

## Synonymy in the domain of migration: Sign of changing mentalities?<sup>1</sup>

**Elpida Loupaki**

*Aristotle University of Thessaloniki*

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate the phenomenon of synonymy in the domain of migration terminology for the language pair English-Greek. Whereas traditional theory of terminology focuses on normalization and thus discourages the existence of synonymous terms, more recent studies using a socio-terminological perspective have demonstrated the presence and even the importance, at cognitive level, of different denominations for the same concept. This paper tries to explore another perspective of synonymy: by analyzing, both manually and automatically, a corpus of texts related to migration we examine the social and translational factors behind the proliferation of some synonyms and question whether their existence could be related with a change in mentalities to such a sensitive issue as migration.

### Keywords

Migration terminology, synonymy, IATE project, corpus analysis, terminology management



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## 1. Introduction: Research motivation

Migration has always been closely intertwined with humanity. Migration flows change in relation to economic, social or political factors; in this context Greece, which, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, experienced outward migration from its borders now faces the reverse flow. According to data from FRONTEX,<sup>2</sup> Greece is the major gateway for migrants and asylum seekers entering Europe from Asia and Africa.

As is usually the case, new realities give birth to new terms or collocations in language and we are currently experiencing a proliferation of new terms describing the domain of migration and its different aspects. For instance, in English, relatively new terms such as ‘hot spot’, ‘brain drain’ and ‘asylum shopping’ are coined, the Greek equivalent of which is not always standardized.

During the academic year 2013-14, I undertook a project with my Master’s students in translation at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, in cooperation with the TermCoord Unit of the European Parliament. The aim of the project was to feed the IATE database with new entries for the language pair English-Greek from the domain of migration.<sup>3</sup> At the end of the project, together with a small group of Master’s and PhD students, we started working on a new project on corpora building. The idea was to build different sub-corpora and study the terminology of migration in each sub-field. During this stage, different synonymy phenomena were observed in the Greek language. The main motivation for this paper is to explore this preliminary observation.

In the following sections I will attempt to investigate the phenomenon of synonymy in the domain of migration, as observed in the English-Greek language pair. To do so, I will start with a general overview of the concept of synonymy as defined from different theoretical angles, then study the texts of our corpus and their special characteristics. Furthermore, specific examples from the corpus will be presented and the relation between synonymous terms will be investigated. Finally, a discussion of the findings will follow. My approach is descriptive and focuses on both textual and terminological aspects.

## 2. Synonymy in terminology

In general linguistics there is no such phenomenon as absolute synonymy in language (Palmer, 1976, p. 60; Charalambakis, 1992, p. 42). General linguistics understand absolute synonyms to be lexical items that can be used interchangeably in all linguistic environments, without any functional or stylistic difference. Following structuralism, traditional theory of terminology shares the view that terms should be used unambiguously in specialized communication and argues that each scientific term should be clearly defined and represent one concept (Kuryško, 1993; Wüster, 1979)<sup>4</sup>. This prescriptive and normative perspective leads to the so called “univocity principle”<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Data available on the webpage of the International Organization of Migration (IOM): <http://greece.iom.int/el/node/30> (last accessed 5/1/17).

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed presentation of our IATE project, cf. Loupaki E. & Maslias R. (2017).

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive presentation of the connections between Saussurian structuralism and traditional terminology, see Rita Temmerman (1997).

<sup>5</sup> For an interesting study about the influence of this concept to specialized dictionaries, cf. Kerremans (2010).

In the last twenty years, socio-cognitive, descriptive, and corpus-based approaches to terminology have challenged the univocity principle. According to Teresa Cabré, in her classic book *Terminology. Theory, Methods and Applications*, “... in reality there are alternative designations for a single concept and the designation of two different concepts can coincide even within the special field” (1998, p. 109). Moreover, she distinguishes four main categories of synonyms in terminology: (a) absolute equivalents, where terminological units belong in the same historical language and the same formal register, (b) semantic equivalent units, where one form is derived from the other (for example initialisms or abbreviations), (c) synonyms of different registers, where we find, for instance, the scientific and popular name of the same concept and finally (d) variants of the same term, where differences in spelling are observed. A more recent categorization of synonymy from Fernandez-Silva, Freixa and Cabré (2008) distinguishes five types of synonymy: (a) term and artificial form, (b) term and acronym, (c) spelling change, (d) reduction and (e) lexical change. Furthermore, descriptive approaches to terminology share the view that terms are subject to denominative variation, i.e., variation affecting the form of the term, also known as terminological variation (Fernandez-Silva & Kerremans, 2011, p. 319).

