



An Approach to Back Translation of Medical/Pharmaceutical Texts

By Celeste Klein and Scott Van Til

If you speak more than one language, you have probably been in situations where you had to translate a common saying or proverb from your native language into another language. If you have, in addition to providing an equivalent saying (if one exists), you probably felt the urge to explain, or translate, what the saying literally “says” or means in the other language. For example, when translating *más vale pájaro en mano que cien volando* (“a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”) into English,

“Back translation” seeks to show what a translation (sometimes called a “forward translation” in this context) *literally* says in the source language.

I might say: “In Spanish, we say ‘a bird in the hand is worth more than one hundred flying.’”

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provide a literal translation of a proverb or saying, the back translator is aware that there are more artful and target-language appropriate ways of rendering the text. But such is not the purpose of back translation. Back translation differs from other forms of translation, which is why back translators should take a more literal approach to it. The following provides an overview of this translation approach and some tips on how to use it.

Back Translation as a Form of “Literal” Translation

As its name implies, “back translation” is the process of translating a translated (target) text into the original (source) language. This is typically done as a quality assurance step to ensure that the forward translation contains no substantive errors, generally called “deviations.” (For detailed explanations of what back translation is and its use in the medical/pharmaceutical industry, see the articles “Medical Back Translation: Strategies for Making it Work”¹ and “Back Translation Revisited: Differences that Matter [and Those that Do Not]”² in past issues of *The ATA Chronicle*.)

If we analyze different translation approaches as a continuum, with word-for-word translation on one end and adaptation (the most extreme form of free translation) on the other, back translation should be placed closer to the “literal” section of the continuum. Translation scholar Peter Newmark calls this approach “semantic translation.” In Jeremy Munday’s words, semantic translation is “always ‘inferior’ to [the source text] ... More complex, awkward, detailed, concentrated,” and characterized by a “tendency to over-translate.”³ This is similar to what linguist and anthropologist Eugene Nida calls formal equivalence: “Formal equivalence focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content ... One is concerned that the message in the receptor language should match as closely as possible the different elements in the source language.”⁴

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Unlike the forward translator, who will usually follow a more communicative approach and translate with the target audience in mind, the back translator must refrain from embellishing the translation in any manner to make it sound “natural” in the target language. Instead, the back translator must try to translate as literally as the rules of the target language permit. Such a literal approach will likely result in some unnatural, sometimes even awkward-sounding, sentences, but that is acceptable and even necessary in back translation. This is why Mike Collins, in his article “Medical Back Translation: Strategies for Making it Work,” described back translation as being “a concept that seems to run counter to everything we know and understand about our profession at the most basic level.”⁵

How “Literal” Should a Back Translation Be?

As translators following a source-text-oriented approach, back translators walk a fine line between literalness and mistranslation. Translators should be careful when translating literally because, unlike a merely literal translation—which is not inaccurate per se, but just sounds “unnatural” to the reader—a mistranslation fails to convey the actual meaning of the forward translation. Therefore, it may not provide an accurate picture of what the target text will mean to the target reader.

How “literal” should a back translation be? To answer this question, it will help to consider back translation choices both at the *sentence* and *word* levels. Literalness is preferred at the *sentence* level. The back translation syntax and style, including punctuation and register, should follow the translated text as much as

possible. Thus, long, complex sentences using lots of connectors, typical of Romance languages such as Spanish, should not be split or simplified in an English back translation, as one would normally do in a more communicative or target-centered translation approach. Again, the “unnaturalness” resulting from this approach is not only acceptable but necessary in back translation. The following examples, taken from two informed consent documents, illustrate this point.

Example 1

- **English Source:** A Randomized, Global, Double-blind, Placebo-controlled, Parallel-group Study to Evaluate the Efficacy and Safety of Once-daily Oral XYZ for the Treatment of Adults with Thrombocytopenia Associated with Liver Disease Prior to an Elective Procedure.
- **Spanish Translation:** *Estudio mundial aleatorizado, con emascaramiento doble, controlado con placebo y con grupos paralelos para evaluar la eficacia y seguridad de XYZ vía oral, administrado una vez al día, para el tratamiento de adultos con trombocitopenia asociada a enfermedad hepática antes de una intervención quirúrgica programada.*
- **English Back Translation:** A world-wide, randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled study with parallel groups to evaluate the efficacy and safety of XYZ, administered by mouth once daily, for the treatment of adults with thrombocytopenia associated with liver disease prior to a scheduled surgical procedure.



