# SEMASIOLOGY AND ONOMASIOLOGY IN WEB CONTENT LOCALIZATION

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*Abstract*

The article examines the validity of employing methods from linguistics to web content localization. The two proposed approaches, elicit two distinctive, yet compatible, methodologies that can be successfully applied to web content translation.

**Keywords: web content localization, semasiology, onomasiology, translation strategy, website localization.**

Semasiology and onomasiology are two branches of lexicology which represent two different approaches to the term-concept relation. Semasiology is defined by Oxforddictionaries.com as "The branch of linguistics that deals with words and phrases and the concepts that they represent" [1]. The same online source defines onomasiology as "the branch of linguistics that deals with concepts and the terms that represent them, in particular contrasting terms for similar concepts, as in a thesaurus" [2].

Grzega's and Schöner's view on the topic is that "The goal in onomasiology is to find the linguistic forms, or the words, that can stand for a given concept/idea/object" (2007:7). Onomasiology is "the study of designations, where the linguist starts with an extralinguistic concept and looks for its formal verbalizations." (Grzega 2012:271)

Semasiology, on the other hand, examines terms first and then the concept or concepts designated. The semasiological direction in Saussurean terminology (2011) is from the signifier (term) to the signified (concept), that is to observe which concepts are associated with a specific word. Onomasiology analyzes the term-concept relation from an opposing perspective. The direction is from the signified to the signifier, from a concept to a word that may be used to represent or name the concept.

Semasiology, applied to localization and translation, contribute to increasing the efficiency of these processes. The use of synonyms, hyponyms or heteronyms and the choices made according to the ways in which the users input their queries in search engines help website content producers to build the message in a more accessible manner making it reachable by users and search engines alike.

Onomasiology is of particular interest to translation and website localization, more specifically, synchronic onomasiology because it is during the localization process that the localizers of websites need to consider how users designate the concepts they are looking for. In Lakó (2010a), I proposed a similar approach. In these discussions on an onomasiological strategy to text production I refer strictly to one-word units (simple or compound). However, the practice of using search engines shows that the naming process should be extended to expressions of two or several words. Grzega mentions in

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his *English and General Historical Lexicology* that some linguists view onomasiology as "grammatical forms that can stand for a given function" -<<How can I express future time?>> or <<How can I greet somebody?>> "for conversational patterns that can be used in a given communicative task" (2007:7). In terms of localizing web content, the localizer should be thinking from the perspective of the web-user: "How can I find this product/service?" or "What words should I use to find that information?"

The importance of the onomasiological approach to website content localization can be expressed in simple terms with examples such as naming the "the third season of the year, when crops and fruits are gathered and leaves fall, in the northern hemisphere from September to November and in the southern hemisphere from March to May" [3] as *autumn* in the UK versus naming it *fall* in the US. Naming things or concepts differently can occur within the borders of the same country, with different naming of the same concept from region to region, called **regionalisms**.Referring back to my previous example, the localizer would use *Autumn Sale* for certain markets while *Fall Sales* for others.




**Figure 1:***Term usage adapted to target market – autumn[4]*




**Figure 2:** *Term usage adapted to target market – fall[5]*

Inbound marketing, through website content is the most efficient technique to deliver pertinent information that is straightforwardly accessible with the aid of search engines. Consequently, it is important to research the keywords by which web-users look for information that relates to the offer of products or services. Regardless of the type of localization (involving translation or not), keywords must be contained in web content and those keywords must match the signifiers used by the web-users to refer to common concepts (products or services). While this approach is not new, academics in Translation Studies most often touch upon the issue of onomasiology in passing and tend to overlook its importance in online communication.

A similarity with the onomasiological approach can be seen in Translation Studies in the case of **terminology building**: It is concept-oriented, when the person building the terminology provides one concept per entry. If localization is within the same language area (US, UK, Australia, etc.), during the Internationalization process a team can establish a terminological database where the internationalized or pivot source web



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content is paired with the various regional target web content. If translation is involved in the localization process, the keywords used by the search engine users should be reflected in the terminological database. Furthermore, inside the same target language, there should be several regional onomasiological entries, for each of the regions, if this may be the case, to mirror the naming of that particular region (a country, a state, a county, or a city). The process would still be keyword based.

