

# Words or terms? Models of terminology and the translation of Buddhist Sanskrit vocabulary\*

Ligeia Lugli

Buddhist Sanskrit texts, like most texts, can be conceived as networks of words woven together by complex lexical, semantic and pragmatic relations. An understanding of these relations, and of the many factors that influence the meaning and use of words in context, is key to the translation of these texts. This may sound obvious. Yet, I had occasion to discover that many translators of Buddhist literature conceptualise their translation task rather differently.

As part of my lexicographic work on Buddhist Sanskrit vocabulary, I had, at some point, to interview the prospective audience of the lexical resource I was working on.<sup>1</sup> Since the resource was mainly aimed at translators of Buddhist Sanskrit texts, most of the interviewees were scholars and students actively engaged in the translation of such texts. The interviews were enlightening. Among other things, they revealed a fundamental discrepancy between the interviewers' and interviewees' conceptualisation of the language of Buddhist sources. While my colleagues and I were talking of Buddhist Sanskrit words and vocabulary, our interlocutors were consistently referring to Buddhist Sanskrit terms and technical terminology. They appeared to hold what I call a 'terminological view' of the Buddhist lexicon, whereby much of the Buddhist vocabulary (notably the segment that proves the most resistant to rendition in English) is taken to have a highly specialised and stable meaning that is best understood (and translated) not so much through the study of its behaviour in context, but rather through mastery of, quite specifically, abhidharmic definitions.

Fascinated by this discrepancy in the conceptualisation of the Buddhist Sanskrit lexicon, I gave some thought to the difference between words and terms and the impact any conceptualisation of that difference may have on translation.

## 1. Models of terminology and their impact on translation

Terminology is a specialised subset of the general language. As such, it calls for specialised translation. Generally speaking, translating terminology requires a level of precision and consistency that is neither necessary nor advisable in the translation of most non-specialised texts. Yet, just how different terminological translation should be from non-specialised translation ultimately depends on how greatly we take terms to differ from general language words.

For most of the twentieth century, Western scholars in the fields terminology and specialised translation regarded terms to be fundamentally different from words.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to words in the general language, whose meaning is largely "fuzzy" and context dependent, terms

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews were held in 2015 at the Mangalam Research Centre (Berkeley, CA) and online, as part of the development of the Buddhist Translators Workbench (<https://btw.mangalamresearch.org/en-us/about/development/>).

<sup>2</sup> The fields of terminology and specialised translation are closely related. Theoretical work on terminology first began in response to the needs of translators working on technical texts and it is no coincidence that Eugene Wuester, the father of terminology as an academic discipline, was actively engaged technical bilingual lexicography (see Faber 2009, 111).

typically designate well-defined concepts that have a precise function and taxonomic position within a system of knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

An example may serve to illustrate this difference and how it affects translation. Let us contrast the word ‘friend’ with the term ‘diabetes’. Depending on the context, ‘friend’ can mean, among other things, someone one likes to spend time with, an ally in war, a romantic partner or a mere acquaintance. The boundaries between these various concepts are not clearly delineated. Where the concept of friend starts, and that of acquaintance ends, is largely a matter of personal interpretation. Moreover, if one wants to express the prototypical meaning of the word friend, that is, the idea of someone one wants to spend time with or talk to, there are a plethora of near-synonyms one can choose from depending on the communicative situation, register or semantic nuance one wishes to convey. One can for example choose the words ‘buddy’, or ‘mate’ over ‘friend’. Thus, to render the word ‘friend’ accurately in another language, translators have to pay great attention to context. In most cases, they have to keep adapting their rendition of this word throughout the text, in order to convey the various meanings it takes in different sentences. No translator would stick to one single translational equivalent to render all the different meanings that a word like ‘friend’ acquires in different contexts.

The translation of the term ‘diabetes’ is an entirely different matter. ‘Diabetes’ refers to a well-defined family of diseases which occupies a specific position in medical taxonomy. Moreover, the term diabetes stands in a bi-univocal relationship with the concept it expresses. It only refers to one medical concept and, in medical discourse, this medical concept can only be expressed with the name ‘diabetes’. Lexical choice in this case is not influenced by the multitude of factors that usually inform word selection in everyday language. Regardless of context, collocational patterns or communicative situation, one would have to use the term ‘diabetes’ to refer to the homonymous family of diseases.

The tasks of the translator in this case is to find an equivalent expression in the target language for the medical concept expressed by the term ‘diabetes’. Once a suitable equivalent is found, it has to be consistently adopted throughout the entire text, to ensure precision and avoid the ambiguities that lexical variation might bring about. This task is not without its challenges. To make sure they select the appropriate equivalent, translators need to be well acquainted with the definition of a term in a discipline and make sure that it matches the definition of the equivalent term in the target language. In some cases, the target language may lack an exact equivalent and translators would have to decide how to fill the terminological gap. Overall, however, in the case of “pure terms” like ‘diabetes’, terminological translation is a straightforward, if not mechanical, matching exercise. Alas, as it often happens with seemingly straightforward things, this view of terminology and terminological translation has turned out to be often unrealistic.

Only a minority of terms behave as neatly as ‘diabetes’. ‘Diabetes’, is, so to speak, a prototypical term. More specifically, ‘diabetes’ fulfils the requirements of the General Theory of Terminology (also called ‘classical model of terminology’ in this paper). According to this theory, a lexical item qualifies as a term only if it stands in bi-univocal relation with its referent and is unambiguously defined.<sup>4</sup> In other words, this model of terminology views terms as radically different from general language words.

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<sup>3</sup> See Cabré 2010, 357 (infra note 14) and Bowker and Hawkins 2006, 79: “The concepts that make up specialized fields of knowledge are designated by lexical items known as terms.”

<sup>4</sup> See Bowker and Hawkins 2006, 83.

