

The Art of Back Translation

WHITE PAPER

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Introduction

Quality in translation is hugely important, but within the life sciences industry, incorrect translations can literally be life threatening. Even the most minor mistranslations can put patients at risk, so it's imperative that translations are performed correctly the first time. The usual translation quality assurance steps – while comprehensive – need to be supplemented with something more: back-translation.

What is Back Translation?

When it comes to clinical labeling, back-translation – the process of taking a translated text and rendering it back into its source language in order to check its meaning – is an important step prior to the global launch of any medicine, medical device, or accompanying directions and manuals. This quality assurance method doubly ensures the translation's accuracy and those operating in the life sciences field should always request it, even if they have their own in-country review support. The aim of the process – sometimes referred to as translation validation – is simple: allow the client to verify the text's accuracy.

Due to the nature of language – its idiomatic expressions, grammatical twists and turns, and unspoken cultural underpinnings – back-translated text will never be exactly the same as the original, but it's exceptionally useful for identifying errors and sources of confusion that might arise. Whereas usual translations require a comparatively artful approach to capture not only the meaning, but also the feeling of the language, back-translations are performed as literally as possible in order to express the exact meaning of the translation. Nuances of grammar and culture are thus brought to the fore, making the slightest inaccuracy or possible misinterpretation clearly visible.

Who Performs Back Translation?

Who performs the back-translation is also crucial. These projects should always be car-

ried out by a subject matter expert (SME) who has native fluency in the target language, the ideal candidate should be someone who specializes in the field and has done similar work in the past, but they must not have been involved with the original translation project. Furthermore, the back-translator should complete the task without the use of reference materials or the original source. This guarantees an unbiased, accurate back-translation.

The Details Matter

The truth is, even the simplest, most innocuous statements can take on different meanings when translated. For example, translate the phrase "I like turtles," into Chinese, using Google Translate. Now copy the Chinese text and translate it back into English. What comes out? "I like the tortoise." It's easy to see how a slight distinction like this in such a simple sentence could mean major dissimilarities in longer texts. Slight differences like this might amount to very little in a casual conversation, but when it comes to the life sciences industry, the devil is in the detail.

In the United States, both English and Spanish are widely spoken, but not everyone is bilingual, much less a translator. Take, for example, the word "intoxicado." In Spanish it can mean "intoxicated" or "poisoned," and can include anything from drug or alcohol intoxication to food poisoning or accidental ingestion of arsenic or mercury. With so many meanings, the importance of the correct translation for medical purposes is obvious. Similarly, the word "impair" interpreted for Spanish speakers could be translated as 'afectar.' If this word were then back-translated, it would be translated as 'to affect.' Literally, 'to affect' means 'to influence, to have an impact on' whereas 'to impair' means 'to worsen, to damage, to weaken.' Back-translation serves as the ultimate double-check and – provided it's carried out – mistakes like this can be spotted and the original translation re-worked.



But it takes time. Back-translation projects increase reviewer workloads and can make deadlines terribly hard to meet. That's why preparation is so important for translation projects in the medical field. There should be plenty of time allocated for forward- and back-translation, reviews, and dealing with the unexpected. Products can then be released on time and to necessarily exacting standards, thereby protecting both the life sciences industry and the people they serve.

Do You Need It?

Good translations should always be clear, precise, culturally appropriate, and handled correctly for each target language audience, but good translations in the medical and healthcare fields need to go further. It may not be necessary for all content, but clients at CSOFT are strongly advised to perform back-translation as an additional step in their usual QA process for high-risk documentation such as texts relating to medications, clinical trials, patient wellbeing, and medical devices. This ensures the highest level of accuracy and thus, safety. It may take more time and money, but in this industry, it is always best to be safe rather than sorry.

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