**Case study**

The borrowing of a term or loan translation through the translator (Venuti's foreignization - 1998), or by web-users that work in a specialized field may also be considered as relating to the onomasiological approach. In e-commerce sellers often target a group of specialized people, from a certain profession or with common hobbies. For instance, if research is conducted on keyword usage with Google's KeywordPlanner[6], *sticker(e)* is suggested, a non-standard yet high traffic term in Romanian (there is no such entry in the Romanian dictionaries – dexonline.ro). Such a term can be included into the Romanian target text, instead of *etichetă*, or *adeziv* or can be alternated with *autocolant*. If I compare *baby-sitter* with the Romanian *bonă/bone* using the same tool, the obvious main keyword is the autochthonous *bonă* or its plural form *bone.Voucher* in English is defined as "A small printed piece of paper that entitles the holder to a discount or that may be exchanged for goods or services." [7] *Voucher* was initially used by Romanian travel agencies as a certificate that entitles the owner to benefit from services bought at the agency. Its usage as a discount certificate began only later. There are several synonyms in Romanian borrowed previously that refer to the same concept, *cupon* (fr. coupon.), *tichet* (fr., engl. ticket), which are also used in marketing *cupon reducere* (*discount coupon*), or in an institutionalized, governmental context *tichet de masa* (food voucher)(Monitorul Oficial [8]), *tichet rabla*(car voucher)[9]. However, according to Google Trends [10] and Google KeywordPlanner [6] *voucher* is the preferred term, even if it is a **luxury loan**. This preference also overlaps the institutionalized *tichet* so keywords such as *voucher rabla,* and its plural forms *vouchere rabla* are more frequently used than *tichet(e)rabla*, even if there has been a continuous institutionalized and "educational" initiative with regard to the car renewal program ever since 2005.

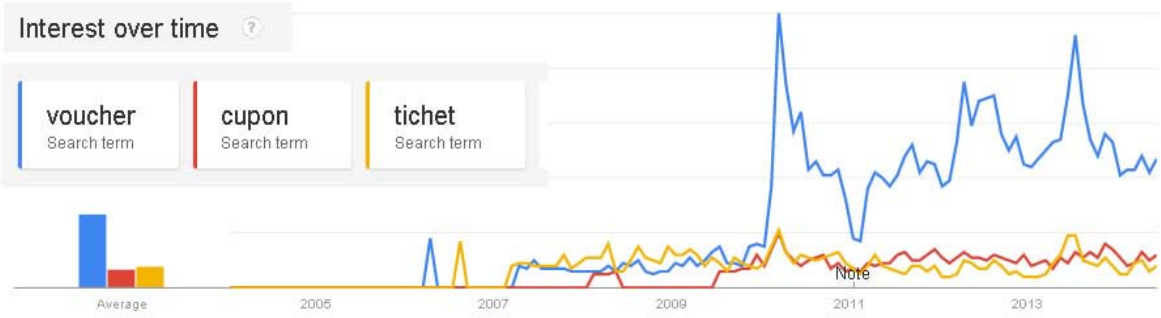


**Figure 3:** *The term Voucher vs. cupon and tichet in Google Trends*



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*Cupon* and *tichet*, is about 25% of *voucher,* represented in blue. Considering the graph from a diachronic perspective it shows that, until March 2010, the usage of the term *tichet* outperformed *voucher* and *cupon* in terms of queries used by search engine users.

From the examples above, one can observe that competing synonyms, used as signifiers for the same concept, thing, or idea, can be either recognized as the norm or not. A synonym from a group of several synonymic words and expressions may become the dominant one, while the others fade away. Web-users have to be spoken to in the language they commonly use even if that is not a standard accepted usage or the norm. Thus, web-users impose the signifiers they use onto the online marketing professionals. While academics favor prescriptive approaches and try to impose on web content user language norms, the industry applies both approaches, prescriptive in the case of brand websites, and a descriptive approach, especially in the case of affiliate websites.

While considerations at word level are useful from a diachronic and synchronic point of view for researchers in linguistics, to the industry of localization keywords made up of two or more words (for SEO purposes) are more relevant.

Overall, both approaches, semasiological and onomasiological, should be considered and combined for a successfully personalized web localization outcome. The semasiological approach is a prescriptive method (its purpose is to unify, institutionalize and standardize language). By using as a precautionary measure various signifiers (*auto, automobile, car, compact, limousine, limo, machine, motor, motorcar, ride, sedan, station wagon, touring car vehicle, wagon, wheels*) for the same signified the localizer could communicate to as many potential web-users as possible. The semasiological approach is used primordially by well-known brands when they educate or inform potential clients. The onomasiological approach is a descriptive method as it perceives and examines the appearance of terms as inputted by web-users in search engines.

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