The reasons behind this variation are numerous and can be related to the communication setting, the level of specification, the author’s stylistic choices, or even social factors. For instance, Cabré has developed the principle of polyhedral or multifaceted perspective of the concept. Following this principle, any concept can be perceived through different angles and thus it can originate different denominations in the same language community (Cabré 2003; Freixa, Fernandez-Silva & Cabré, 2008). Furthermore, Freixa noted that “denominative variation occurs more often in less specialized texts” (2002, as referred in Kerremans 2010, p. 8). One question reasonably arises here: how many denominations can we have for the same concept and still insure an efficient communication?

According to some scholars the proliferation of synonyms can sometimes be problematic. In their case study about synonymy in Italian, in the special domain of digital terrestrial television, Bertaccini, Massari and Castagnoli make a distinction between “physiological” and “pathological” synonymy (2010, p. 16). Borrowed from medical jargon, these adjectives describe synonymy that may be functionally motivated in contrast to synonymy that causes confusion.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, for some others, synonymy could reflect the lack of harmonization and standardization or the absence of a linguistic policy and it is typical for domains which are subject to profound changes (Mayer, 2002, p. 118, as referred in Bertaccini *et al.*, 2010, p. 14).

This final observation is very relevant for our corpus, which – as will be explained in the following section – deals with a dynamic, sensitive and continually changing issue.

### 3. The language of migration: Main characteristics and corpus building

As a social phenomenon migration is multidimensional: it covers legal issues, sanitary questions, and human rights of migrants; it also involves work conditions, family relations and issues of abuse, property, or punishment. This multidimensionality is also reflected in the texts

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<sup>6</sup> An illustration of “physiological synonymy” is for the authors the case of “set-top-box”. Twelve different terms or variants were registered for this concept in their Italian corpus. However, they consider that this proliferation of terms is justified, as different terms are used in different language contexts, from different user groups. On the other hand, “pathological synonymy” is originated by the coexistence of English loan terms along with Italian terms describing the same concept. According to Bertaccini *et al.*, this coexistence is arbitrary and yet not functional.

connected to migration. These cover a wide variety of genres and are issued from different institutions, such as the UNHCR, the European Parliament or national authorities; NGOs such as the Médecins sans Frontières or Amnesty International, as well as from academic scholars. As suggested by Riggs, Mälkiä and Budin in their article entitled “Descriptive Terminology in the Social Sciences” (1997, pp. 184-196), “The first step in a descriptive terminology project involves identification of a subject field and representative documentation of its literature”. In this sense we tried to make an inventory of all texts types related to migration (see Table 1).

no	Genre	Text Type	Number of Texts Used
1	Legal texts (legally binding or non-binding)	EU documents (directives, resolutions, regulations, rulings of the Court of Justice of the European Union, conventions) Greek documents (Official Government Gazette)	84
2	Administrative texts	Public services reports, police instructions, frontier authorities documents, health services guides	25
3	Academic texts	Academic papers on the subject matter of migration, seen from different scientific angles	19
4	General public texts	NGOs information leaflets, NGOs reports, glossaries, press articles, university course descriptions, blogs	28

**Table 1.** Typology of texts

Texts are grouped in four distinct categories, in relation to their communicative settings (mainly sender, receiver and target). The three first categories are characterized by a higher degree of specialisation, while the fourth category contains texts addressed to the general public of a less specialised nature.