## 1.a Current model of terminology

Over the last couple of decades, a growing body of evidence has emerged against the General Theory of Terminology. It is now generally agreed that the distinction between words and terms is far from clear-cut, with terms being subject to much of the same fluidity as words. The current model of terminology is articulated, with minor differences, within a variety of theoretical frameworks. Prominent theories include Sociocognitive, Communicative and Frame-based theories of terminology.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of their individual flavour, all current theories agree that terms are dynamic and stand on a continuum with general language words.

Three main points emerge from the ever-growing literature on the subject. First, specialised concepts, which are the referents of terms, are dynamic, multifaceted and often tolerant of a degree of vagueness. To begin with, they are subject to diachronic change, as they develop together with the fields of knowledge to which they pertain.<sup>6</sup> They are also subject to contextual change. They are conceptualised differently depending on the field in which they occur, with different aspects of the same specialised concept being foregrounded in different contexts.<sup>7</sup> This is all the more frequent when a concept is underspecified and thus allows for a degree of reinterpretation in different environments.<sup>8</sup> Faber-Benítez and León-Araúz (2016) offer a fine example of this phenomenon. They propose that the oscillatory movement that constitutes the prototypical aspect of the concept of ‘wave’ is fundamentally underspecified. It can apply to anything that follows an oscillatory movement pattern. This under-specification allows the concept of ‘wave’ to become associated with different specialised concepts in different fields, for example with electromagnetic waves in physics and surface waves in marine ecology.<sup>9</sup> Thus, words denoting broad, underspecified concepts like ‘wave’ are likely to acquire different terminological realisations in different contexts, especially when compounded with other words that serve to specialise their meaning (e.g. the adjective ‘electromagnetic’).

Second, terms behave much more like general language words than it was previously thought. Style and register affect specialised prose, creating terminological variation and alternations between terms and general language expressions that approximate the same specialised concept (e.g. ‘cardiovascular disease’ can be replaced by ‘heart condition’ in some contexts).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, like general language words, terms are not exempt from being used metaphorically or developing semantic extensions that result in terminological polysemy.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, words and terms stand on a semantic continuum. As the example of ‘wave’ mentioned above illustrates, most terms are but general language words that acquire specialised meanings in certain contexts. These contexts are not always easy to identify and some ambiguity as to the terminological status of an expression may arise. Faber and León-Araúz (2016), for example, argue that the verb ‘to dissipate’ in the domain of meteorology (e.g. in the sentence ‘the cyclone has dissipated’) is related to the terminological value of this verb in thermodynamics, where it specifically refers to the dispersion of energy. However, they note

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of these theories, see Faber 2009, 112 ff.

<sup>6</sup> See tenHaken 2015 and Dury 1999.

<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon is often referred to as multidimensionality or perspicitization; see Rogers 2004, Antia et al. 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Freixa 2006, 64.

<sup>9</sup> Faber and León-Araúz 2016, 9.

<sup>10</sup> See Bowker and Hawkins 2006 and Fernández-Silva et al. 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Terminological polysemy differs from the polysemy of words in the general language, insofar as it rarely gives rise to ambiguity. The different terminological realisations of a single word typically pertain to different domains of knowledge. The use of ‘virus’ in computer science, for example, is a metaphorical extension of the biological application of the same term, but the two uses are not likely to generate much semantic ambiguity as they typically occur in very different context.

that the verb can also be read in its general language sense of ‘to dissolve gradually’.<sup>12</sup> Cases like this call for re-conceptualising terminology as a graded phenomenon. Terms and words stand on cline of specialisation, with some instantiations being closer to “classical” terms and some closer to general language use.

This renders the categorisation of word instantiations as terminological somewhat problematic.<sup>13</sup> Recent definitions of terms emphasise the function that terms serve in context rather than their intrinsic lexico-semantic properties. A leading terminologist, M.T. Cabré, writes:

Linguistically, terms are lexical units of language that activate a specialized value when used in certain pragmatic and discursive contexts. The special value results in a precise meaning recognized and stabilized within expert communities in each field. From a cognitive point of view, terms constitute conceptual units representing nodes of knowledge which are necessary and relevant in the content structure of a field of specialty and which are projected linguistically through lexical units. All the conceptual nodes together constitute the conceptual structure of the field.<sup>14</sup>

In this model of terminology, the challenge for terminologists is to identify words that “can acquire terminological value, to account for how this value is activated [and] to explain the relations of these units with other types of sign.”<sup>15</sup> This complicates the work of translators as well, as the task of terminological translation becomes more nuanced than it used to be within the classical model of terminology.

### **1.b Impact on translation**

In a paradigm where terms and words blur into one another, consistency and conceptual precision, the bedrocks of terminological translation within the classical model of terminology, become potential sources of inaccuracy. To consistently render all instances of ‘wave’ in a text with a translation that conveys the precise meaning of word in physics may quickly lead to inaccuracy if, in fact, the source text moves across domains of knowledge; for example by referring to waves in the context of both physics and ecology. The same applies if the source text moves across registers. For example, if a physics textbook intersperses highly specialised scientific demonstrations with non-specialised examples accessible to the general reader.

Translators need to assess very carefully whether each instance of a word possesses terminological value and to what degree this value departs from the general language. Failure to distinguish between terminological and general language instances of the same word inevitably results in a distortion of the register of the source text. Over-consistent and over-specialised renditions risk making the translated version sound more scientific than the original.<sup>16</sup> This problem is especially acute when renditions are less transparent than the

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<sup>12</sup> Faber and León-Araúz 2016, 6-7.

<sup>13</sup> For an outline of the difficulties of distinguishing between words and terms, or specialised and non-specialised vocabulary, and a survey of attempts to arrive to such distinction, see Pearson 1998, 16-28.

<sup>14</sup> Cabré 2010, 357.

<sup>15</sup> Montero and Faber 2009, 102.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Olohan 2013, 428.

original. For in this case the translated text will prove less accessible to a general audience than the source text intended to be.