Example 2

- **English Source:** By signing this form, you are stating that you have read this document and understand it. Also, by signing this form, you are stating that you voluntarily desire to participate in this research study. You do not have to volunteer or give this permission.
- **Spanish Translation:** *Por medio de su firma, usted manifiesta que ha leído y entendido el presente documento. Asimismo, por medio de su firma, usted manifiesta que desea participar en este estudio de investigación de forma voluntaria. Usted no tiene la obligación de participar como voluntario ni de otorgar el presente permiso.*
- **Back Translation:** By means of your signature, you state that you have read and understood this document. In addition, by means of your signature, you state that you wish to participate in this research study voluntarily. You are under no obligation to participate as a volunteer or to grant this permission.

In the first example, “Once-daily Oral” became “administered by mouth once daily” and “Parallel-group” became “with parallel groups,” reflecting the more complex syntax used in the Spanish translation. Also, note how the use of title case in the original English was lost in the back translation, as Spanish does not follow this convention.

The change from lower to higher register is obvious in the second example: “By signing this form” versus “By means of your signature”; “You do not have to volunteer” versus “You are under no obligation to participate as a volunteer”; and “give” versus “grant.” (For more examples of back translation, including examples in other languages, see the articles written by Michael Collins, Richard Paegelow, and Chris Lines⁶ in the “Notes” section at the end of this article.)

The back translator must try to translate as literally as the rules of the target language permit.

When to Avoid a Literal Translation

The back translator should avoid literalness at the *word* level. In fact, the translator *should* avoid translating literally in the following cases.

Terminology: If a term was translated correctly in the forward translation, it should likewise be converted correctly from the target back into the source. Even when a more “literal” translation would not be a mistranslation, the back translator should still use the standard industry terminology in the back translation. Examples of this include: “visit” for *consulta* (instead of “consultation”); “randomized” for *aleatorio* (instead of “random”); “site” for *centro* (instead of “center”); “research” for *investigación* (instead of “investigation”); and “MD” for “Dr.” (instead of “Dr.”) in most medical/pharmaceutical texts in English.

False Cognates: Back translators, like all translators, must be aware of false cognates. Examples in pharmaceutical texts include: “corresponding” for *correspondiente* (“relevant,” “pertinent”); “prospectus” for *prospecto* (“leaflet”); “reactives” for *reactivos* (“reagents”); and “quantification” for *cuantificación* (“quantitation”).⁷

Translating Errors in the Forward Translation

Errors in the forward translation must always be reflected in the back translation, regardless of whether they are at the word or sentence level. The back translator should never deviate from the forward translation when errors of any kind are found (grammar, punctuation or spelling errors, typos, incorrect terminology, inconsistencies, etc.). This approach contradicts a very common

practice in the translation industry, which is to correct errors found in the source during the process of translating, and, in many cases, going the extra mile to point out the error to the client. It is often the case that translators of any field come across very poorly written source texts (e.g., nonsensical syntax, incomplete sentences, spelling errors, etc.). If the error is discernible enough that the translator can make sense of the sentence or phrase, such as a misconjugated verb, a spelling error, or a typo, the standard practice is to draft the target text correctly. However, since the very purpose of back translation is to detect deviations and other errors in the forward translation, this should never be done in a back translation. In the back translation process, deviations and other errors in the forward translation are subsequently corrected before the forward and back translations are delivered to the client. The back translator should make sure to reflect the errors as accurately as possible by incorporating equivalent errors into the back translation, and even add a comment to call the project manager’s attention to the fact that there are errors in the forward translation. Documenting these errors is key, as it greatly facilitates the back translation review task. (Back translation review is the process of comparing the original source file against the back translation to verify that the forward translation reflects the meaning of the source text accurately.)

Striking a Balance

Translation and back translation are different tasks with different purposes, and therefore call for different approaches. Back translators must be ready to use an approach and strate-

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gies that will likely feel contrary to those they use in their “regular” translation work. Above all, they must recognize what elements of a forward translation should be translated more literally to support the back translation process. They must provide the client with an accurate picture of what the forward translation will mean to its readers while being careful not to mistranslate. ■

Notes

1. Collins, Mike. “Medical Back Translation: Strategies for Making it Work,” *The ATA Chronicle* (August 2005), 19-24.
2. Paegelow, Richard S. “Back Translation Revisited: Differences that Matter (and Those that Do Not),” *The ATA Chronicle* (August 2008), 22-25.
3. Munday, Jeremy. *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2nd edition, 2008), 45.
4. Nida, Eugene A. *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1964), 159.
5. Collins, 19.
6. Lines, Chris. “Back and Parallel Translations: Managing Client Expectations,” *The ATA Chronicle* (October 2006), 28-31.
7. Goldsmith, Emma. “‘False Friends in Pharma,’ Signs & Symptoms of Translation,” <http://signsand symptomsoftranslation.com/2013/08/06/false-friends/>.

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