It is clear that the language of migration is not an independent and well defined specialised type of discourse. It could be argued that it forms part of legal/ administrative language, as a high number of texts are legal texts; it could also be asserted that it forms part of the language of the social sciences, as numerous academic papers using sociology, psychology or political sciences as theoretical background are found in our sample; finally, NGOs reports mixing specialised language and general language or press articles are also an important part of this discourse. In all cases, terminology in the domain of migration does exist and is strongly influenced by the multiplicity of media involved in its production.

In order to obtain a balanced corpus in the domain of migration, we attempted to include the majority of text types mentioned above. According to McEnery, Xiao and Tono in their reference book *Corpus-Based Language Studies*, “...classifying and characterizing text categories is highly relevant to any attempt to achieve corpus balance” (2006, p. 16). However, as we were working for the IATE term database, EU texts were given priority<sup>7</sup>. Our corpus

<sup>7</sup> This priority is reflected in the number of EU documents (see Table 1).

includes both texts originally written in Greek and EU documents, mainly translated from English. Although according to the EU principle of language equality all language versions are considered original, the fact that a large amount of texts are translations may have implications in terminology with special reference to synonymy.

As we pointed out in the previous section, there are different approaches to synonymy, most of which focus on the relation of synonymous terms with the concept or the kind of equivalence. In this paper, we intend to focus on a different aspect of synonymy, i.e., its production setting. It should be stressed that as our corpus contains a big amount of translated texts, we intend to examine the relation between the translation setting and the choice of a term. Furthermore, to shed light on the synonymous terms found in the corpus, we shall examine the factors influencing the appearance of synonymy. Some relevant questions are as follows:

1. Is one synonym preferred over another in different linguistic environments?
2. Does one synonym have different connotations than others?
3. Is there a change in terms preferred in relation to the date of the document?

All these findings are expected to provide an answer to the question formulated in the title of this paper: Is synonymy a sign of changing mentalities? If, as Discourse Analysis has already demonstrated, language reflects the way we perceive the world and even sometimes determines it (cf. for instance Fairclough, 1989; Hodge & Kress, 1993; Van Dijk, 1993) maybe it is worth studying whether differences in naming things could suggest a change in mentalities. The change in mentalities is here understood as a more tolerant, more solidary, more informed approach to social issues, such as migration.

#### 4. Data analysis

The data in this study has, in the first place, been analysed manually; then the results were cross-checked by automatic processing using AntConc.<sup>8</sup> In particular, two sub-corpora were used: the one contains Greek texts from NGOs, blogs and the press and includes 69.445 words and the second sub-corpus contains legal documents, both binding and non-binding, and includes 396.667 words.<sup>9</sup> Based on the analysis of our corpus, 169 terms in the domain of migration were extracted for the language pair English-Greek.<sup>10</sup> Out of 169 English terms we found 58 synonyms in the Greek language for 25 concepts. Synonymy was identified after a comparative study of the definition in both English and Greek for each term extracted. The starting point was the English term, as the majority of concepts are introduced into the Greek reality via English. It is worth mentioning that for some concepts, synonyms may exceed the number of seven, as is the case for the concept “acculturation”.

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<sup>8</sup> AntConc is a freeware corpus analysis toolkit for concordancing and text analysis. For more information see [www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/](http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/) (last accessed 13/01/17).

<sup>9</sup> I would like to thank all my students for their hard work and enthusiasm. Special thanks go to N. Troupkos and D. Petsa who helped me with the corpus building.

<sup>10</sup> All terminology records created for the IATE project are available on the site of TermCoord, at the following address: [termcoord.eu/universities/universities-projects/](http://termcoord.eu/universities/universities-projects/), (last accessed 13/01/17).

