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## SELECTED MEDICAL TRANSLATION PROBLEMS

### Summary

Every year about 34 kinds of packages of different pills, lozenges and capsules are consumed in Poland per capita. Majority of them are produced in the USA and the UK which means that they must be translated into Polish. As Naomi Moreas suggests, medical translation is a challenge that not every translator should take. It requires a great deal of professional knowledge, awareness of the EU regulations and ability to deal with its complexity. Bearing the above in mind, one may come to a conclusion that possible consequences of mistranslating medical texts can be serious, if not fatal. The question, how translators can avoid making mistakes needs to be answered. The prime concern of the following presentation is to indicate the areas of difficulties and shed some light on the complexity of medical translation. It presents the results of research conducted on medical texts delivered by a professional translator.

**Keywords:** medical translation problems, medical terminology, PIL, translator.

### 1. Introduction

Medical translation belongs to a prominent group of technical translation. It is one of the most difficult translations and requires excellent knowledge of English as well as very good knowledge of medical terminology and medicine in general. The best translator is a person educated in both English and medicine<sup>1</sup>. However, there are only a few such people in Poland and it is obvious that they cannot meet the demand created by growing pharmaceutical and medical market. Therefore non-professional translators should cooperate with medical professionals in order to avoid mistakes, which may be disastrous<sup>2</sup>. One should bear in mind that rendering

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<sup>1</sup> Badziński, A.: 'On the necessity of cooperation between the professional translator and the medical professional in the process of translation', [in:] Borkowska, E. and Lyda, A. (ed.). *Studies in Language, Culture and Literature*. Katowice: WSZMiJO 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Moreas, N. (2010): *Linguistic Differences Between Legal and Medical Translation*. Pp. 3–4.

medical texts it is often more than just translating words from one into another language; it is working with terms concerning someone's health and even life<sup>3</sup>. The following paper shows the results of research conducted on medical texts delivered by a professional translator and focuses on the main areas of medical translation problems.

## 2. Medical terminology

Medical translators must deal with a great number of medical terms during their work<sup>4</sup>. Medical terminology is defined as a set of words which accurately describe human body and its processes in a scientific manner<sup>5</sup>. Medical terms are often based on the concept of word roots, prefixes and suffixes. A word root contains a primary meaning of a medical term. Majority of words are derived from Latin or Greek language therefore two different roots may have the same meaning. Generally speaking, Latin roots are used to create words describing anatomical structures whereas Greek roots are used to create words describing a disease, treatment or condition<sup>6</sup>. For example, the Greek root *nephr* is used in terms that describe a kidney disease; the Latin root *ren* describes an anatomical structure of a kidney. Sometimes a word root is combined with a vowel and then we may talk about a combining form.

A suffix is defined as a word element which is placed at the end of a word and therefore changing its meaning. In medical terminology suffixes usually denote a pathology, surgical procedure or symptom. Gylys and Wedding provide the following examples of suffixes:

-*itis* (inflammation); e.g. *gastritis* – inflammation of the stomach

-*megaly* (enlargement); e.g. *gastromegaly* – enlargement of the stomach<sup>7</sup>.

A prefix is defined as a word element which is added to the beginning of a word root. A prefix changes word's meaning and usually describes a position, direction or negation. An example of a prefix is *hyper-* meaning excessive, not normal which can be observed in a word *hyperthermia* which is understood as condition of excessive heat<sup>8</sup>.

While translating medical terms, the basic knowledge of how they are constructed can be very helpful. Gylys and Wedding suggest three steps to be taken while defining medical words:

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<sup>3</sup> Fischbach, H. (1962): *Problems of medical translation*. Pp. 1–11.

<sup>4</sup> Alfaro, D. (2005): *Difficulties in Translating Medical Texts*.

<sup>5</sup> Dudley-Evans T., St John M.J.: *Developments in English for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge University Press 1998. Pp. 49–50.

<sup>6</sup> Gylys, B.A., Wedding, M.E. (2009): *Medical Terminology Systems. A Body System Approach*. P. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem. P. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem. P. 4.

1. Define the suffix, or last part of the word.
2. Define the first part of the word (which may be a word root, combining form, or prefix).
3. Define the middle parts of the word<sup>9</sup>.

