

## Key Problems in a Medical Terms Translation: Overview of the Issue

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### Abstract

*This study tackles the key problems of translating medical terms. It uses an evaluative approach to investigate and discuss the problems and intricacies of translating medical terms. The purpose of the study is to display the difficulties of translating medical terms and how they were tackled by academicians and translators who are competent in medical translation who work in the medical field. The study adopts a qualitative-quantitative approach. It focuses on different types of medical terms, excluding pharmacy-related terms. As medical terms are the key components of medical texts, the research was centered around diversified English medical terms taken from different medical reports, namely National Health Service (NHS) leaflets and flyers and World Health Organization (WHO) reports for 2018 and 2019.*

**Keywords:** terminology, medicine, translation, STT, SLT, TLT.

### 1.0. Introduction

Translation has played a major part in communication between languages and cultures. Without translation modern technology could never have been transferred between nations. Translation can be applied to all fields of language including legal, religious, literary language etc. Among these fields is scientific and technical translation (STT), which covers the specialities which are relevant to science and technology. The act of expressing scientific concepts and content is usually challenging and serious as it requires accuracy, knowledge and understanding of the ideas behind the terms. Difficulties can arise from the fact that the language of science and technology has its own characteristic terminology.

Terms are the key concept in the translation of any kind of technical text. Al-Ma'ni (2000) believes that while the understanding of the source text terminology is an important factor in the process of translating, the coining of the terms' target language counterparts is of equal, if not, greater importance. In translating technical terms, one is often faced with the problem of neologism and non-equivalence. Such problems arise due to the rapid progress of, and the advances made in, science and technology around the world which make it difficult for terminologists and specialists to keep pace with the huge numbers of terms that continually enter the language of science, which is usually English. One of the most noteworthy issues in scientific translation is how to achieve the highest degree of precision possible in the use of words and to transfer the information contained in the source language text (SLT) into the target language text (TLT) without any loss of the original meaning.

Translation has often been viewed as the process of establishing equivalence between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL). Finding equivalents is the most problematic stage of translation, as equivalence (which means sameness or similarity) has been/is a key concept in translation studies. Achieving perfect equivalence in rendering ST properties into TT ones is not possible as each language has its own grammatical, lexical and textual systems which distinguish one from the other.

Medical translations are some of the most difficult to complete by an ordinary translator and need the skills of a specialist. It is preferable that anyone who attempts to take on a medical translation task should have some sort of medical qualification so that they have firsthand knowledge of the medical terminology which is most frequently used.

Altogether it has been estimated that the medical field is composed of no less than 20,000 medical terms and this does not include the names of parts of the body, illness and names of medicines and drugs. The huge vocabulary is forever changing as new concepts are developed and new drugs and medicines are introduced.

### 2.0. Outlining the Research Directions

#### 2.1. Historical Background

Medical and religious translations are amongst the oldest forms of translation (Berghammer, 2006). Also, Fishback (cited in Pilegaard, 1997) argues that translating medicine is regarded as the “most universal and oldest field of scientific translation because of the homogenous ubiquity of the human body.” The history of medicine can be traced back to centuries ago when the Greeks established what have now become modern scientific methods. It slowly but surely began to spread its influence to the Roman Empire (which fell in AD 476), then to medieval Europe at the turn of 5th century and to modern Europe in the late 15th century (Montalt and Gonzalez, 2007). As times have evolved, dominance in knowledge has affected language relationships. English has gained added importance (especially in the 20th century) following on from the demise of Latin. This is also true for the field of medical research where English has been extremely widely used.

## 2.2. What are the Medical Translations Problems and Solutions

One of the key problems in a medical translation is when there are two words that need to be translated but which could have different meanings. It would only be an experienced medical translator who would have the knowledge to know which translation is correct. One important example is the difference between dysphagia and dysphasia. The former word means having difficulties with swallowing, while the later word means loss of the ability to understand and use speech. These are very different meanings but the two words look and sound similar when spoken.

Medical abbreviations can easily be confused when translated, but they may have vastly different meanings. Possible examples are the abbreviations for the left and right ear. AD stands for the right ear while AS is used for the left ear and AU is the word for both ears. If the doctor sees a wrong translation it wouldn't be noticeable and treatment could be administered incorrectly.

## 2.3. Using the Similarities between Languages is not Acceptable

Some English words are not that much different from some words in other languages. This is particularly the case between Medical Spanish and English. It is tempting to pick the literal translation, which isn't always accurate. Cuantificación, which is a Spanish word, is usually translated into the English form which is quantification. This is quite correct but in the pharmaceutical context, it should be quantitation. Another example is reactivos, which aren't actually reactives, but reagents.

## 2.4. New Medical Words

All new discoveries, findings, theories or drugs have to be given a name and as the medical field is considered to be universal, the International Anatomical Nomenclature Committee (IANC) endeavours to standardise and adapt scientific terminology through participating in international meetings. More than 80% of medical terminology has its roots in Latin. These words can be broken up into suffixes, prefixes and roots which help the translator to understand more easily the translation. Dermatitis is such an example as the root “derm” is referring to the dermis, i.e. the skin, while “-itis,” the suffix, refers to inflammation, so the word dermatitis comes out to mean skin inflammation.

It's important that the medical translator knows what sort of text he or she is about to translate, whether it's a prescription, a medical report for a patient or a medicine's patent so that other similar examples can be referred to first.