To retain the level of accessibility of source text, a translation should strive to convey the same degree of continuity between terminological and general language uses that a word has in the source language. Thus, if a physics textbook switches between highly specialised explanations of electromagnetic waves and widely accessible examples linking some electromagnetic phenomenon to sea waves, a translation should capture the continuity between the terminological and general language applications of the word ‘wave’.

This may not always be achievable in practice. Different languages may link general language and terminological expressions differently. If a language uses radically different expressions for the general and specialised concept of ‘wave’ it may be impossible to preserve the same level of lexical cohesion and semantic transparency in translation. Depending on the case, translators will have to decide whether to prioritise the preservation of lexical cohesion or the accurate rendition of register. In cases where some level of wordplay is involved, lexical cohesion may prove the better choice. In other instances, it may be preferable to maintain the same register and level of specialisation as the source text.

All this is very difficult to achieve in any kind of translation. It proves especially difficult in the translation of ancient Buddhist texts. A number of factors contribute to this increase in difficulty. The most obvious is, perhaps, the unavailability of native speakers to help us judge how natural or specialised an expression may sound in a given context. This difficulty is compounded with the cultural distance between present day English and classical Buddhist languages. Such distance makes it likely that we will encounter in Buddhist texts words that have no equivalent in English (lexical gaps). Concepts that were salient in the ancient Buddhist world and may have been neatly expressed by a single word (lexicalized) in the languages of that world are not prominent in the conceptual landscape of the modern West and are therefore not lexicalised in contemporary English. The very nature of the texts, too, adds a layer of complexity to the task of translation. The hermeneutic and intertextual dynamics at play in much of Buddhist literature often call for the preservation of lexical cohesion in the translated text.<sup>17</sup> Finally, as Griffiths noted in his much-quoted paper on Buddhist Hybrid English, many translators lack sufficient knowledge of the source languages and their conceptual landscape to be able to render Buddhist terminology adequately.<sup>18</sup> I would add that they often also neglect to evaluate the terminological status of individual word instantiations with sufficient delicacy.

Consistency and accuracy have perhaps been over-emphasised in the field of Buddhist translation.<sup>19</sup> The repeated adoption of over-specialised renditions, stemming, perhaps, from an interpreting segments of the Buddhist vocabulary through a classical model of terminology, has surely contributed the rise of unidiomatic English translations.

A large-scale survey of the Buddhist lexicon is needed to determine to what extent Buddhist terms may fit the classical model of terminology and, hence, require highly consistent and precise renditions. A cursory look at the dozen words<sup>20</sup> I had the good fortune of studying in my lexicographic work suggests that the classical model of terminology may not be the best fit for the Sanskrit Buddhist lexicon. Several terms follow the pattern highlighted by Faber-Benítez and León-Araúz (2016), whereby terminological specialisations of a polysemous word

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<sup>17</sup> See Nānamoli 2011 (first published 1956), L-LI.

<sup>18</sup> Griffiths 1981, 19.

<sup>19</sup> See Nānamoli 2011 (first published 1956), L-LI, Norman 1984 and infra section 2a.

<sup>20</sup> The lemmata analysed include: *adhimokṣā*, *adhiṅmuc*, *adhimukti*, *bhakta*, *kalpanā*, *√kṣp*, *prasāda*, *saṃjñā*, *saṃjñā*, *saṃkalpa*, *saṃkṣp*, *sparśa*, *śradḍhā*, *śradḍhā*, *vikalpa*, *viṅkṣp*.

arise when an otherwise underspecified word is compounded with specifying lexical items (e.g. *rūpaprasāda*, *śraddhānusarin*).

In what follows I am going to focus on a single case study on the Sanskrit word *saṃjñā* and show how different models of terminology affect the rendition of this word in Buddhist contexts.

## 2. Case study: *saṃjñā*

*Saṃjñā* is a prominent word in the Buddhist lexicon. It refers, among other things, to a key doctrinal concept, the *saṃjñā-skandha*. Not surprisingly, its English rendition is a matter close to the heart of many scholars, translators and Buddhist followers alike. Alas, *saṃjñā* is extremely difficult to translate. Many a learned footnote, dense with elucubrations on its possible renditions and their various shortcomings, testifies to this translational difficulty.

It is not my ambition to offer yet another essay on how this word should or could be rendered in English. I merely intend to problematize the discussion on the terminological translation of this word. I will first show that much of the academic debate on the translation of *saṃjñā* is tinged with a version of the ‘terminological view’ of the Buddhist Sanskrit lexicon. In this case, a view that aligns with the classical model of terminology insofar as it conceptualises the translational challenges posed by *saṃjñā* exclusively in terms of terminological precision and consistency of rendition. I will then evaluate to what extent the use of *saṃjñā* in the sources is terminological and whether this word fits the classical or current model of terminology better. Finally, I will conclude by proposing that we move away from framing the translation of *saṃjñā* as a terminological problem and treat *saṃjñā* as a lexical gap instead.

### 2.a The academic debate on *saṃjñā*

Most students of Buddhist texts will struggle with the translation of the word *saṃjñā* at some point in their career. Fortunately, there is no shortage of exquisitely researched pieces of secondary literature to which they can refer in their struggle. Here, I wish to revisit six pieces that guided my own understanding of this word in my studies: Vetter (2000, 24-26), Skilling (1994, 477ff. n. 31), Deleanu (2006, 481 n. 41), Ruegg (1973, 76-77 note 2) and (1995, 146) and the brief discussion in Gyatso (1992, p 7).

Much of the discussion in these contributions revolves around a critique of the once-favoured translation of this word with ‘perception’.<sup>21</sup> The reasons adduced against rendering *saṃjñā* (or its Pali cognate *saññā*) with ‘perception’ are various, but they tend to cluster around three issues.