Medical translators must have basic knowledge of Latin and Greek root words, suffixes and prefixes as a large number of medical terminology is based on them. Without this knowledge, translating medical terms may be impossible, or at least very difficult. There are many different kinds of medical translations which require various skills. Some of them must be done according to formal regulations. Medical translators cannot forget about them, the same as they should be aware that their work is very important and they cannot allow themselves to make the smallest mistake, as it can be fatal.

### 3. The suffix *-itis*

Terms containing Latin suffix *-itis* are often problematic. *-itis* sometimes indicates “nieżyt”, sometimes “zapalenie” and sometimes both translations are acceptable.

**Table 1.** Correct and incorrect translation of the terms containing a suffix *-itis*<sup>10</sup>

English term	Correct translation	Incorrect translation
Sinusitis	zapalenie zatok	nieżyt zatok
Rhinitis	nieżyt nosa	zapalenie błony śluzowej nosa
Gastritis	zapalenie błony śluzowej żołądka / nieżyt żołądka	–
Laryngitis	zapalenie krtani	nieżyt krtani
Cystitis	zapalenie pęcherza moczowego	nieżyt pęcherza

There is a double problem with a term *stomatitis*. Firstly, it ought to be translated as “zapalenie”, **not** as “nieżyt”. Secondly, stoma is not associated with a stomach but with an oral cavity. Therefore *stomatitis* may be confusing for less experienced translators.

**Table 2.** The term *stomatitis*

English term	Correct translation	Incorrect translation
Stomatitis	zapalenie błony śluzowej jamy ustnej	nieżyt jamy ustnej / nieżyt żołądka / zapalenie błony śluzowej żołądka

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>10</sup> All tables of own elaboration.

Table 2 presents the term *stomatitis* together with its correct translation into Polish. There are also examples of incorrect translations indicated by professional translators who came across such mistake during their career.

#### 4. Words used in medical context

Another interesting aspect of medical translation is different meaning of words while used in medical context. There is a large number of terms which change their meaning depending on context<sup>11</sup>. It means that their general meaning may be far different than when used in medicine. It often causes problems as less experienced translators trust their knowledge of general English and do not check other meanings of a problematic word. It leads to misunderstandings and makes the final translation product unacceptable.

**Table 3.** The examples of terms which have different general meaning

English term	Medical context	General context
sacral	krzyżowy	sakralny
temporal	skroniowy	tymczasowy

In general English the word *sacral* is translated as “sakralny” but in medicine it means “krzyżowy” (e.g. sacral bone – kość krzyżowa). Similar errors may be made while translating the word *temporal* which in this context does not mean “tymczasowy”. There is an interesting case of the word *angina*. It is a common error to translate English word *angina* as “angina”. The Polish term “angina” must be translated into English as *tonsillitis* because the word *angina* means “dusznica/dławica”.

#### 5. Branches of medicine

Translators must also pay attention to the branch of medicine they are dealing with as different fields of medicine require different translations of the same looking terms<sup>12</sup>. There is an interesting example of a word *myelitis*. In neurological context this term means “zapalenie rdzenia kręgowego” whereas in orthopaedic context it is understood as “zapalenie szpiku kostnego”. As it can be seen, making such a mistake would cause serious problems and therefore special attention ought to be paid to the area of medicine the translator deals with. There is a similar situation with Polish terms “pęcherz/ pęcherzyk”. They are found in many contexts in Polish medical texts but their translation must be different.

<sup>11</sup> Newmark, P: *A Textbook of Translation. Hong Kong*: Prentice HaH Int. 1988. P. 140.

<sup>12</sup> Vihla, M. (1998): *Medicor: A corpus of contemporary American medical texts*. Pp. 1–8.

**Table 4.** The problem of the word *pęcherz*

Polish term	Correct translation
pęcherz / pęcherzyk	bladder / blister / bulla / follicle / alveolus

When the term refers to “pęcherz moczowy” the correct translation is urinary *bladder*, “pęcherzyk” (on skin) is blister but if it is big one then it is *bulla*. “Pęcherzyk jajnikowy” is translated as *ovarian follicle* whereas “pęcherzyk płucny” means *alveolus*.

## 6. Colloquial and specialized terms

Another field of difficulty is created by colloquial versus specialized English terms. There are lots of colloquial terms used commonly by non-professionals and it is worth mentioning that also in Poland people use colloquial names of illnesses or medical conditions whereas there are professional equivalents that ought to be used while translating documents. It seems obvious that when working on official papers, conference abstracts and case studies, translators are obliged to use specialized terms. While translating simple texts aimed at non-professionals, however, simplified language is required<sup>13</sup>. Table 5 provides several examples of specialized medical terms and gives their colloquial equivalents.

