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## A Critical Analysis of the Translations and Lexicography in the Context of Political Terminologies and Concepts

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### Abstract

The paper critically discusses the influence of ideology in lexicography, the complexities of translating political content, and the ethical dilemmas involved. Lexicography, the practice of compiling dictionaries, is often perceived as a neutral linguistic endeavour; however, when it comes to political terms, the influence of ideology is inescapable. Political lexicography is far from a neutral linguistic task. It sits at the intersection of language, power, and ideology, shaping how societies understand and engage with politics. Whether through subtle framing, overt state control, or cultural biases, dictionary definitions of political terms carry significant ideological weight. Again, Translation is more than just the act of converting one language into another; it is a complex practice deeply embedded in socio-political, cultural, and ideological contexts. When political content is involved, the stakes of translation become even higher. Translators are often confronted with ethical dilemmas that arise from the need to balance accuracy with neutrality, the responsibility to the original text with their obligations to the target audience, and the often-implicit pressures of political, ideological, or commercial forces. Translators must navigate the complexities of neutrality, cultural sensitivity, ideological pressures, and their responsibility to truth. The stakes of their decisions are high, as translation can influence public opinion, shape international diplomacy, and affect the lives of millions.

**Keywords:** Ideology, Political lexicography, Political concepts, Translation

### 1. Introduction

The first section of this article discusses the influence of ideology in lexicography, and the second section unfolds the complexities of translating political content and the ethical dilemmas which are involved.

## 2. Ideology in Political Lexicography

Political lexicography involves defining, classifying, and presenting political concepts such as "democracy," "terrorism," "freedom," and "socialism" — all of which are deeply value-laden and often contested. This area of study critically examines how ideological perspectives shape dictionary entries and how such shaping influences political discourse, public understanding, and even policymaking.

### 2.1. Understanding Political Lexicography

Political lexicography is a subfield of both lexicography and political science that deals specifically with the vocabulary used in political contexts. Unlike scientific or technical language, political vocabulary is often ambiguous, emotionally charged, and ideologically contested. Dictionaries attempt to stabilize these meanings for readers, but in doing so, they often embed particular worldviews — intentionally or not.

Political terms are rarely value-neutral. For instance, words like *freedom*, *patriotism*, *revolution*, or *authoritarianism* mean different things depending on who is using them and in what context. Lexicographers must choose definitions that reflect usage while also maintaining coherence and authority, but these choices can subtly (or overtly) promote certain ideological viewpoints.

### 2.2 Ideology and Definition Framing

Ideology in lexicography manifests primarily in the framing of definitions. Even minor changes in word choice or ordering can reflect ideological bias.

#### Example 1: "Terrorism"

Compare how different dictionaries define *terrorism*:

- **Oxford English Dictionary (OED):**  
*"The unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims."*
- **American Heritage Dictionary:**  
*"The use of violence or threats to intimidate or coerce, especially for political purposes."*

While both definitions agree on key components (violence, coercion, political motives), the OED's emphasis on "unlawful" and "especially against civilians" introduces a moral dimension that may align with Western legal and ethical frameworks. In contrast, omitting "unlawful" may suggest a more neutral or less judgmental stance.

Some political actors have further blurred the term. For example, a government might label a resistance movement as “terrorists,” while others might consider them “freedom fighters.” These discrepancies reflect deeper ideological divides, and dictionaries — as arbiters of meaning — must navigate this complex terrain.

### 2.3. *Lexicographic Authority and Political Power*

Lexicographers wield significant authority, especially in monolingual dictionaries used in education, media, and law. When a dictionary defines a term in a certain way, it influences how that term is used and understood, potentially reinforcing or challenging existing political ideologies.

#### **Example 2: "Socialism" and "Capitalism"**

In U.S. dictionaries like *Merriam-Webster*, *socialism* is often defined in terms of government ownership or control of the means of production, with less emphasis on democratic or egalitarian aspects emphasized by socialists themselves.

- **Merriam-Webster:**

*“Any of various economic and political theories advocating collective or governmental ownership and administration of the means of production and distribution of goods.”*

This framing tends to align with Cold War-era understandings prevalent in American discourse, which contrast *socialism* sharply with *capitalism*. However, many socialist thinkers argue for democratic control or cooperative ownership rather than government control per se. Omitting this nuance can marginalize non-authoritarian forms of socialism and reinforce capitalist ideology.

### 2.4. *National and Cultural Lexicographic Variations*

Ideological differences become even more pronounced in multilingual or cross-national lexicography. The same political term may be defined differently in different countries, reflecting distinct political cultures and historical experiences.

