"With every day and from both sides of my intelligence, the moral and intellectual, I thus drew steadily to that truth by whose partial discovery I have been doomed to such a dreadful shipwreck: that man is not truly one, but truly two." (Robert Louis Stevenson, 1886).

Unlike Don Draper, the fictitious creative director of the Manhattan advertising firm Sterling Cooper on Mad Men, you probably have no creative team, no focus group, and no marketing miracle workers at your beck and call. Welcome to the world of medical marketing translation—a veritable jungle of multisyllabic pharmacological buzzwords, 140-character limits, and culturally opaque content. This is a challenging field for linguists, who must engage both right- and left-brain thinking to master the science of creating artful, engaging, and medically accurate copy. Translators must be prepared to draw on a broad skill set and walk the fine line between pharmacochemistry expert and marketing genius. The hurdles of terminology, linguistic mutation, and brand-specific proprietary terms present challenges at every turn.

What are some of these challenges? A closer look at a few real-life sample translations from medical marketing materials should provide valuable insight regarding the interlinguistic wordplay, language-specific tone and voice, production, and regulatory constraints involved in this type of translation.

Right Brain Meets Left Brain
The field of medical marketing has undergone rapid progression in recent years, metamorphosing into a patient-centric and technology-driven business with a more extensive global reach across multiple channels. For translators, this is a billion-dollar industry rife with budding opportunities, drivers, and “phar-merging” markets; however, it is also a specialization that requires linguists to marry technical expertise with inspired messaging. As with the titular characters of Robert Louis Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, translators in this area recognize that the primordial challenge is not just learning to look at two sides of a coin—the technical and the creative. Rather, it is developing a toolkit of creative fluency to ensure that the power, persuasion, and effectiveness of the end communication is married with its accuracy.

The Challenge: What Kind of Translator Are You?
Translating in the field of medical marketing is so very like and so very unlike translating for any other field of specialization. The essential challenges are threefold: 1) reading and understanding the source text, 2) transferring the source meaning, and 3) writing the target text. While conceptually simple, ultimately there is no right translation. Also, relying too heavily on the translation process is a self-inflicted barrier to developing a nuanced level of translation trans-
parency and a target text that is idiomatic and meaningful for the target audience.

In a marketing or end-customer-facing context, in particular, the strength of a translator’s competence is gauged by the deft ability to meet the goals of a specific communication by compensating for potential losses in meaning in the translation. For example, medical texts are overflowing with idioms and metaphors requiring translators to make upstream strategic decisions and downstream decisions concerning detail. Translators must decide whether to try to translate a term or find an equivalent idiomatic expression. They also need to recognize when such a “cheeky” translation approach is inappropriate or nonexistent in the language combination in which they are working. The ultimate question when developing a marketing mindset is: what kind of translator are you?

To answer this, it is essential to determine what characteristic best defines you as a translator. In his paper “Towards a Model of Translation Competence,” Stuart Campbell, professor emeritus at the University of Western Sydney, Australia, identifies four translator qualities that translators adopt when confronted with problems or constraints:

• **Risk-taking**: Translators stray from the literal and dare to explore translations that have the same marketing emotional effect (sentiment, outrage, joy, annoyance, etc.), but which are not literal or one-to-one translations.

• **Capitulating**: Translators maintain a conservative approach and opt for equivalent idioms, or a one-to-one “trans-explanation” of the source.

• **Prudent**: Translators take calculated risks, but pursue translations that will generate the most equivalent reaction in the target language.

• **Perseverant**: Translators attempt to stay as close to the source text at all costs as a mechanism to combat risk.

Where does the profile of the perfect translator fall? Clearly, this is a question of degrees and scope, although it is a worthwhile consideration for translators. It is especially pertinent for translators of medical marketing materials, who require a certain degree of self-awareness in order to acquire the mindset necessary in an environment where they are dealing with partial linguistic correspondence and divergent sociocultural norms.

**Building a Marketing Mindset**

Translating in the field of medical marketing requires the development of a very specific medical mindset that will allow the translator to generate not only accurate raw linguistic content, but content that is also aimed at bolstering the unique selling proposition of a product or service. Such content needs to expand the value offering without cannibalizing existing advertising campaigns (whether that be of your client or a competitor). There is a fine line between achieving dexterous self-awareness and creativity during the translation process and over-scrubbing a translation, stripping it of its ingenuity and creative impact.

For example, the essential skills of linguistic dexterity and creative wordsmithing required for success in this area of medical translation are illustrated by a 1999 headline from *The Economist*: “Asthma: Not to be sneezed at.” This wordplay, based on the English idiomatic expression “not to be sneezed at,” means something to be taken seriously. It is a rather simple pun, but one that does not necessarily travel so easily across linguistic borders, as it plays on both the literal and the idiomatic/metaphorical. While this title
translates easily into French, where a similar play on words can be dexterously executed—Asthme: il n’y a rien à éternuer (“nothing to be sneezed at”)—the equivalent Italian idiom, non sono pochi (“they are not small in number”)—fails to capture both the meaning and function of the English source. Thus, the required translator mindset lies in a gray area seesawing between technical skills and shades of poetic license.

Is This Untranslatable?