## 3.0. Discussion

A translator who embarks on the seemingly steep path of medical translation has two main obstacles: medical knowledge, and medical terminology. This post is about the latter. Medical terminology presents problems which are different from other specialised domains. This post presents the most obvious problems in determining the right medical terminology. It is not an extensive list; nevertheless, it should present a clear case for the difficulties translators encounter in translating medical texts. Though written mostly from the point-of-view of French to English translation, it can also apply to medical translation of all language pairs. Lastly, these issues also apply to the practice of medical lexicography.

### 3.1. Terminology Issues Unique to Medical Translation

One of the first criteria that a medical translator must determine is their target audience. The target audience will determine whether the text is translated into layperson terms or medical terms (or both). For example, “Varicelle” (FR) would not be automatically translated into “Varicella” (EN), which is the medical term for “Chickenpox”, if the text is intended for a layperson (e.g. a patient).

### 3.2. Medical Translation

Eponyms present a big problem in Medical translation because often they are synonyms for another term. For example, according to *Dermatology Therapy : A-Z Essentials*, “infantile scurvy” has the following synonyms: “Barlow’s disease”; “Möller-Barlow disease”; “Barlow’s syndrome”; “Cheadle-Möller-Barlow syndrome”; “Moeller’s disease”; “vitamin C deficiency syndrome”. Choosing between an eponym and another term would depend on which is more common in the target culture.

Often, a translator who lacks experience in translating medical texts would automatically translate a drug name into the target-culture equivalent. This, however, would not be functional. Source texts often refer to drug names as they are known in the source language, which is likely to be a brand name. When coming across a brand name like “Ventoline”(FR), it would help the end receiver (specialist or layperson) to not only have the English trade name “Ventolin”, but also its International Non-proprietary Name (INN) “Salbutamol”. An (INN) is a unique name designated by the World Health Organization (WHO) to a particular pharmaceutical substance. There are several good reasons for using an INN. Your target text may be read by native English speakers from different countries. Do you use the British Approved Name (BAN) or the United States Adopted Name (USAN)? Another reason is that one drug can be produced by several companies and so including a generic name would make it easier to decipher the chemical function of the drug.

### 3.3. Medical Terminology

Another criterion to determine from the outset is whether to translate into British or American English (or rather, whether to adopt British or American medical terms). This may be a minor point, and most doctors would still understand, but not knowing the difference will mean a compromise on term consistency when you start mixing up your “hematomas” (US) with “haematomas” (UK). Sometimes, the spelling may be the same but the meaning is different. “Surgery” is a place where you get cut open in the US, but also a doctor’s office or their opening hours in the UK.

Lastly, you may think that metaphors or euphemisms are related to only literary translation but they are also very relevant to medical translation. Doctors sometimes use euphemisms for unpleasant topics, such as “to expire” for “to die”, or “critically ill” for someone who is dying and with no hope of recovery. How can these be translated into different languages? Related to this are culture-bound metaphors (e.g. “Spanish Flu”, and - “German Measles”).

There are many other terminology-related problems in medical translation, such as hospital jargons (e.g. “inpatient/outpatient”), and the fact that practitioners themselves do not agree on the terms. To solve these, adequate background knowledge and research skills are needed; reliable websites and medical journals should be consulted. Nevertheless, being aware of these issues will go a long way in determining the right medical terminology. Any type of translation has its own difficulties; despite the obstacles, medical translation can be hugely rewarding.

### 4.0. Conclusion

The common use of English language in science in general, and in medicine in particular, makes the use of other languages very limited. Krulj et al. (2011:170) emphasize that “It is well known that English is the leading language of medical sciences. Communication in English has been indispensable throughout the history of medicine”.

The increasing demand for technical and scientific translation arises from scientific and technical progress, the growth of scientific, technical, commercial, cultural and other relations, and the desire of nations and governments to develop co-operation and to coordinate their efforts in promoting civilization.

Medical translation is a branch of scientific and technical translation and is a very important type of translation. Montalt (2011) emphasizes that medical translation is one of the most active types of professional translation. The researcher suggests that medical terms are the main challenge for a translator of medical texts. Therefore, a translator should be aware of the importance of understanding the medical terms he/she comes across during the translation process in both languages and should also be aware of the sensitivity of the subject matter.

Medical translation as a sensitive subject demands a high degree of consistency and accuracy in transferring the source text to the target language (TL). The translation of medical terms generally throws up many challenges. Although some medical terms can be translated without any difficulty, others are tremendously difficult to translate. What makes the translation of some medical terms into Arabic more complicated is their complex structure, e.g. as shown in such terms as hypergammaglobulinaemia, videofluoroscopy, gastro-oesophageal etc. Additionally, there are medical compound terms and abbreviations (that can be ambiguous) which make it hard for the untrained translator to grasp the intended interpretation, e.g. CNS: central nervous system and UTI: urinary tract infection etc. Many medical abbreviations cannot be found in bilingual dictionaries and computer translation tools. Translators sometimes find it difficult to cope with these structures in English, which might result in mistranslations. Furthermore, there are problems of ambiguity as many English terms are either new or so technical that untrained translators cannot understand their meanings in the SL.

All of the above emphasizes the importance of training for the translators to be able to work in the medical field. To sum up, the study has shown that the translation of medical terms is problematic for two main reasons: the first reason is that some medical terms have complex structures and can give rise to various semantic, lexical and grammatical interpretations, through which the job of a translator is rendered very hard. The second reason emerges from a lack of clarity of, or because of ambiguity in, some medical terms or expressions in the SL which, in turn, has a great effect on the translation process. Often such ambiguity derives from the fact that many English medical terms have Latin or other language origins. The problem of neologism and non-equivalence also affects the translation process.

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