English term	Greek synonyms	Back translation <sup>11</sup>
acculturation	πολιτιστική επαγωγή [politistikí epagojí]	cultural induction
Definition: the processes of change in artifacts, customs, and beliefs that result from the contact of two or more cultures	πολιτιστική διείσδυση [politistikí dízdisi]	cultural penetration
	πολιτιστική αφομοίωση [politistikí afomíosi]	cultural assimilation
	επιπολιτισμός [epipolitizmós]	acculturation
	εκπολιτισμός [ekpolitizmós]	enculturation
	πολιτιστική ενσωμάτωση [politistikí ensomátosi]	cultural integration
	πολιτιστική προσαρμογή [politistikí prosarmojí]	cultural adaptation
	πολιτιστικός εγκλιματισμός [politistikós enghlimatizmós]	cultural acclimatization

Table 2. Example 1a

During our analysis we tried to track the origin of the term or at least find some references about its source. For this purpose, we searched both in our corpora and in the IATE term database to find the particular text from which the term was extracted.<sup>12</sup> The examination of these synonyms revealed different parameters influencing synonymy. These are as follows:

The first parameter determining synonymy is the author; as texts are issued from different organizations/ institutions, differences in naming the same concept are observed. For instance, for the term “acculturation” previously mentioned four of the Greek synonyms come from different institutions.

<sup>11</sup> According to Larose (1989, p. 83), back translation was initially used during the Latin era, in order to judge the precision and correctness of a translation in relation to its source text. To this end, back translation is a word-for-word rendering and does not produce a fluidly readable text. Back translation is here used in order to demonstrate the differences between synonym terms.

<sup>12</sup> One of the basic requirements for an IATE project is that terms should not be already incorporated in the IATE for the same domain. At the time we worked on this project all terms that we have chosen were not available, however today some terms are already incorporated in the IATE.

English term	Greek synonyms	Author
acculturation	πολιτιστική επαγωγή [politistikí epagogí]	UNESCO
	πολιτιστική διείσδυση [politistikí díizdisi]	UNESCO
	πολιτιστική αφομοίωση [politistikí afomíosi]	Eurovoc
	επιπολιτισμός [epipolitizmós]	Master's Thesis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
	πολιτιστική ενσωμάτωση [politistikí ensomátosi]	ELIAMEP <sup>13</sup>

Table 3. Example 1b

Other examples where different authors propose different terms are as follows:

English term	Greek synonyms	Back translation	Author
well-founded fear of persecution	βάσιμος φόβος δίωξης [vásimos fónos díoksis]	founded fear of persecution	FRA <sup>14</sup>
Definition: a threat to life or freedom on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group is always persecution	βάσιμος και δικαιολογημένος φόβος δίωξης [vásimos ké dikeolojiménos fónos díoksis]	founded and justified fear of persecution	UNHCR

Table 4. Example 2

<sup>13</sup> Greek Institute for European and Foreign Policy (non-profit organisation).

<sup>14</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

English term	Greek synonyms	Back translation	Source
Enculturation Definition: the process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that enable them to become functioning members of their societies	πολιτισμοποίηση [politismopóisi]	enculturation	University of Patras
	πολιτισμική μεταβίβαση [politismikí metavínasi]	cultural transmission	Democritus University of Thrace

Table 5. Example 3

English term	Greek synonyms	Back translation	Source
cultural mediator Definition: a professional representative with the task of facilitating communication and understanding, both on linguistic and cultural level, between service seekers of ethnic minorities and functionaries in agencies or public service offices, self presenting in an equidistant and neutral way between the interested parts.	διαπολιτισμικός διαμεσολαβητής [diapolitizmikós diamesolavitís]	intercultural mediator	Technological Educational Institute of Epirus
	πολιτισμικός διαμεσολαβητής [politizmikós diamesolavitís]	Cultural mediator	Heinrich Boell Foundation

Table 6. Example 4

In academic contexts, difference in terminology used – as in examples 3 and 4 – can sometimes be intentional, indicating theoretical shifts between different scholars, between different “schools”. Our findings confirm the principle of polyhedral perspective of the concept, introduced by Cabré (2003).

Another parameter influencing synonymy is the date of publication. For example, for the term “domestic violence” we can find four different terms in the Greek language, two of which date from 1998, one from 2006 and one from 2011. It is worth mentioning that both terms used in 1998 are periphrastically expressed and are no longer in use. This phenomenon is also related to the so-called life-cycle of terms, where the retrieval of a term from a term bank is the last stage. It is also worth mentioning that a quite new term found in texts recently published is “βία μεταξύ ερωτικών συντρόφων” [violence between sexual partners] which is a term used in the science of psychology and has also an abbreviation. This term was not found in our corpora as texts were selected during 2013-2014.