First, ‘perception’ is regarded as an imprecise translation that does not exactly match the cognitive function expressed by *saṃjñā*. Vetter and Deleanu highlight that ‘perception’ suggests a rather simple processing of sensorial inputs, which does not accommodate the complexity of the cognitive process that *saṃjñā* denotes.<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, Gyatso and Skilling emphasise that perception fails to convey the discriminative nature of the cognitive function expressed by *saṃjñā*.

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<sup>21</sup> See especially Ruegg 1995, 146; Vetter 2000, 24-25; Gyatso 1992, 7.

<sup>22</sup> See Vetter 2000, 24-25.

Second, the rendition of *saṃjñā* with 'perception' risks introducing terminological inconsistencies. Ruegg (1995) and Gyatso point out that 'perception' is best used to render the term *pratyakṣa*, which occupies a very different position in the Buddhist conceptual taxonomy and should not be confused with *saṃjñā*.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, 'perception' does not cover the full semantic range of *saṃjñā* has in context. Skilling highlights the difficulty of finding a single English word that matches the variety of contexts in which *saṃjñā* occurs and he provisionally accepts 'perception' as a viable translation option. Vetter and Deleanu prefer to dispense with this problematic rendition and propose 'ideation' as a translation term capable to approximate the different meanings of *saṃjñā*.<sup>24</sup>

All the scholars mentioned above would probably agree that *saṃjñā* is polysemous and is therefore not a term in the classical sense (see section 2.b below). Yet, their discussion of the translation of this word seems to presuppose a view of *saṃjñā* that is consonant with the classical model of terminology, especially in regard to the insistence on precision and consistency of rendition.

The preoccupation with the semantic imprecision of 'perception', for instance, points to an understanding of *saṃjñā* as a term consistently denoting a specific type of cognitive activity, which must be rendered with utmost precision in translation. Ruegg's and Gyatso's concern over the possible conflation of *saṃjñā* with *pratyakṣa* in English translations is explicitly framed as a problem of terminological coherence and standardisation, which, again echoes the classical ideal of consistency of rendition.<sup>25</sup> Finally, this ideal of consistency is clearly behind Deleanu's and Skilling's quest for a single one-word equivalent that would match all senses of *saṃjñā*.

There is no doubt that translations should accurately render the meaning of the source text and that a degree of consistency in the choice of renditions is desirable (although not necessarily at the level of individual words!). Yet, to consistently choose a rendition that sounds specialised, such as apperception (Ruegg 1973), ideation (Deleanu and Skilling), or perception-as (Gyatso),<sup>26</sup> risks creating a translation that sounds more "jargon-y" and technical than the source text.

It is true that the contributions considered here are mostly concerned with *saṃjñā* in reference to the *saṃjñāskandha*, which is a term and indeed needs to be rendered consistently (see infra 2.b). Still, the specialised status of *saṃjñā* appears to be taken for granted in the literature and little attention is given to possible fluctuations in the level of specialisation that this word undergoes in context. The attitude of some authors towards definitions is significant in this regard.

Several studies take abhidharmic definitions of the *saṃjñāskandha* as their point of reference. Some scholars compare these definitions with contemporary lexicographic definitions of the English words they choose to translate *saṃjñā* and use such definitional comparison as a test of translational accuracy.<sup>27</sup> This definition-matching practice de-

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<sup>23</sup> See Ruegg 1995, 146; Gyatso 1992, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Vetter 2000, 25; Deleanu 2006, 481.

<sup>25</sup> See especially Gyatso 1992, 33: "Buddhologists are still very much engaged in the project of arriving at satisfactory translations and interpretation of primary texts, where the problem of which Western word should render a Buddhist technical term is frequently a vexing one: the translation of many of the most foundational concepts is still not standardized."

<sup>26</sup> Gyatso (1992, 7) glosses *saṃjñā* with 'perception-as', rather than translating it, and explains her decision with this phrase: "*saṃjñā* is what might be termed perception-as; it consists in assigning an object a label, classifying it in a category, seeing it as something and so forth..."

<sup>27</sup> See Deleanu 2006, 481, Skilling 1994, 477 and 479.

contextualises both the Sanskrit and the English word. This is justifiable only if one takes the terminological meaning of *saṃjñā* to be unaffected by context, as the classical model of terminology would predict.<sup>28</sup>

Only few of the studies considered here acknowledge the effect that contextual variation has on the semantic value of *saṃjñā*.<sup>29</sup> They too, alas, appear to neglect the translational plasticity required to represent the specialised and non-specialised uses of *saṃjñā*. Ruegg (1973), for instance, emphasises the continuity between the various senses of this word in the conceptual domains of cognition and language. Still, he confines his discussion to the philosophical discourse, so he does not address the connection between the specialised and non-specialised meanings of *saṃjñā*; nor does he mention the translational challenge that conveying this connection in English would pose.<sup>30</sup> Skilling (1994), by contrast, widens the lexical study of *saṃjñā* to cover non-philosophical material. He is perhaps the only one, among the authors considered here, to highlight the relationship between the abstract cognitive sense that *saṃjñā* has in abhidharma and the everyday meanings it expresses in narrative contexts. He is also the only one to warn the reader of the shortcomings of adopting too specialised a rendition for this word.<sup>31</sup> Still, frustratingly, he strives to find a single one-word English rendition that would accommodate both specialised and non-specialised applications of the word.

Overall, little attention is devoted to teasing out the difference between the translational requirements of *saṃjñā* as the name of a *skandha* and *saṃjñā* in other contexts. Even less attention is paid to the degree of semantic specialisation that *saṃjñā* has in the compound *saṃjñāskandha*.

To what extent this is merely an oversight or the result of a conscious reading of *saṃjñā* through the lens of the classical model of terminology is hard to tell. In either case to disregard the differences and similarities between the specialised and non-specialised applications of *saṃjñā* is bound to have consequences in translation. Notably, it is likely to result in misrepresentation of the register and level of accessibility of the text.

