INTERVIEW: Knowledge and terminology management at the Danish National Board of Social Services

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"We need to do more than simply create classifications"

Abstract

The concept secretariat of the Danish National Board of Social Services carries out terminology and classification work in connection with IT projects, among others, in the field of social services. This work is interesting for several reasons. On the one hand, terminology work obviously contributes to enhanced efficiency and transparency from the points of view of all types of users. On the other hand, some social services professionals are skeptical vis-à-vis the terminology projects because they fear unification and standardization of their professionalism and working procedures in connection with the introduction of new IT systems. And finally, a number of ethical issues have to be taken into consideration when deciding on terminology in the social services field. All in all, target group and communicative aspects become central to the effort.

David Rosendahl

Terminology consultant at the Danish National Board of Social Services

The Danish National Board of Social Services

("Socialstyrelsen") is an independent subdivision of The Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration. The Board aims to promote new development and initiatives in social services while also supporting and counselling local authorities in providing services to citizens, i.e. children, young people, socially marginalised groups, elderly and disabled.

(Source: http://www.servicestyrelsen.dk/om-os/about-us).

MØLLER: The Danish National Board of Social Services has been working since 2007 on mapping out the concepts and the terminology of the social services field. What has been the goal of this effort?

ROSENDAHL: Conceptual clarification was initiated as an integral part of the Strategy for Digitalizing Social Services 2005-2008. We had to perform concept clarification supporting unambiguous exchange of information among: a) people, b) people and IT systems, and c) various IT systems.

It was not entirely clear from the Strategy whether clarification of concepts meant clarifying the

terminology of the subject field or clarifying IT-related concepts as a prerequisite to data modeling.

However, it was soon decided to focus on clarification of the terminology of the field, simply because the project we first had to carry out was the so-called Social Services Gateway, bringing together all services offered within a number of fields defined by Danish social services legislation. In order to present and compare the services offered, there was a need to structure some of the central areas of the field using a number of classifications - and we ended up with classifications of service providers, services, and target groups.

Later we also carried out terminology projects involving a more general clarification of concepts in social services. Today our focus is mainly on support projects for IT projects. In such projects, a sufficient number of people, of different specializations and with different needs, are brought together in a framework calling for standardization, and at the same time financial resources are actually made available.

In that way, development in the IT field promotes development in the field of terminology, which is both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the one hand, these IT projects demonstrate a number of needs and enable them to be met as well. Thus it becomes possible to reap some benefits with respect to process and decision support, reuse of information, and savings on time and resources. Besides, new opportunities arise from applying information for management, statistical, and analytical purposes as well as for other types of knowledge creation purposes.

On the other hand, terminology work becomes involved in the chaos and challenges connected with the introduction of IT solutions, more standardized procedures, and increased and more conspicuous documentation requirements in connection with social service work. All these are phenomena that have appeared during recent years and that may generate a good deal of concern and resistance.

Q: How has the work been organized?

A: Two of us are full-time terminology consultants whose positions are predominantly funded through projects, and occasionally we buy external terminological expertise. The *Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration* and *Local Government*

Conceptual work

Common understanding and use of concepts is a prerequisite of

- High quality social service documentation
- Recording of data into data bases
- Exchange of information among systems
- Retrieval of social service data for statistical purposes
- Management information
- Development of operational standards for data exchange
- Cross-sectorial comparison of social service efforts

(Source: http://www.socialebegreber.dk/begrebsarbejde)

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Denmark (Kommunernes Landsforening) are our primary clients.

Each terminology project starts with preparatory studies and a preliminary clarification stage in which the field in focus is mapped out using the combined competences of the Board of Social Services and the Ministry, in some cases supplemented by a corpus of relevant documentation if such material is available (cf. figure 1).

Next, a working group is formed of people possessing relevant qualifications in the field as well as practical knowledge. The group will provide feedback on the draft produced during the preliminary clarification stage. We may also include other people from our network to supply terminological expertise. And finally, we may submit the result to review by specially selected persons with subject-specific or terminological expertise. This constitutes our quality assurance process.