English term	Greek synonyms	Back translation	Syntactical structure	Date
domestic violence/ intimate partner violence	συντροφική βία [sindrofikí vía]	intimate violence	Adj. + noun	2011
Definition: [the] behaviour by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours	ενδοοικογενειακή βία [endoikojeniakí vía]	intra-familial violence	Adj. + noun	2006
	βία μέσα στο σπίτι [vía méssa sto spíti]	violence inside the house	Noun+adv. +prep./article+noun	1998
	βία μέσα στην οικογένεια [vía méssa stin ikojénia]	violence inside the family	Noun+adv. +prep./article+noun	1998

**Table 7.** Example 5

The time of publication can also be influential even for texts issued from the same organization, as demonstrated in the following example:

English term	Greek synonyms	Back translation	Institution	Date
voluntary return	εκούσιος επαναπατρισμός [ekúsios epanapatrizmós]	voluntary repatriation	European Parliament	2001

Definition: Act of a non-national (whether lawful or unlawful) returning to his or her country of origin or to a third country following his own request, or within the time-limit set for that purpose by the return decision.	εκούσια επιστροφή [ekúsia epistrofí]	voluntary return	European Parliament	2007
	οικειοθελής επιστροφή [ikiothelís epistrofí]	unforced return	European Parliament	2008
	εθελούσια επιστροφή [ethelúsia epistrofí]	willing return	European Parliament	2015

Table 8. Example 6

Another parameter affecting synonymy appears to be the sensitivity of the political issues discussed. A typical example of this category is “irregular migrant”/ “irregular migration”:

English term	Greek synonyms	Back translation
irregular migrant	παράτυπος μετανάστης [parátipos metanástis]	irregular migrant
Definition: person who, owing to unauthorised entry, breach of a condition of entry or the expiry of his or her visa, lacks legal status in a transit or host country	παράνομος μετανάστης [paránomos metanástis]	illegal migrant
	παράνομος μετανάστης χωρίς έγγραφα [paránomos metanástis xorís éhgrafa]	Illegal migrant without papers
	μετανάστης χωρίς νομιμοποιητικά έγγραφα [metanástis xorís nomimopítika éhgrafa]	migrant without legitimating documents
	μετανάστης χωρίς έγγραφα [metanástis xorís éhgrafa]	migrant without documents
	άτακτος μετανάστης [átaktos metanástis]	unruly migrant

Table 9. Example 7

The terms “irregular migration” and “irregular migrant” have gradually replaced the terms “illegal migration” and “illegal migrant” in the English-speaking legal order. The new terms are considered to be more politically correct, although, as pointed out by IOM, “there is no clear

and universally accepted definition of irregular migration”.<sup>15</sup> In the Greek-speaking legal order the terms “irregular migration”/ “irregular migrant” have different renderings. For example, in the *European Pact on Immigration and Asylum* issued in 2008, the English term “irregular migration” is translated “παράνομη μετανάστευση”, which is normally the equivalent of “illegal migration”. Furthermore, our research in the sub-corpora has demonstrated that until 2015 the term “παράνομος μετανάστης” was mainly used in both original texts produced by the Greek government (i.e., police authorities, ministries, etc.) and in translated EU documents either referring to “illegal migrant” or to “irregular migrant”. One hit of the term was equally found in a document of the United Nations Regional Information Center for Western Europe (UNRIC). Over the last years, a discussion has been open concerning the terminology used for this concept; some alternatives proposed are “παράτυπος μετανάστης” [irregular migrant], “μετανάστης χωρίς νομιμοποιητικά έγγραφα” [migrant without legitimating documents], “μετανάστης χωρίς έγγραφα” [migrants without documents – which is apparently coined from the French term “sans papiers”] “άτακτος μετανάστης” [unruly migrant].<sup>16</sup> In our sub-corpora we only found hits for “παράνομος” (69 hits) “παράνομος χωρίς έγγραφα” (1 hit) and “παράτυπος” (8 hits). All hits of “παράτυπος” registered in our sub-corpora come from one document issued in 2013 by *Human Rights Watch*; at that period the use of the term “παράτυπος” was strongly supported by NGOs and left-wing ideological circles. Further research in the data base of legal EU documents, Eur-lex<sup>17</sup>, in more recent documents have demonstrated that starting from 2015 the term “παράτυπος” is more systematically used in EU legal documents too. The main problem arises with the terms “παράνομος” [illegal] and “άτακτος” [unruly] that both have negative connotations in Greek. In particular, “παράνομος” means illegal, whereas “άτακτος” is a lexical unit generally used either for small children or for rebellious troops.