It is therefore crucial to tease out when *saṃjñā* functions as a term, when it behaves as a general language word and which intermediate degrees of specialisation it might have in between these two poles.

To this end, I have drawn on my ongoing lexicological research on *saṃjñā* and surveyed over eight hundred concordance lines with a view to evaluate to what extent different models of terminology may fit the use of this word in context.<sup>32</sup> This research is based on two Sanskrit corpora,<sup>33</sup> a corpus of Buddhist texts dating approximately from the first half of the first millennium CE and a reference corpus of non-Buddhist texts from a similar period.<sup>34</sup> Both corpora comprise different genres and text-types. The Buddhist corpus includes *śāstras* of

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<sup>28</sup> On the relative limitations and usefulness of definitional approaches to terminology, see tenHaken 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Ruegg 1973 and Skilling 1994.

<sup>30</sup> Ruegg 1973, 77 n. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Skilling 1994 477, n. 31.

<sup>32</sup> My current research of *saṃjñā* is part of the project 'Lexis and Tradition', funded by the British Academy through the Newton International Fellowship programme. I am grateful to Roberto García for helping me with the collection and semantic annotation of part of the concordances for *saṃjñā*. Any inaccuracy in the interpretation and analysis of these citations is, of course, solely mine.

<sup>33</sup> In this paper, I use the words corpus and corpora in their Corpus Linguistics sense, that is to refer to "large collections of [electronic] texts used for computer-assisted linguistic analysis. (Meyer 2002, ix)" The corpora used for this study, however, are rather small, totalling just over one and half million words (the corpus size in words is estimated from character count to control for the effect of different compounding styles among the texts included in the corpus).

<sup>34</sup> The periodization of the texts is obviously only tentative, as the exact chronology of the sources is unknown.



various scholastic affiliations, Mahāyāna *sūtras*, *avadāna* and literately texts such as the works of Aśvaghōṣa.<sup>35</sup> The reference corpus includes religio-philosophical and political *śāstras*, extracts from the epics and works by Kālidāsa.<sup>36</sup> Both corpora are still being adjusted for balance<sup>37</sup> and the results discussed here are based only on a preliminary qualitative study of the corpus data.

## 2.b *saṃjñā*: a term or a word?

Corpus research is hardly needed to determine that *saṃjñā* is not a term in the classical sense. As it is well known, this word is highly polysemous. In the corpora used for this study, it takes at least seven different senses, meaning, in turn, (1) signal, (2) name, (3) technical term, (4) a high number, (5) notion, (6) a form of cognitive construal and (7) being conscious.<sup>38</sup> The contexts and discourses in which this word occurs are equally wide ranging, spanning warfare, cosmology, argumentation, story-telling and Buddhist doctrine. Even if we consider only its uses in specialised Buddhist texts and confine our analysis to abhidharma literature, we find that this word undergoes a variety of semantic permutations. In fact, within the corpora used for this study, the text in which *saṃjñā* displays the richest polysemy is the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*.<sup>39</sup> To limit the investigation to attestations where *saṃjñā* refers to the conceptual domain of cognition, which is the focus of the academic debate on the translation of *saṃjñā*, does not completely eliminate *saṃjñā*'s polysemy either; although it does reduce it. In the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* alone *saṃjñā* expresses at least three meanings in this conceptual domain: the cognitive state of being conscious, the cognitive process of conceptual construal and the content of such construal in the form of a notion or awareness of something. Try as we might, *saṃjñā* is not amenable to the monosemy required by the classical model of terminology.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> The Buddhist corpus used for this study includes the following texts: *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, *Arthavinīścayasūtra*, *Aśokāvadana*, *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, *Bhāvasaṃkranti*, *Bhaiṣajyaguru-vaidūryaprabharājasūtra*, *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, *Buddhacarita*, *Daśabhūmikāsūtra*, *Kāśyapaparivartasūtra*, *Jātakamalā*, *Madhyāntavibhāṅgabhāṣya*, *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, *Pañcaskandhaka*, *Ratnāvalī*, *Rāṣṭrapālapariprcchāsūtra*, *Ratnagotravibhāṅga*, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*, *Saundarananda*, *Samādhirāja*, *Sarvadharmāpravṛttinirdeśa*, *Suvarṇavarṇāvadāna*, *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*, *Triṃśikā*, *Vajracchedikā*, *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra*, *Viṃśatikā*.

<sup>36</sup> The reference corpus includes: *Abhijñānaśākhakūṭalam*, *Arthaśāstra*, *Mahābhārata* (1-9), *Manusmṛiti*, *Meghadūta*, *Nyāyasūtrabhāṣya*, *Pañcatantra*, *Rāmāyaṇa* (2), *Vaiśeṣikasūtrabhāṣya*, *Yogasūtra*.

<sup>37</sup> For an overview of the concept of balance in corpus design see Hardie and McEnery 2011, 10-13.

<sup>38</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I adopt here a conservative view of polysemy as a collection of different discrete senses. Yet, the various senses of *saṃjñā* are all very closely related conceptually, an alternative model of polysemy would probably fit *saṃjñā* better. Polysemy can be viewed as a form of semantic under-specification, insofar as different contexts highlight different aspects of a broad, vague concept, or as a series of conceptual extensions of a prototypical core meaning (for a brief summary of current theories of polysemy and an explanation of the relationship between polysemy and semantic under-specification, see Falkum and Vicente 2015). The under-specification model may provide a better description of *saṃjñā*'s semantic behaviour. Regardless of which model of polysemy we choose, the fact that *saṃjñā* undergoes noticeable semantic permutations in different contexts disqualifies it from being classified as a term in the classical sense.

<sup>39</sup> In the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* the word takes up the unusual meaning of 'a large number' alongside its typical Buddhist senses of 'name', 'notion' and 'cognitive construal' and its meanings of 'signal' and 'being conscious', widely attested outside of Buddhist sources. The extreme polysemy of *saṃjñā* in this text is partly due to the co-existence of multiple discourses in this text. However, a degree of polysemy is registered even in specialised passages pertaining to strictly doctrinal abhidharma discourse; see for example *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, Pradhan 1983, 330 (infra note 48).