Once the work process has been concluded, the project will be wound up and the results are published via our home page. This publication takes place via a written report as well by making the new terminology accessible in our concept data base.

We try to maintain a focus on generalizability. On the one hand, we have to meet the needs of individual projects, on the other hand, we want to be able to reuse concepts for related purposes, and to revert to some of the concepts later in order to update or differentiate if the need should arise.
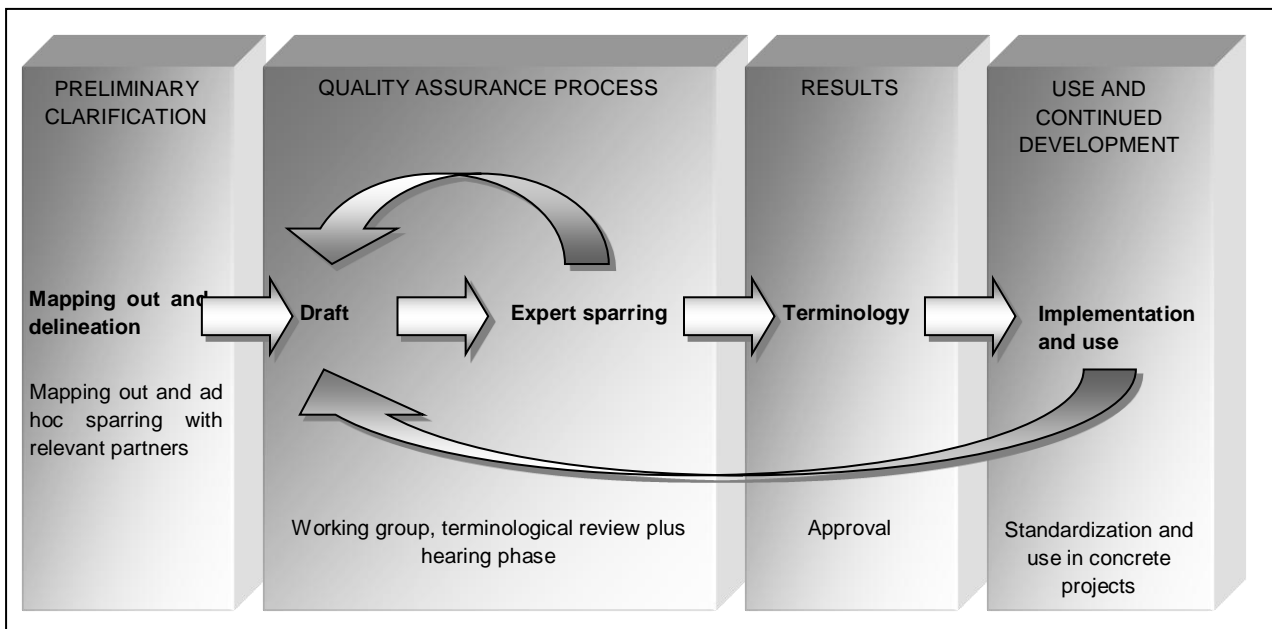

Figure 1*: Flow of practice-oriented terminological conceptual work process*
(Source: http://www.socialebegreber.dk/begrebsarbejde/proces-og-kommissorium)

Communication & Language at Work

Q: Which types of tools and methods do you use?

A: In order to support our vision of creating a map comprising all our terminology projects, we apply a systematic approach ensuring that our individual clarification projects will be integrable in the future. This is done first of all by applying the principles laid down by the ISO standards on terminology work. In this way, we may later make use of and secure consistency with terminology projects within other fields in which the same methodology has been applied.

And naturally, we have an IT system capable of handling the terminology as well as presenting it on our home page.

Q: Which challenges have you met?

