ in line with cohesive constraints.

Figure 1: Translation strategies in relation to well-motivatedness and consistency of term use in a source text (ST)

## Conclusion

In this paper, it has been argued that inconsistency in the use of terms, whether in source texts or target texts – otherwise, ‘variation’ – is in some cases textually constrained and therefore well motivated. A re-orientation has therefore been suggested towards a view of term selection in technical translation which focuses on motivatedness rather than on a one-dimensional notion of consistency. Such an approach to translation decisions can clearly be seen as a part of translator competence and contrasts with what has been seen as an advantage of machine translation and computer-assisted translation systems over human translation, namely the automatic substitution of equivalents. The implications for lexical cohesion of such automatic substitution in, for example, outputs from translation memory tools, remain an empirical question.

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