<sup>40</sup> The corpus used in this study is too small to indicate whether *saṃjñā* may fulfil the other requirement of the General Theory of Terminology, i.e. that a term is not used interchangeably with other near-synonyms. I have so far identified only one case where *saṃjñā* is substituted by a similar word in a locution that typically features *saṃjñā*. *Saundarananda* contains a variation on the canonical string *aśubhe śubhasaṃjñā* where *saṃjñā* is replaced with the semantically related verb *√kṣp* (*Saundarananda* VIII.54: *śubhatām aśubheṣu kalpayan*; cf *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, Wogihara 334: *anītye nītyam iti duḥkhe sukham iti anātmāny āmeti aśubhe śubham iti vikalpya saṃkalpya utpadyate saṃjñāviparyāsaś cittaviparyāso drṣṭiviparyāsaḥ*). Extensive onomasiological research is needed to gauge how interchangeable *saṃjñā* and semantically related words might have been and how entrenched *saṃjñā* was vis à vis competing expressions.

The current model of terminology, being tolerant of polysemy, seems a better fit for *saṃjñā*. Still, strictly speaking, this word is not a term from the point of view of current terminology theories either. According to current theories, a word functions as a term insofar as it refers to specific nodes within a field of knowledge.<sup>41</sup> Within the sources considered for this study, *saṃjñā* in itself does not seem to correspond to any specific node in the Buddhist system. However, as discussed in the previous section, the current model of terminology views terms as originating through a process of specification and formalisation of a general language meaning. This process, the model expects, is often realised through lexical compounding. This fits the case of *saṃjñā* well. *Samjñā* does indeed refer to items in the Buddhist doctrinal taxonomy when it is used in combination with other words, typically *skandha* and (*caitasika*)*dharma*.<sup>42</sup> It is important to specify that in these cases the actual terms that denote specialised Buddhist concepts are the multiword expressions *saṃjñā + skandha* and *saṃjñā + dharma*. *Samjñā* on its own may retain the terminological power of these multi-words expressions if it is clear from context that the words *skandha* and *dharma* are implied. This can be considered as a case of terminological specification of a more general word-sense, similar to the case illustrated in the previous section by the examples of the expressions ‘wave’ and ‘electromagnetic wave’.<sup>43</sup>

How close the analogy between the term *saṃjñāskandha* and a term like ‘electromagnetic wave’ might be depends on how specialised and transparent we take *saṃjñā* to be in the string *saṃjñā + skandha*. In the expression ‘electromagnetic wave’, ‘wave’ is both specialised and transparent. It is specialised because it refers to a specific node in the field of physics; it is transparent, because its application in physics is sufficiently close to the prototypical general language use of the word to be intelligible to a non-specialised audience (understanding the specifying modifier ‘electromagnetic’, by contrast, requires some degree of specialised knowledge on the part of the audience). Exactly how specialised and transparent *saṃjñā* is in itself, in isolation from the terms *skandha* and *dharma*, is difficult to determine.

Corpus data can help us in this regard. Here I will limit my discussion of corpus data to attestations in which *saṃjñā* expresses a form of cognitive process, which is the word-sense activated in the multiword expressions *saṃjñā + skandha* and *saṃjñā + dharma*.

The corpora used for this study suggest that *saṃjñā* in this word-sense is likely to be situated at the lower end of the terminological cline.<sup>44</sup> It might have enjoyed some degree of specialisation, but it remained close to non-specialised uses and its terminological application in combination with *skandha* was probably semantically transparent, being but a formalisation of a widely used non-specialised sense. Here is why.

The use of *saṃjñā* in the sense of a cognitive process displays a degree of specialisation insofar as it seems to have a Buddhist flavour, with non-Buddhist sources preferring the sense of cognitive state.<sup>45</sup> This signals that this use might have been characteristic of the Buddhist

<sup>41</sup> See Cabré 2010, 357, supra note 14.

<sup>42</sup> In the Sanskrit Buddhist corpus used for this study *saṃjñā* also displays other terminological realizations. When paired with the words *bhāvinyā* and *anvarthā*, *saṃjñā* functions as a specialised term that signifies specific types of word-referent relations. This use is well attested in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, where it appears to pertain to the specialised domain of hermeneutics and argumentation. However, since this terminological application of *saṃjñā* is not characteristically Buddhist, I will not discuss it in this paper.

<sup>43</sup> See supra note 9.

<sup>44</sup> I paraphrase here M. Rogers’ expression “cline of ‘terminess’” (Rogers 2015).

<sup>45</sup> The two senses can be clearly distinguished on syntactic grounds by the presence or absence of an object governed by *saṃjñā*. The difference in the semantic distribution of *saṃjñā* in the Buddhist and reference corpora may be simply due to a discrepancy in the topics covered in the two sets of texts. A systematic onomasiological study is needed to determine whether

discourse; but it does not warrant that it had a specialised terminological value in Buddhist sources. To determine to what extent this word-sense may have possessed a degree of terminological specialisation, we should consider the level of specialisation of the contexts in which it occurs and the degree of precision of the concept it refers to.

