



Bridging the Channel



Stéphane Barrier at Primoscrib addresses the problems and challenges posed by French-English medical translation

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Without a clear understanding of the subject matter, translation is impossible. With this in mind, the medical domain is possibly one of the hardest speciality fields to get to grips with. Therefore, it is easy to imagine that only doctors are qualified to do medical translations. However, this is a misconception. Firstly, it is rare to find a doctor who is prepared to hang up their stethoscope in exchange for a dictionary. Secondly, even if you could find a willing candidate, they would need to learn the numerous traps faced during the process of translation.

SAME WORDS, DIFFERENT MEANINGS

'Faux amis', literally 'false friends', refers to some of the more pernicious anglicisms that are often overlooked by less fastidious translators. These are terms that sound very similar in both French and English but that have a very different meaning. The translation of 'traitement énergétique' is certainly not 'energetic treatment', but rather 'aggressive treatment'. 'Actuel' does not mean 'actual', but 'current' – for example, 'les connaissances actuelles' would translate as 'current knowledge'. An 'injure' is not an 'injury' but an insult. 'Abnormality' would not translate as 'anormalité', it would be 'anomalie'. To confuse the issue further, 'anomaly' would also translate as 'anomalie', despite the fact that 'abnormality' and 'anomaly' have very different meanings in English. The latter is a good example of the broader vocabulary of the English language compared to French – there are an extra 150 pages in the English section of Harrap's shorter French-English dictionary compared with the French section. Other terms that often give rise to confusion are 'urètre' and 'uretère', which translate as 'urethra' and 'ureter' respectively.

Sentence structure is quite an art in the idiosyncratic English language, and grammatical subtlety is overlooked by most authors. In English it is not uncommon to juxtapose different elements of a phrase without using prepositions to explain their relationship. The author expects the reader to make the appropriate connection. Medical English is no exception. Let us take the following statement as an example: 'partially purified beta-lactamase preparations'. What has been purified? The preparations or the beta-lactamase? A more correct version would read 'preparations of partially purified beta-lactamase', or 'partially purified preparations of beta-lactamase', thus leaving no room for ambiguity.

One could also cite the difficulties associated with English syntax, notably the use of adjectives that relate to two or more nouns. Although the grammatical rules are clear, they are often overlooked by authors who expect their readers to make an educated guess, thus seriously complicating the work of the translator. Take, for example, 'The drug's side effects include mild azotemia and proteinuria'; here the reader can justifiably assume that 'mild' relates to both azotemia and proteinuria, whereas the author may have been trying to say that 'the side effects of the drug include proteinuria and mild azotemia'. Such 'errors' take on an even greater importance when an article is to be translated; adding a third noun to the above example gives us at least three options: 'the side effects of the drug include mild azotemia and proteinuria, and thrombocytopenia'; '...mild azotemia, proteinuria, and thrombocytopenia'; or '...proteinuria, thrombocytopenia, and mild azotemia'.

One also needs to look out for terms that appear very similar but do not have the same meaning, or are used in very different contexts. For example, 'mortality rate' and 'lethality rate'. The first refers to the entire population of a country, whilst the second refers to the population that is affected by the disease in question. Although the adjectives 'mortal', 'lethal', and 'fatal' are synonymous in everyday English, this synonymy would be incorrect in a medical text.

The transformation of some English or French terms into adjectives is very straightforward: 'bacterial resistance' translates as 'résistance d'une bactérie' or 'résistance bactérienne'. However, as with all good rules there are many exceptions: 'skeletal muscles' should not be translated as 'muscles squelettiques', but rather 'muscles du squelette'!

