

# Lost in translation?

**Lars Johan Materstvedt** discusses issues and challenges regarding the translation of scientific papers

In a previous issue of this journal this year, I reported on the work of the European Association for Palliative Care (EAPC) Ethics Task Force on Palliative Care and Euthanasia.<sup>1</sup> That group's paper was originally published in English.<sup>2</sup> As of today, there are translations in French, Italian, Hungarian, German, Greek and Finnish.

## First translations

First translations were a joint effort. Many individuals worked together – on an entirely voluntary basis – to translate the paper into another language, with one enthusiastic person taking the lead. I remember receiving a translation in which all corrections and suggestions were visible in the Word document. It looked like the colours of the rainbow – a true testimony to the fact that several people had done a job that is extremely valued both by the EAPC and our task force.

## The new EAPC translation policy

A number of issues arose over the procedures adopted for the translation of this paper, which subsequently reflected the need to revise the translation policy in its entirety. The author, who chaired this particular task force, and Professor David Clark, a member of the task force and the EAPC Board of Directors, worked together on this and have refined the rules of translation, which have been agreed by the EAPC Board. In effect, only papers translated in accordance with the new rules will be considered acceptable by the board, providing a standard of equity and reliability across translations. The revised policy highlights the need for conceptual equivalency in addition to word translation. The rules are as follows.<sup>3</sup>

The EAPC discourages ad hoc translation. Any 'unofficial' translation that may exist should be reported to the EAPC, which will then ask the relevant parties that it be withdrawn, and instead suggest a translation process in accordance with the one described here.

- Official translations should be organised in collaboration with the national associations that are collective members of the EAPC.
- The EAPC grants the right to publish translations in the scientific journals of the national associations, or similar.
- A PDF of the translation must always be provided for publication on the EAPC website.
- The EAPC will nominate the translator of the document.
- The Chair of the report will nominate a referee to check the translation.
- Referees' judgements would usually take precedence over those of translators.
- Both the translator and referee must be native speakers of the target translation language.
- The names of both the translator (and any people who have assisted the translator) and the referee must always be given in a footnote to any translation.
- In that footnote, the original English paper must also be referenced, with a hyperlink, to the full text or PDF version of the original, as well as to the task force's response to critics.
- The national association will, after both translator and referee have completed the translation, consult with the EAPC to facilitate translation back into English of all translations.
- Finally, after having supervised the work of translator and referee, and having checked their work against the translation, the Chair, together with the group of people he or she chooses to consult, must give approval before any publication can take place.

## Key points

- A number of issues arose over the procedures adopted for the translation of scientific papers, which subsequently reflected the need to revise the translation policy in its entirety.
- Only papers translated in accordance with the new rules established by the EAPC Board will be considered acceptable by the board, providing a standard of equity and reliability across translations.

# Guidelines

● It is anticipated that translators and referees will work on a voluntary basis. If this is not possible, the national associations will be asked to bear the costs of using an external service, or to provide a translator before commissioning the work.

It must also be noted that English remains the official language of the EAPC and all reports must be presented in English and approved by the board of the EAPC before any other translation process is undertaken.

Along the way, we also found that it would be helpful to publish a foreword with each translation. These forewords are written by the EAPC President and myself; four have been published.<sup>4-7</sup>

## When the understanding of concepts varies

In the translation of the paper, considerable additional work was required to ensure that meaning was not lost in the process, particularly where no direct word or concept translation was apparent.

An example of this is the key term, 'palliative care'. When we worked on the German translation, it soon became clear that there is no expression in German that would cover the exact meaning of palliative care. The closest seems to be 'palliativen Fürsorge'. However, this is traditionally understood as the kind of work nurses do. On the other hand, doctors are in the business of 'Palliativmedizin'.<sup>8</sup> The solution to the problem was to state that these two areas together comprise what is known internationally as palliative care. Thus, the English expression 'palliative care', in italics, is used throughout the German translation.