Canonical references to *saṃjñāviparyāsa*, typically instantiated in the construction “x-loc y-acc (*iti*) *saṃjñāviparyāsa*” and signifying a mistaken interpretation of reality, may be regarded as providing a specialised context for the use of *saṃjñā* (at least as far as the phrase *saṃjñāviparyāsa* is concerned). However, this use seems too close to non-specialised occurrences of *saṃjñā* in narrative contexts to justify a terminological reading.<sup>46</sup> Sentences like *gr̥hapaterantike pitṛsaṃjñāmutpādayet* (“he would regard the householder as a father, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, Kern, 107), *vismṛtaśatrusaṃjñas* (“forgetting that he used to consider him an enemy”, *Jātakamalā*, Hanish, XXV,8), or *sa pārthivāntaḥpurasaṃnikarṣaṃ (...) dhīro vanasaṃjñāyeva* (“He remained composed in the female quarters as if these were a place of austerity to him”, *Buddhacarita*, Johnston, I,51), all of which occur in non-specialised contexts, are semantically identical and syntactically related to the prototypical canonical use of *saṃjñāviparyāsa*. The same use is also attested in the topos of mistaking a rope for a snake (e.g. *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, 375: *rajivām iva sarpasaṃjñā*), which, even though it occurs in specialised doctrinal contexts, is unlikely to have a specialised meaning, due to the everyday nature of the image around which the analogy pivots. All in all, it seems that *saṃjñā* in the sense of cognitive process or cognitive construal (i.e. take something for/ regarding something as) is not technical. The use of this word is likely to have sounded rather idiomatic to an audience familiar with the use of *saṃjñā* in Buddhist narrative texts, but with no specialised knowledge of Buddhist doctrine or abhidharma.

This meaning of *saṃjñā* is likely to have remained transparent even in highly specialised contexts. A look at the definition of the *saṃjñāskandha* in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, for example, shows that this terminological application of *saṃjñā* stands on a continuum with the non-specialised uses of the word in narrative texts. The *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* defines *saṃjñā* in relation to the *saṃjñāskandha* as the process of identifying the characteristics of objects and exemplifies it with the construal of something as blue or yellow or of someone as friend or foe.<sup>47</sup> This is but a formalisation and specification of the non-terminological use of *saṃjñā* in narrative contexts, where *saṃjñā* is used in the fundamentally identical sense of to consider someone as an enemy, or as father and so on. Thus, while the string *saṃjñā + skandha* functions as a term, the meaning of *saṃjñā* in this string is close to its non-specialised meaning.

This allows for some fluidity between terminological and general language uses of *saṃjñā*. In the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, for example, a highly specialised discussion on experience in the immaterial realm (*arūpyadhātu*) clearly connects the terminological use of *saṃjñā* as one

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non-Buddhist sources tend to use different words to lexicalise the same concept that *saṃjñā + object* expresses in Buddhist texts.

<sup>46</sup> It might be worth noting, incidentally, that the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* remarks that the canonical string *saṃjñāviparyāsaḥ cittaviparyāso dṛṣṭīviparyāsa* is subject to the vagaries of linguistic convention—an assertion that may be taken to signal a perceived lack of terminological precision in these phrases (see *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, Pradhan 1983, 283: *yat tarhi sūtre uktam ānitye nityam iti saṃjñāviparyāsaḥ cittaviparyāso dṛṣṭīviparyāsa" iti / dṛṣṭir evātra viparyāsaḥ saṃjñācīte tu tadvaśāt // V.9 // dṛṣṭīviparyāsaśāśād eva tatsaṃprayukte saṃjñācīte viparyāśāv uktau / vedanādayo 'pi kasmān noktāḥ / lokaprasiddhyā / loke hi viparyastasaṃjñā viparyastacīta iti prasiddham na punar viparyastavedana iti /*).

<sup>47</sup> *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, Pradhan 1983, 10: *saṃjñā nimittodgrahaṇātmikā // I.14 // yāvannīlapīta-dīrghahrasvāstripuruṣamītramasūtrasukhaduḥkhādīnīmittodgrahaṇamasau saṃjñāskandhaḥ/*. Cf. *Pañcaskandhaka*, Steinkellner and Xuezhū 2008, 4: *saṃjñā katamā | viṣayanīmittodgrahaṇam |*.

of the *skandha* with the general use of *saṃjñā* as awareness of something— a meaning that is attested outside of Buddhist sources, too.<sup>48</sup>

So, in keeping with the current model of terminology, the boundary between terminological and non-terminological uses of *saṃjñā* is fuzzy. Even clearly specialised expressions such as *saṃjñā + skandha* are best conceived as standing on a terminological cline rather than as being neatly separated from general language uses. By virtue of this continuum between its specialised and non-specialised applications, in most contexts *saṃjñā* is likely to have been semantically transparent and to have sounded idiomatic to an audience not especially trained in the Buddhist system. A good translation of this word should aim to convey a similar level of transparency and idiomaticity.

## 2.c From terminological problem to lexical gap

Interpreting *saṃjñā* through the current model of terminology does not make the task of translating it any easier. Quite the opposite. As mentioned in the previous section, the current model of terminology, being more nuanced than its predecessor, adds layers of complexity to the task of terminological translation. It does however present some advantages. Besides providing a more accurate representation of the behaviour of *saṃjñā* in context, the current model of terminology helps us reprioritise our translational desiderata. By highlighting that *saṃjñā* acquires varying degrees of specialisation in different instantiations, this model reveals that the quest for a single translation equivalent is unrealistic, if not outright misleading. By showing the continuity between the meaning formalised in abhidharmic definitions and the broader use of the word in non-specialised discourse, it also de-emphasises the importance of finding a precise rendition that would match these definitions in favour of crafting translations able to convey *saṃjñā*'s fluctuations in register and meaning in text.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, the current model of terminology helps us shift our attention from definitional minutiae to the main translational challenge that *saṃjñā* poses: *saṃjñā* corresponds to a lexical gap in English.

*Samjñā* is difficult to render in English not because it is a specialised term that refers to a precise and doctrinally sophisticated concept, but because this concept is not lexicalised in English. The problem is twofold.