The language employed in medical marketing and patient-directed copy is a rich and vivid mixture of literary devices and language- and culture-specific references. It is one of the few genres of writing that is categorically intangible, as it is simultaneously concrete and sales-oriented, while still maintaining a certain abstraction, in order to provoke emotion. The question of the untranslatable arises when the translator is confronted with lacuna, or semantic lexical gaps, wherein the non-equivalence of the source and target terms becomes even more relevant than the notion of their equivalence. This is contrary to the example in Figure 1 on page 17—in which the notion of dur à avaler (“hard to swallow”) translates successfully on a linguistic, idiomatic, and visual level. These untranslatables are rather common in medical copy and sometimes metamorphose into impassable roadblocks in the development of an effective global campaign.

A closer examination of the different categories of untranslatables illustrates the types of obstacles faced when an equivalent translation based on pragmatic one-to-one linguistic equivalence fails to produce a meaningful and engaging rendering of the source term into the target term.

1. Interlinguistic Wordplay and Puns

In the previous examples, both the expressions and the functions of the source and target language demonstrated clear correspondence. Assuming that the translator has near-native competence in both the source and target languages, the transference of linguistic communication is simple and effective. However, cases of such easy transference of meaning are rather exceptional. A more common occurrence is when the literal and the figurative expressions leave a gaping abyss between the source and target languages. One such case is a 2001 advertisement by Merck for Singulair, an oral drug to control allergies, asthma, and rhinitis. The company employed the headline, “Cattails or cat tails. Try a different way to treat allergies.” (see Figure 2). In this example, the copy plays on the word “cat” with the objective of winning over consumers with a product offering protection for those suffering from allergies due to both indoor allergens (cat dander) and outdoor allergens (pollen). In this case, the content deals with cattails or Typha, although, in reality, these are only mildly allergic.
While this advertisement maintains a sense of formal equivalence, wherein the message itself is comprehensible in both the source and target languages, there is a lack of dynamic equivalence, wherein the equivalent effect of the pun on the word “cat” is lost in translation. Moreover, this gap in dynamic equivalence is reinforced further by the visual collateral used in the advertisement, showing the two allergens, which may potentially be uncircumventable, depending on the client’s attachment to the images in the ad.

Under such circumstances, the translator must make several decisions based on the constraints and specifications of the client, project, and source-target language combinations. Can the existing visual be scrapped and replaced with a more meaningful image that bolsters an equivalent, but not a literal pun on “cat” in the target-language? This would result in an effective advertisement employing the same technique of customer engagement, but the translation could be problematic in that it could fail to fall under an umbrella of a singular look and feel for a global advertising campaign. This is a particularly knotty conundrum in countries that prefer parallel bilingual advertisements, such as with English and Spanish in the U.S. or English and French in Canada, wherein the expectation is that the advertisements should hold up side by side seamlessly. Or, would the client prefer a more banal translation, reinforcing the notion of indoor versus outdoor allergies, leaving the wit of the original copy by the wayside?

2. Ad-Speak, Neologisms, and Buzzwords

The maze of translation possibilities continues to grow when taking into consideration the full toolbox employed by today’s Mad Men of medical marketing. Ad-speak, neologisms, and buzzwords saturate source copy in an attempt to keep the message relevant, exciting, and novel in the minds of consumers and prescribers. While the creation of new words and the renewal of the linguistic tissue is a completely natural phenomenon in the field of linguistics and precisely what keeps the linguistic organism fresh and full of vitality, it is often a point of difficulty in translation, particularly in cases of languages that are resistant to the evolution of language.

For example, how can “thrifier” (an HIV-positive person who remains healthy) be translated effectively without an extensive explanation? Or, what about “theranostic implants” (a combination of therapy and diagnostic)? The Spanish pastillero has an English equivalent of pill popper, but does not necessarily translate so idiomatically or culturally in all languages.

3. Brand-Specific Proprietary Terms

Most people are aware of the horrors of brand names that are either, at best, lost in translation, or worse, downright offensive. A prime example is Gerber baby food, with gerber meaning to vomit in French. (This is a bit too close to home in view of the product’s color and consistency). However, most companies have had their wrists slapped at this point and now conduct broad upstream market research to reject any unfortunate or inappropriate product names or taglines. In simpler terms, just because a product name or slogan has passed a linguistic screening regarding all of the things it is not—offensive, political, difficult to pronounce, etc.—does not mean that it is as linguistically rich or holds the same connotations in a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural context.

This lack of combined effect can leave translators high and dry when it comes to replicating the form, content, style, and image of a brand or slogan in another language or for another locale.

Conclusion

The exponential rise in global communication and the continued expansion of the medical and pharmaceutical industries have placed translators in a more visible and central role in facilitating and promoting medical communication. Translators must learn to balance simultaneously courage and discipline in order to translate, transcreate, and draft copy for medical marketing and promotional material. While good language, writing, and scientific qualifications are clearly an asset, experience, self-monitoring, and continued professional development mean translators need to take advantage of all of the tools at their disposal to keep up-to-date on market intelligence. At the same time, they need to stay abreast of pop culture phenomena and driving sociolinguistic forces in the various locales and countries for their language combination(s). Moreover, researching existing products and examining their market strategies, as well as investigating consumer behavior and trends, will provide greater insight during the translation process. Doing so will facilitate value-added translations that not only convey scientific messages, but also employ creativity and industry intelligence to strengthen the concerned product, service, or trial at every point of contact and exposure.

Notes

1. Stevenson, Robert L. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. (New York: Bantam, 1886), 65.

Additional Reading