**Table 5.** Specialized vs colloquial terms

Polish term	Specialized English	Colloquial English
jelita	Intestines	guts
drobnoustroje	Microorganisms	bugs
ospa prawdziwa	Variola	smallpox
ospa wietrzna	Varicella	chickenpox
krwotok	Haemorrhage	bleeding
staw	Articulation	joint
pokrzywka	urticaria / hives	nettle rash

While translating from Polish into English the translator must avoid using colloquial expressions, which may be inappropriate in official translation. The above examples of errors indicate simplification, when the translator reduces complexity of language. Especially *smallpox*, *chickenpox* are commonly used instead of their specialized equivalents. It is important to mention, that in some cases more

<sup>13</sup> Sin Wai Chan: *A Dictionary of Translation Technology*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong 2004. P. 64.

informal terms may be used, for example in Patient Information Leaflet (PIL). If a word exists in general English and is used by patients who may not know its specialized equivalent (e.g. *chickenpox* – *varicella*), the translator should use the general term in PIL. While translating official documents, scientific research etc., the specialized term must be used<sup>14</sup>. The word *bleeding* has not only colloquial, but also a more general meaning. It has a universal use, whilst specific types of bleeding can only occur in a particular context. The word *haemorrhage* subsequently can be divided into specific types of disorder, like *epistaxis* (haemorrhage from the nose) or *gastrorrhagia* (bleeding from the stomach). In these cases, using only the term *haemorrhage* would be a simplification.

## 7. Problems with spelling

There is a significant group of words which may be confused due to similar spelling. The difference is sometimes very small – usually one letter changes and the meaning is different. Therefore translators should make sure that they checked carefully spelling to avoid such mistakes. There are examples of two problematic pairs of words are shown in Table 6.

**Table 6.** Words of similar spelling

English term	Translation
Chlorine	chlor
Chloride	chlorek
Lactose	laktoza
Lactase	laktaza

Translators must be very careful and do not overlook the spelling differences because it would lead to mistranslation. *Chlorine* is a chemical element whereas *chloride* is a compound. *Lactase* is an enzyme produced in the digestive system whilst *lactose* is a disaccharide sugar derived from glucose and galactose.

## 8. Legal regulations

The last group of potential difficulties while translating medical text is connected with the European Medicines Agency regulations<sup>15</sup>. Table 7 shows selected terms

<sup>14</sup> Jensen, M.N.(2011): *Medical translation for the lay receiver: Who are the experts?*

<sup>15</sup> Source:[http://www.ema.europa.eu/ema/index.jsp?curl=pages/document\\_library/document\\_listing/document\\_listing\\_000312.jsp&mid=WC0b01ac05807a4177](http://www.ema.europa.eu/ema/index.jsp?curl=pages/document_library/document_listing/document_listing_000312.jsp&mid=WC0b01ac05807a4177) [accessed on 23.05.2014].

and phrases which have only one correct translation accepted by the Agency juxtaposed with possible mistakes.

**Table 7.** Examples of translation recommended by EMA

English term/ phrase	Correct translation	Possible incorrect translations
package leaflet	ulotka dołączona do opakowania	zapakowana ulotka / ulotka w opakowaniu / informacja w opakowaniu
incompatibilities	niezgodności farmaceutyczne	niezgodności / niekompatybilności
general classification for supply	kategoria dostępności	ogólna klasyfikacja dostawy

In the cases above, there is no space for translators' creativity as the terms have to be translated in a certain way. Translators are obliged to follow the EMA regulations thoroughly.

## 9. Conclusions

Translating medical texts is a great challenge. Medical translation belongs to a prominent group of technical translation. It is one of the most difficult translations and requires excellent knowledge of English as well as very good knowledge of medical terminology and medicine in general. The best translator is a person educated in both English and medicine. However, there are only a few such people in Poland and it is obvious that they cannot meet the demand created by growing pharmaceutical and medical market. Therefore non-professional translators should cooperate with medical professionals in order to avoid mistakes, which may be disastrous. One should bear in mind that rendering medical texts it is often more than just translating words from one into another language; it is working with terms concerning someone's health and even life. The translator must be aware of complexity of medical translation and take into consideration all areas of difficulties. It is also necessary to adhere to formal rules and regulations, as making mistakes in medical translation may lead to serious consequences.

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