First, there is no English word that covers the whole semantic spectrum of *saṃjñā*. This is a very common phenomenon, as lexical polysemy is rarely aligned across languages (anisomorphism).<sup>50</sup> It is also a much-discussed issue within the debate on the rendition of *saṃjñā*, as it impacts translation of this word on several levels. It hinders the rendition of lexical cohesion, making it difficult to convey the relationship between different semantic realisations of *saṃjñā* throughout a text or across texts. Perhaps more importantly, it risks introducing in the translation conceptual distinctions alien to Sanskrit sources. As Ruegg (1973) notes, there is some conceptual continuity in Buddhist philosophy between the concepts *saṃjñā* expresses in the domain of language (designation) and in the domain of cognition (notions, conceptual

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<sup>48</sup> See for example *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, Pradhan 1983, 330: *katham idānīm sukhasvabhāvām vedanām duḥkhataḥ paśyanti / yathā rūpasamjñādīny api duḥkhataḥ paśyanti / [...] āryānām ca rūpārupyopapattau katham duḥkhasamjñā pravarteta {Y. pravartate} / na hi punas teṣām duḥkhavedanāhetuḥ skandhā bhavanti/*. Cf. *Mahābhārata* VII.49: *nihatāḥ prtanāmadhye mṛtasamjñā mahābalāḥ*.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Skilling 1994, 477 n. 31.

<sup>50</sup> For an accessible study of anisomorphism see Adamska-Sałaciak 2013.

construal).<sup>51</sup> This continuity is difficult to render in English for want of lexical items that can similarly connect these domains.

Second, there is no single English word that expresses the concept of “taking something for ....”, “construing something as ....”, or “thinking of something in terms of...”, which is the sense from which the specialised use of *saṃjñā* in Buddhist literature arises. This, too, is a very common phenomenon. Different languages lexicalize concepts differently and foreground different aspects of them. This is in no way limited to specialised vocabulary. A typical example of this phenomenon in translation and linguistics literature is the absence of words in English to differentiate between maternal and paternal uncles, a difference that is lexicalised, for example, in Polish and Arabic.<sup>52</sup> While the lack of an equivalent in the target language surely makes translation harder, this problem is manageable if we overcome the (unhealthy) desire to map each noun of the original text to a single noun in the translated text.

A common translation strategy to deal with lexical gaps is to craft phraseological renditions (circumlocution).<sup>53</sup> This strategy offers a great advantage over solutions like neologism and borrowing—both of which have been adopted for rendering *saṃjñā*, which is sometimes left untranslated or glossed with quasi-neologisms such as ‘perception-as’.

Contrary to translation “equivalents” made of individual nouns or nominal compounds (e.g. ideation or perception), phraseological renditions enjoy some plasticity, especially at the level of syntax. They include different part of speech which can be adjusted to retain the semantic transparency and idiomaticity of the source text. Just to illustrate the principle, and with no intention of suggesting a specific rendition, let us revisit the main argument adduced against rendering *saṃjñā* with ‘perception’ in the literature. The authors considered above are dissatisfied with the semantic imprecision of this word. *Samjñā* means “perception-as” rather than perception tout-court, some note. This shortcoming could be overcome simply by switching from the noun ‘perception’ to variations of the verbal or phrase ‘to perceive as’ (e.g. ‘perceiving something as’, ‘perceived as’, ‘one who perceives something as’, and so on). This phrase has the advantage of sounding idiomatic in English, because it is sufficiently malleable to fit different syntactic contexts, and also of being semantically transparent. It could also, if the context allows, be manipulated to capture at least some of the lexical cohesion of a source text. This could be done, in theory, by exploiting either lexical or syntactical similarities. Lexically, a phraseological rendition of *saṃjñā* containing the string ‘to perceive as’ could be deployed to echo cases where *saṃjñā* is translated, for example, with ‘perception’ or with cognates such as ‘misperception’ or ‘apperception’. Syntactically, it could be used to link to cases where *saṃjñā* is rendered with verbs of cognition that govern a similar complementation pattern, like ‘to consider as’, ‘to regard as’, ‘to construe as’, which may better fit the register or meaning of *saṃjñā* in other contexts. Most importantly, the flexibility of phraseological rendition can help us convey the different registers and level of specialisations that are found in the source texts.

To frame the translation of *saṃjñā* as lexical gap problem, rather than as a terminological problem, frees us from the constraints of classical terminological translation. It affords us a

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<sup>51</sup> See Ruegg 1973, 77. Ruegg’s wording (“même si les valeurs de “notion” et de “nom” sont à considérer comme deux acceptions distinctes du mot sanskrit *saṃjñā*”) suggests that there is an actual division in the semantic spectrum of *saṃjñā*. However, such division may be an artefact of looking at the meaning of this word through the lens of languages like French and English. These languages lexicalise the conceptual space differently from Sanskrit and force the speaker to differentiate between the meanings that *saṃjñā* expresses in the domains of language and cognition; cf. supra note 38.

<sup>52</sup> See e.g. Farghal 2015, 67; Wierzbicka A. 2016, 72.

<sup>53</sup> For a summary of translation strategies recommended for dealing with lexical gaps, see Rogers 2015 chapter 5.

measure of creativity, which the most talented of us can use to weave translations that are as intelligible to contemporary readers as the source texts were intended to be to their audiences.

## Conclusions

The case study illustrates that translators of Buddhist texts can benefit from staying abreast of advances in the fields, not only of Buddhist and Translation studies, but also linguistics. The adoption of corpus methods and current terminology theories (and more generally lexicosemantic theories) can help us rethink the way we conceive of the Buddhist Sanskrit vocabulary and the way we approach its translation. To consider key Buddhist expressions as general language words that may acquire terminological value under certain conditions can lend some fluidity to our translations and help us move one step away from the notorious clumsiness of Buddhist Hybrid English. Much more work needs to be done to understand the level of specialisation, idiomaticity and semantic transparency of the vocabulary of Sanskrit Buddhist texts. A larger scale study is also needed to estimate how representative *saṃjñā* may be of the behaviour of Buddhist terminology in general. In the meantime, only very broad suggestions about translation practice can be gleaned from the single case study on *saṃjñā*.

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