What Makes it Difficult to Translate English Medical Terms?

Olga Voika

Rīga Stradiņš University, Language Centre

Introduction. The topic of this research is very relevant due to mistakes observed in written translation of medical documents and medically-related texts. Many important issues must be taken into consideration in case of translation of medical terms; general knowledge of medicine and precise specific medical terminology is required. Greek and Latin combining terms are of outmost importance; therefore, lack of knowledge may lead to inappropriate use of the term. Mistakes can easily occur due to similar outlook; the word may contain similar Latin-Greek combining form and can be wrongly translated. Difference in both spelling of medical terms and meaning of some of them in British and American language, as well as use of eponyms in medical lexicon make medical translation complicated and challenging.

Aim, Materials and Methods. The aim of this article was to analyse common mistakes encountered while translating medical documents, medically-related texts and student translations.

Parallel texts and medical documents in Latvian and English, as well as student sentence translations were used, common mistakes were revealed, categorised and analysed. Discourse analysis and qualitative analysis of medical terminology were implemented.

Results. The present research helped reveal and categorise common mistakes in translation of medical documents. Mistakes mostly occur due to lack of knowledge of medicine in general and medical terminology in particular, leading to the use of inappropriate, inconsistent and sometimes radiculous terms in both translations of medical documents and medically-related papers. Translation of certain sentences done by students showed typical mistakes mostly due to lack of knowledge of both grammar and medical terms. Terms from both British and American English were inconsistently simultaneously used in one text by a translator. The eponyms appear to be misleading (difficult to understand, remember, transcribe, and sometimes pronounce).

Conclusions. In medical translation every word is very meaningful, therefore, a person – translator should be very knowledgeable, precise and accurate due to very serious consequences an error may lead to.

AIX