Another issue is that particular words and expressions may have quite different cultural and ethical connotations. For example, although we are used to thinking of palliative care as something very positive, in Italian the phrase actually has the opposite meaning. Privitera notes, 'In the Italian language, *palliativo* is used with the connotation of "unnecessary", "superfluous" and "useless".'<sup>9</sup>

Obviously, the word 'euthanasia' is highly value-laden. Think only of the so-called 'euthanasia clinics' that were established even before World War II. In our task force's conception, as well as in the Dutch sense, those medical facilities had nothing to do with euthanasia; they were about medical murder.<sup>10</sup> In our original paper in English, this message

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comes across clearly when we stress that euthanasia can only be voluntary.<sup>2</sup> At this point, then, it is absolutely crucial that concepts are used with great care in any translation. And here we faced problems: during the translation process, in the first version of one of the translations, there was a fundamental misrepresentation with regard to the exact meaning of euthanasia. This was discovered by the referee.

## The role of the referee

Our experience is that the work of referees is indispensable. All referees worked on a voluntary basis and we are extremely grateful for their contribution.

Six of the eight authors of our paper are physicians. So should the referee also be a physician? Sometimes he or she was, sometimes not, depending, among other things, upon what sort of people were available and willing to do the job. The advantages of being familiar with medicine in general, and palliative care in particular, seem obvious. But is such knowledge a prerequisite? I would answer in the negative. On two occasions, non-medical people performed excellent referee work. The Italian referee is a sociologist working at a university department of language, communication and

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cultural studies. The German referee is a philosopher also working at a university. A hallmark of both professions is a preoccupation with the meaning of words and with language, and we benefited much from this.

I myself understand German, and so was able, as Chair, to work more closely on the German translation than, for example, on the Greek or the Finnish translation. This is a natural limitation for anyone in charge of a translation process such as this: some languages one will understand fairly well, others will be completely (and literally) foreign. In the case of the native German referee, I was in a most fortunate position as he also speaks my own language, Norwegian, fluently. That really made the communication between us easier. In those instances when I had no understanding of the target translation language, everything was more dependent on the referee's judgement.

### Translations back into English

Back translation was mostly carried out by professional translators. This was a revealing step in the process. None of the 'new' English versions came back exactly like the original. Since languages are sometimes very different, and because the connotations of words may vary a lot, one cannot reasonably expect to end up with an identical version of the original.

However, I was amazed at how close to the original the back translations were. But there is a potential problem here to be aware of: due to the differences described, there is a risk that the back translation may be less precise than the original in places. This happened, so it was necessary to discuss it again with those who made the first translation into the target language. Indeed, there was much going back and forth to adjust the final translation, including repeated discussions with referees. Furthermore, referees may also come up with inappropriate suggestions and this is also a reason for getting back in touch with the original translators who might not be entirely happy with all the corrections made by referees. One rule states that, 'Referees' judgements would usually take precedence over those of translators'. However, 'usually' entails that it could be at the Chair's discretion to decide who gets the final word. There is also the possibility that the Chair, to quote another rule, 'after having supervised the work of translator and referee and having checked their work against

the translation', will agree with neither of them and will have a suggestion of his own.

### A scientific challenge

The translation of scientific papers is much more of a consuming activity than I imagined it would be. It takes time, and everyone involved in the process must be painstakingly accurate in what they do. Sometimes, finding the 'right' word will prove impossible and one will have to settle for second best. Attempts at bridging the gap between two languages may run into insurmountable obstacles deeply rooted in differences in culture. Anyone having learnt a foreign language has experienced that getting to know that language is, in a fundamental way, equivalent to getting to know a culture (as well as a history).

The challenge of finding the most appropriate translation is a scientific one. Language and concepts are building blocks of science: the more advanced the wording, and the more worked out and precise the concepts, the better the science is going to be. Hence, the importance of language cannot be overrated. It is the filter through which we perceive reality; the way we speak and write about the world reflects the way we see the world. Accordingly, reality is not always something that 'just is' in itself. Quite the contrary; often it is what we take it to be. That there are many ways of seeing the world will become apparent to anyone who becomes engaged in translation work.

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