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Linguistic Data and Domain Specific Language or: How specific is specific (Abstract)

Starting from the common distinction between domain-specific and general-purpose language, the talk looks at ways of handling research data in domain-specific language and discourse studies. The definition of what is seen as domain-specific is crucial across the whole spectrum of applied language studies, ranging from lexicography/terminology to discourse analysis, LSP and specialized translation. The question affects the research process from data collection to analysis.

Adopting a corpus perspective and focusing on language in its context of use, the talk centres on two (related) key issues: attention to internal variation and problems of comparability. Attention to internal variation refers to a consolidated awareness that domain-specific studies do not only address what characterizes the domain as such, but also variation within the domain itself. Expert-to-expert communication and knowledge dissemination, for example, may opt for different communicative forms, rhetorical structures and lexico-grammatical choices. Closer attention to internal variation could also mean paying attention not only to those language forms that represent the basic knowledge structures of a domain (e.g. its specific terminology), but also to its specific uses of general language, as these may point to distinctive ways of organizing discourse, arguing a position or presenting knowledge. Comparability refers to the inherently comparative nature of most studies on domain-specific language use. Comparisons between corpora and subcorpora are common when studying variation across different domains and subdomains, across different genres and communicative events, across text sections or even across languages. Attention should be paid to comparing what is really comparable and to considering both similarities and dissimilarities. The study of text-internal variation (e.g. different sections of a communicative genre) and cross-cultural comparison (e.g. the same genre in two languages) represent two extremes in a cline of comparability. The talk exemplifies strategies for studying lexico-grammatical patterns and functional units and discusses them in relation to the issues raised.