A: One of the challenges is how to present our results in a form that is useful to our target groups. We are continuously trying to improve the way we communicate the results to our various target groups with their rather different needs. One group consists of IT developers who are used to working with data models, applying conceptual models developed by others. Another group consists of social service professionals whose needs and background knowledge are of a different kind. In connection with the IT of development projects, for instance, they may need a conceptual overview of a restricted field, or they may need to be able to look up individual concepts.

A second challenge lies in the fact that the social services sector does not have a long history of applying standardized procedures, classifications, or terminologies; besides, a variety of professions are often involved in the field.

A medical doctor will not worry about his professional competences being infringed on because he has to use an international classification of diseases. This is simply an integral part of his professionalism and of his working procedures. We are performing terminology work in an area dominated by different traditions, which means that our working conditions differ from those of, say, the medical doctor. Thus we need to do more than simply create classifications. We also need to consider such issues as how the results are to be applied in practice, who has to apply them and in which contexts, what is the type of project, what is the purpose, etc.

Pragmatic considerations are thus equally important for our work as are the IT perspective and the ISO standards. What is particularly characteristic of this field is a certain degree of sensitivity to language. The choice of words used to refer to citizens and their problems is essential. Thus when working on a terminology project intended to support an IT system, we as developers may find it frustrating not to be allowed to name concepts the way we find the most consistent from a terminological point of view. At the same time, it is extremely important to select terms that will be accepted by future users, and it does not make sense to select a term that is consistent from a

conceptual and terminological point of view if that term has negative connotations to the users.

We have also succeeded to a large degree in communicating the usefulness of our conceptual work to the surrounding world: the classifications we have created since 2006 are now being implemented in a number of IT systems spanning various fields and working procedures - so naturally their usefulness has become more visible.

Q: Conceptual work is seldom, if ever, of a controversial nature; at most, it may be difficult to obtain the resources required because decision-makers fail to realize its usefulness. Nevertheless, you have experienced situations in which it may be controversial. Is there any advice that you may give our readers as to how to communicate results in a suitable way?

A: As I mentioned before, some of our users are worried or skeptical about our conceptual work because they perceive it as a potential tool for unification and standardization of their professionalism and working procedures in connection with the introduction of new IT systems.

In our experience, the most efficient method of communication consists of going out to meet the users. Once they have been introduced to the context, the purpose, and the potential benefits of the conceptual work we carry out, they, in most cases, show considerable understanding of the purpose as well as the content of the project. In such cases the users realize that we do not intend to restrict their professional diversity; on the contrary, conceptual work may contribute to strengthening their professionalism and avoiding arbitrariness.

Oral communication is the most efficient channel. As soon as we start communicating with users in writing, for instance by asking for feedback from working groups or experts, it gets more complicated. Some users may find that their worries and reservations are confirmed rather than the opposite, simply because they see only a few pieces of the entire picture.

Last year when we sent out for a hearing of a material we had worked out for a social case management system to cover the area of the disabled and of socially marginalized groups, the media controversy that arose could probably be attributed mainly to the fact that the material was ill suited for a hearing.

The critics picked a number of concepts the definitions of which seemed perfectly intuitive. As a matter of fact, we had not defined the concepts in question, but copied them from the ICF (WHO's International Classification of Functioning, Health and Disability). The working group had picked a number of concepts that were relevant for the case management in question, concepts which seemed perfectly obvious when seen

out of context. Thus one might smile at the fact that somebody had spent resources on defining 'eating', 'drinking', etc.

Case management systems are examples of areas in which we have user satisfaction surveys, telling us how the IT systems have been received by users; and the results show a very high degree of satisfaction on the part of users as far as IT support of working procedures is concerned. Thus it provides case managers with the support they need in order to make sure that every element of the process is taken into account, and in that way it contributes to securing proper, careful case management that is in accordance with relevant legislation. And finally, some of the data generated during case management is reused for national statistics purposes as well as for informing management within the organization; and the latter is very much welcomed.

To sum up, our experience tells us that whenever conceptual work is integrated into projects accommodating the concrete needs of their target groups, it will be well received.

(Translator/co-author: Birthe Toft, assoc. prof., University of Southern Denmark)