#### **Example 3: "Liberalism"**

- **In the U.S.:** *Liberalism* generally refers to a center-left ideology emphasizing social welfare, regulation, and civil rights.
- **In Europe (especially classical liberal traditions):** *Liberalism* often means free markets, individual liberty, and limited government — more aligned with what Americans would call *libertarianism*.

These definitional differences can lead to confusion in translation, diplomacy, and international discourse. Lexicographers must decide

whether to reflect local usage, global consensus, or both — each choice has ideological implications.

### *2.5. Political Lexicography in Authoritarian Contexts*

In authoritarian regimes, lexicography can become an explicit tool of state propaganda. Governments may influence or control how political terms are defined to reinforce official narratives and suppress dissent.

#### **Example 4: China's Political Dictionary**

In China, official government dictionaries often define terms like *democracy*, *freedom*, and *rights* in ways that support the Communist Party's legitimacy. For instance, *democracy* might be described not as free elections or pluralism, but as "the people's democratic dictatorship under the leadership of the Communist Party."

This ideological framing ensures that the population associates positive political concepts with the regime, while alternative models are marginalized or vilified. Similar patterns can be seen in North Korea, Iran, and historical examples such as the Soviet Union.

### *2.6. Implications for Translation and Education*

The ideological nature of political lexicography has implications for translators, educators, and students. Translators must navigate these definitional ambiguities carefully, especially in sensitive political contexts. Educators using dictionaries must be aware that definitions are not always neutral and may reflect a specific worldview.

Moreover, bilingual political dictionaries pose unique challenges. Translators must decide whether to prioritize semantic accuracy, functional equivalence, or ideological alignment, often with limited guidance.

## **3. Translation Ethics in Political Contexts**

Translation is more than just the act of converting one language into another; it is a complex practice deeply embedded in socio-political, cultural, and ideological contexts. When political content is involved, the stakes of translation become even higher. Translators are often confronted with ethical dilemmas that arise from the need to balance accuracy with neutrality, the responsibility to the original text with their obligations to the target audience, and the often-implicit pressures of political, ideological, or commercial forces. These challenges make **translation ethics in political contexts** a critical area of study and practice.

### *3.1. The Role of Translation in Political Discourse*

In political contexts, translation plays an essential role in shaping public opinion, forming international relations, and influencing policy decisions. Political speeches, legal texts, manifestos, and media reports are all key sources of political discourse that often require translation. Translators are tasked with not only conveying the meaning of these texts but also interpreting the nuances, tones, and subtleties inherent in political language. Missteps in translation can distort the intended message, create diplomatic tensions, and even contribute to conflicts or misunderstandings.

For example, when translating political speeches, such as presidential addresses or diplomatic statements, it's essential that the tone of the original is maintained while ensuring that the meaning resonates with the target audience. Political terms and concepts such as *democracy*, *freedom*, *rights*, and *terrorism* can have vastly different connotations in different languages and cultures, making the translator's role as an interpreter of these concepts vital.

### *3.2. The Ethics of Neutrality vs. Advocacy*

One of the central ethical issues in political translation is the question of **neutrality**. Should translators remain completely neutral, or do they have the ethical responsibility to advocate for particular political positions or ideologies, especially when translating politically charged texts? In theory, translation is a neutral practice, but in reality, the translator's ideological standpoint, personal beliefs, and cultural background can influence their translation choices.

#### *Example 1: Translating Political Propaganda*

In authoritarian regimes, political translation can become a tool of state propaganda. Consider the translation of political materials or speeches by leaders in a totalitarian state. Should the translator remain neutral and faithfully reproduce the content, even if it promotes repression, propaganda, or human rights violations? Or should they take a more active stance, perhaps modifying or challenging the content in ways that align with ethical values such as freedom of speech or human rights?

For instance, when translating a political speech from a government known for human rights abuses, a translator may struggle with whether to translate the content "as is" or to interpret it in a way that mitigates or critiques the messages being promoted.

#### *Example 2: Translating News Articles in Conflict Zones*

Translators who work in conflict zones often face ethical dilemmas related to objectivity. In these regions, news coverage is highly politicized, and translating articles from one language to another may inadvertently influence the perception of the conflict. A journalist working for an international news outlet may face a dilemma when translating articles that

contain biased or one-sided views of a political situation. Should they maintain objectivity, or is there an ethical responsibility to provide a more balanced or nuanced interpretation of events?