## 5. Discussion

As demonstrated by data analysis, there are three main factors generating synonymy that can operate separately or in combination:

1. The author
2. The date of publication
3. The sensitivity of the issue

The multiplicity of authors naturally constitutes a major reason for synonymy. As is usually the case, different authors may have different perspectives on the same issue, especially in academic contexts. Even when authors are EU institutions, differences in naming the same term do occur. It is worth making a special reference to the use of translated texts as documentation. For instance, as pointed out by Kirsten Malmkjaer (1998), the main problem with using parallel texts in corpus analysis is that the target text “represents one individual’s introspection”. Moreover, the identity of these individuals may be totally different; from in-house translators with years of experience and access to all tools available to sub-contracting

<sup>15</sup> Key Migration Terms, International Organization for Migration, [www.iom.int/key-migration-terms](http://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms) [last accessed 17/01/17].

<sup>16</sup> All synonyms here presented were discussed in a terminology network initiated by the European Commission and each solution has been documented by reference either to legal documents or to high quality press.

<sup>17</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/homepage.html>.

free-lancers with no academic qualifications. This argument is reinforced by the COTSOES handbook (2003, p. 44), where it is stressed that translations can be trustworthy only when they have been completed under favorable conditions. Such conditions involve time restrictions, understanding the purpose of the translation, the quality of the original, etc. Finally, in relation to the multiplicity of authors in the EU, it should also be kept in mind that before IATE, i.e., before 2004, every EU institution had its own term database and coordination between different terminologies was rare.

Another phenomenon related to synonymy observed here is the lack of standardization, especially in the social sciences. This is a reality already demonstrated by Riggs, Mälkiä and Budin (1997) and it could be associated with the fact that most of the work in terminology management concerns more technical fields. The lack of investment in social sciences along with the absence of linguistic policy are some of the reasons behind it.

Furthermore, the factors of time and sensitivity of the issue are very indicative in relation to synonymy here examined. When a new term/ new reality emerges in the Greek environment its first renderings may be unfortunate. There are different examples of terms that were translated in a way that didn't guarantee their incorporation into the target language. Gradually, as the Greek community gets more familiar with the concept, better renderings are proposed by experts, translators or terminologists. In this way, both time and sensitivity are important factors.

Finally, to answer our initial question: "Is synonymy a sign of changing mentalities?" In fact, our findings suggest that some synonyms reflect a change in mentalities. For instance, the process of standardization for the term "domestic violence" or the multiplicity of synonyms for the concept of "irregular migrant" may also be explained by the growing attention paid to these delicate issues. More evidence is needed in order to confirm such an argument, however for the time being we can assert that terminology management in the domain of migration would be of great help to both migrants and Greek citizens.

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Elpida Loupaki

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki  
Department of French Language and Literature  
54124 Thessaloniki  
Greece

[eloupaki@frl.auth.gr](mailto:eloupaki@frl.auth.gr)

**Biography:** Elpida Loupaki is Assistant Professor in Descriptive Translation Studies and Terminology at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. She teaches general translation, specialized translation and terminology management at both the Translation Department and the EMT Master Program in translation. Her main research interests include EU translation, news translation as well as translation and ideology. She has published a number of articles in conference proceedings and collective volumes. She is a member of the European Society for Translation Studies (EST) and of the Hellenic Society for Terminology (ELETO). She is the Treasurer of the Hellenic Society for Translation Studies.