

LINGUO-SEMANTIC PROBLEMS IN THE TRANSLATION OF MEDICAL TERMINOLOGY

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Annotation: This thesis examines the linguo-semantic challenges faced in translating medical terminology between languages. It analyzes the sources of semantic ambiguity, the role of context, and proposes strategies to ensure accuracy and clarity in cross-linguistic medical communication.

Keywords: medical terminology, translation, linguo-semantics, ambiguity, equivalence, context

In the era of rapid globalization and the internationalization of science, the translation of medical texts has become an essential part of the healthcare system. Medical professionals, researchers, and patients often encounter foreign medical literature or need to communicate across language barriers, making accurate translation a critical factor in ensuring effective treatment and patient safety (Pöchhacker, 2016). However, translating medical terminology presents unique linguo-semantic challenges due to the specificity, complexity, and rapidly evolving nature of medical language.

One of the core linguo-semantic problems in medical translation is polysemy, where a single term may have multiple meanings depending on the context. For example, the English word “discharge” can refer to a patient leaving the hospital, but it can also mean a secretion from the body. Without precise contextual clues, a literal translation might lead to misunderstandings with potentially harmful consequences (Gile, 2009). Similarly, synonyms and near-synonyms in medical terminology often do not have exact equivalents in the target language, which may cause semantic shifts and ambiguity during translation.

Another significant issue arises from differences in conceptual categorization between languages. While Western medical terminology is largely based on Greco-Latin roots, many languages have developed their own system of medical concepts or have borrowed terms with altered meanings. For example, terms like “hypertension” and “hypertonia” are often confused in translation, though they refer to distinct medical conditions. The semantic field of a medical term may thus differ across languages, resulting in partial equivalence or even mistranslation (Kocaman & Ulku, 2020).

Cultural factors also play an important role in the semantic interpretation of medical terms. Certain diseases or treatments may have no direct equivalent in another culture’s medical system, requiring translators to use descriptive translations or borrowings. For instance, the concept of “end-of-life care” in Western medicine does not always have a straightforward counterpart in other medical traditions, which can affect both terminology and patient expectations (Montgomery, 2000). Moreover, eponymous terms—those named after people, such as “Parkinson’s disease”—may be rendered differently in various languages, adding another layer of complexity.

Ambiguity in abbreviations and acronyms is another major challenge. Many medical abbreviations are not standardized internationally and may even have contradictory meanings in different languages. For example, “MS” in English can mean “multiple sclerosis” or “mitral stenosis,” while in other languages,

the same abbreviation might refer to unrelated conditions (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 2014). Without careful attention to context, such ambiguities can lead to serious clinical errors.

Contextual information is therefore indispensable in resolving semantic ambiguity during translation. Skilled medical translators rely on their understanding of both source and target languages, as well as subject-matter expertise, to interpret the intended meaning accurately. Techniques such as back-translation, consultation with subject experts, and the use of specialized medical dictionaries can help ensure the reliability and clarity of the translated text (Mancini, 2022).

Additionally, neologisms and rapidly evolving medical terminology present ongoing difficulties. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, introduced a plethora of new terms—such as “social distancing,” “flattening the curve,” and “long COVID”—which were quickly adopted worldwide but not always consistently rendered in different languages. Translators must keep pace with these changes and be aware of regional variations and language norms. In summary, the translation of medical terminology involves complex linguo-semantic challenges stemming from polysemy, conceptual differences, cultural nuances, abbreviations, and ongoing neologisms. The consequences of misinterpretation can be severe, ranging from confusion in patient care to legal and ethical implications. Therefore, medical translators must not only possess advanced linguistic skills but also demonstrate deep domain knowledge and intercultural competence.

To mitigate these issues, several strategies are recommended:

- Continuous professional development for translators, including specialized training in medical linguistics.
- Collaborative translation efforts, involving healthcare professionals and native speakers.
- The use of up-to-date, authoritative medical glossaries and databases.
- Context-sensitive translation workflows, with thorough editing and review stages.

As the demand for multilingual medical communication continues to grow, addressing linguo-semantic challenges in translation will remain a critical concern for global healthcare and medical science.

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