### *3.3. The Influence of Ideological and Political Pressures*

Political pressures on translators are a significant ethical concern. Translators may face external pressures from governments, corporations, or other powerful entities that wish to control the way political texts are translated. In some cases, these pressures may force translators to make compromises that conflict with their ethical principles. This can happen particularly in situations where governments impose strict censorship laws or where large corporations may seek to avoid translations that could damage their reputation.

#### *Example 3: The Role of Subtitling in Political Documentaries*

Political documentaries often contain controversial or sensitive content. Subtitling these documentaries for international audiences requires a balance between maintaining the integrity of the original text and ensuring that the translation adheres to local cultural sensitivities. Subtitlers may be asked to tone down politically sensitive content to avoid offending certain groups or political powers. The ethics of this process raise significant questions about the role of the translator in protecting freedom of expression and providing accurate representations of political realities.

### *3.4. The Ethics of Cultural Sensitivity and Audience Awareness*

Translation is not a one-size-fits-all process; the translator must also consider the cultural and ideological context of the target audience. This means that translation decisions must reflect the cultural norms and values of the target language community while also accurately representing the political and ideological message of the original text.

Translators must be aware that certain political concepts or terms may not have direct equivalents in the target language. For instance, the concept of “separation of powers” may be well understood in liberal democracies but might be difficult to translate effectively in political contexts where such a principle does not exist. In such cases, the translator has an ethical duty to either explain the concept or adapt it in a way that maintains both its meaning and relevance to the target audience. However, this adaptation should not distort or simplify complex political concepts just for ease of comprehension.

#### *Example 4: Translating International Treaties or Human Rights Documents*

When translating documents like international treaties, human rights reports, or resolutions passed by the United Nations, cultural sensitivity and audience awareness are especially important. A translation that works well in one cultural context may not resonate in another, especially when dealing

with highly technical or culturally specific terms. For instance, human rights discourse in the West often emphasizes individualism, while in some Eastern cultures, communal values may take precedence. This discrepancy can affect how terms like *individual liberty* or *freedom of expression* are interpreted in translation. The translator's ethical responsibility lies in bridging these cultural gaps without altering the fundamental meaning of the text.

#### **4. Ethical Considerations in Political Translation**

The translation of political content, particularly during major international conflicts such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq, is fraught with ethical dilemmas. Translators must navigate the complexities of **neutrality**, **cultural sensitivity**, **ideological pressures**, and their **responsibility to truth**. The stakes of their decisions are high, as translation can influence public opinion, shape international diplomacy, and affect the lives of millions.

In politically sensitive situations, translation ethics calls for translators to be acutely aware of the **power dynamics** embedded in language and the **political consequences** of their work. Whether translating speeches, news articles, treaties, or documentaries, translators must strive to balance accuracy with ethical responsibility, ensuring that their work contributes to a fairer and more informed global political discourse.

The case study of the Iraq War highlights just how critical the ethical decisions of translators can be in political contexts, particularly when faced with competing ideologies, media pressures, and the very real consequences of mistranslation.

#### **5. Implications for Translation and Education**

The ideological nature of political lexicography has implications for translators, educators, and students. Translators must navigate these definitional ambiguities carefully, especially in sensitive political contexts. Educators using dictionaries must be aware that definitions are not always neutral and may reflect a specific worldview.

Moreover, bilingual political dictionaries pose unique challenges. Translators must decide whether to prioritize semantic accuracy, functional equivalence, or ideological alignment, often with limited guidance.

#### **6. Conclusion**

Political lexicography is far from a neutral linguistic task. It sits at the intersection of language, power, and ideology, shaping how societies understand and engage with politics. Whether through subtle framing, overt state control, or cultural biases, dictionary definitions of political terms carry significant ideological weight.

Recognising this ideological influence is crucial — not only for lexicographers and political scientists but also for anyone engaged in political communication, translation, education, or journalism. A critical examination of definitions of political terms is important for awareness of the underlying assumptions which shape our political discourse and for an informed and democratic dialogue.

Again, translation in political contexts is fraught with ethical complexities. The translator is not merely a linguistic technician; they are an interpreter of meaning, culture, and ideology. The ethical challenges in political translation are numerous and diverse, ranging from questions of neutrality and advocacy to concerns about ideological pressures and cultural sensitivity. Translators must balance their responsibility to produce accurate, faithful translations with their ethical obligation to protect freedom of expression, ensure fairness, and avoid distorting politically sensitive content.

The stakes in political translation are high, as mistranslations or biased translations can contribute to international tensions, political manipulation, and conflicts. It is therefore essential for translators working in political contexts to be conscious of the ethical implications of their work and to strive to uphold the highest standards of professional integrity and impartiality. By doing so, they contribute to a more informed and just political discourse on the global stage.

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