



Hits and misses: Translating in a world of error

By Gabi Berghammer

*Many critics, no defenders,
translators have but two regrets:
when we hit, no one remembers,
when we miss, no one forgets.*

Anonymous

Whether pharmaceutical drug, medical device, or software application—translation of the documentation shipping with a product is often seen as merely yet another duty to be fulfilled before a product can be introduced to a particular market. For the clinician, patient, or software user at the far end of the manufacturing chain, a native-language document may be the only door providing access to the features of a drug or product. European lawmakers have taken account of this by stipulating that products manufactured in the EU have by law to be supplied with instructions translated into the respective markets' official languages. On the international or diplomatic stage, failure to show foreign-language linguistic sensitivity can cause anything from political distress—to a smile. Here's a couple of misses that have hit the press.

When babel meets medicine

Cemented or uncemented: mistranslation or missing translation?

The importance of translated product labelling is highlighted by a much publicised case from Berlin, where 47 patients having undergone knee replacement in 2006 and 2007 had to undergo re-operation because physicians had implanted the knee prostheses without applying the necessary bone cement [1].

The manufacturer had shipped the device without German instructions for use. As a result, prostheses designed to be implanted using bone cement were mistaken for prostheses not requiring cementing. Because the English phrase 'non-modular cemented' on the package had been taken to mean 'not requiring cementing', hospital staff had sorted the cemented prostheses into the shelf for cement-free prostheses.

The error was not noticed until the US manufacturer started shipping the product with red and blue German-language stickers on the outer carton. The problem with improperly implanted prostheses is that they fail to attach firmly, causing them to loosen and lead to discomfort or pain.

Missing translation leading to deaths due to x-ray overdose

A similar incident is reported from France, where an error in translating English instructions for the use of software is thought to have led to the death of 3 patients following an overdose of x-ray radiation at a hospital in Lorraine [2].

The errors occurred in the treatment of 23 men suffering from prostate cancer. The deaths of three of the four patients who passed away were linked to the error. According to the government report, the other 19 patients suffered complications of varying degrees as a result of the overdose.

It looks as if there was no French version of an English manual for an x-ray machine available, and the staff made an error by misusing the software—presumably the software that controlled the dosage. As a result, 23 patients received too much radiation, and three died. Exactly where the translation error took place is not clear.

Correct product labelling—as important a safety issue as sterilization

Correct and readily understandable instructions for drugs or medical devices may be as crucial a safety issue as sterilization. For products marketed world-wide, this places enormous demands on translation providers, often having to deliver translations into up to 22 or more different languages.

Yet, translation may itself be a source of error or confusion. Crimson Life Sciences recently presented the results of a 2-year audit survey carried out to measure the risk associated with the translation of product labels in the medical and in vitro diagnostic device industries [3]. Their analysis, covering 21 languages, dozens of audits, and more than a million translated words, found that the rate of serious translation errors—errors that may result in patient harm—was 400% higher than the serious-error rate associated with the current industry best practice.

Best practice in this survey was defined by Crimson's translation risk management process. It is based on the only standard so far available that deals with translation quality (i.e., the SAE J2450 originating in the automotive industry) and a proprietary QA methodology, purportedly reducing the risk of serious translation errors by over 60% versus standard processes.

Postponing marketing approval for poorly translated SPCs

Concerns regarding translation quality have also been voiced by the Danish Medicines Agency (DKMA), saying it had become so tired of poor translations of medicines instructions that it was threatening to postpone marketing approval for drugs. A 2007 statement by the DKMA said that the Agency had informed industry that they were not at all satisfied with the quality of the translations presented to them and that they would prepare to publish examples of bad translations on their web site [4]. This was indeed done, without, however, disclosing the companies or drugs in question.

Translating in a world of error

“In some cases”, the Agency said, “it is just a matter of poor language and awkward phrasing.” In others, however, the translators completely changed the meaning of the text, something DKMA feared may affect patient safety.

To combat the problem, DKMA has told companies to use a “person qualified in Danish medical terminology”. The medicines regulator also said that “From now on we intend to return proposed SPC translations to the applicant in case the quality is deemed substandard, i.e., if too many errors and mistranslations are found. Further processing to prepare for granting the marketing authorisation will be put on hold until an acceptable translation has been received.”

Sport unites the world—if it weren't, for those linguistic nuances...

While translation error in medicine can have grave consequences on patient health or delay marketing authorizations, it can cause serious disharmony in the international arena.

Translation error cost Cuba the use of their top pitchers

A translation error of the World Baseball Classic's rules cost the Cuban team the use of two of its top pitchers [5]. The Cuban team had received an English-Spanish courtesy translation of the tournament's rules. According to the translation, no reliever could pitch the day after throwing “mas que treinta”—more than 30—pitches. What the translation should have said is “treinta o mas”—30 or more. Pitch limits are designed primarily to protect valuable players under contract to major league teams.

Acting on these words, Cuba's manager withdrew two of his top pitchers from the game against Japan after throwing exactly 30 pitches, clearly because he wanted to have them available for next day's game against Mexico. It was only 3 hours before the game against Mexico that he found out that his stars were ineligible to pitch—even though he had been given incorrect information.

The removal of these two top relievers after exactly 30 pitches was immediately surprising, but tournament officials did not learn that Cuba had been misinformed until shortly before the Mexico match. An official pointed out that a note in the Spanish translation warned that this was not the official rules and that teams are supposed to refer to the official, English-language, rules when making a decision.

With the World Baseball Classic's whole purpose being to bring together teams speaking different languages, this incident may not exactly be poised to improving understanding between peoples and cultures.

Thank God the cold war's over...



photo: Sabine Gebele, taken at the Africa festival in Würzburg, Germany [6]

Hillary Clinton pushes the wrong button

It was supposed to be a cheerful reference to US Vice President Joe Biden's recent remark that the new US administration wanted to ‘reset’ ties with Russia after years of tension [7].

However, efforts to close the rift got off to an unfavourable start as US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met in Geneva earlier this year. Mrs Clinton presented to her Russian counterpart a mock ‘reset’ button as a gift, symbolising US hopes for better US-Russian relations.

Hillary Clinton assured Sergei Lavrov that her staff had “worked hard” to ensure the Russian translation on the reset button was accurate. According to a smiling Mr Lavrov, however, the word on the button, ‘peregruzka’, meant ‘overloaded’ or ‘overcharged’, rather than ‘reset’.

Polish for policemen

Ireland's most careless driver of Polish descent

Finally, there are those cross-cultural gaffes which, luckily, don't do any harm—but are good for a chuckle.

Police in the Irish Republic finally managed to catch the country's most careless driver. He had been wanted from Cork to Cavan after amassing countless speeding tickets and parking fines [8]. However, every time the serial offender—a man of Polish descent and, thus, member of Ireland's second largest immigrant population—was stopped, he managed to evade justice by giving a different address.

Until, one day, his cover was blown. It was discovered that the man the entire Irish police corps had been looking for—a Mr Prawo Jazdy—wasn't exactly the sort of criminal they had suspected him to be. Prawo Jazdy was not the first and last name on the driving licence—Prawo Jazdy is Polish for ‘driving licence’.

Finally noticing the error, police checked to see how many times officers had made this mistake. They found that the system had created Prawo Jazdy as a person with over 50 identities. The mistake was corrected immediately by circulating a memo throughout the Irish police force—who are now cognizant of a least two words of Polish.

The long and short of it

Don't save money on translations.

Gabi Berghammer

gabi@the-text-clinic.com

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