

Gained in translation

Communication at the multilingual crossroads

Sometimes, translation takes place not between different languages but between varieties of one and the same language. Thus, a patient calling up her doctor to find out about the results of her autopsy is most likely wanting to know about her biopsy results. Or a patient planning a trip to Africa may ask to be vaccinated for fear of being stung by a mephistopheles when what he actually means is anopheles. For translators, interpreters, and healthcare professionals working in settings involving Spanish as one of their working languages, help has arrived. Fernando Navarro, physician and medical translator from Salamanca,

Spain, has compiled an amazing collection of medical malapropisms—terms occasionally misspoken by patients—and has translated them into proper medical terms.

At other times, translation does not take place at all—a potential cause of serious harm, as the series of case reports on both missing translations and mistranslations shows. In human communication, fortunately, there's more hits than misses. But it's the misses that remind us that communication is never fail-safe.

Gabi Berghammer

gabi@the-text-clinic.com



Patientspeak: A Spanish-English glossary of lay medical malapropisms—Part 1

by Fernando A. Navarro

Medical language is so extraordinarily complex that not even physicians always use it properly. It's not unusual, for instance, for specialists with many years of experience to misspell certain technical terms (e.g., *hydroxycobalamin* instead of *hydroxocobalamin*, *Propionibacterium* instead of *Propionibacterium*, *antibrachium* instead of *antebrachium*, *cachetic* instead of *cachectic*, *hypercapnea* instead of *hypercapnia*, *turalemia* instead of *tularemia*) or to confound similar words or notions (e.g., *keratocyte* and *keratinocyte*, *molality* and *molarity*, *creatinine* and *creatine*, *thyroxine* and *tyrosine*, *cystine* and *cysteine*).

With even doctors often misusing their own specialized language, it is hardly surprising that malapropisms should be common among patients with scant formal education when attempting to pronounce technical terms they have never seen in writing and only heard a time or two from their GP. Such malapropisms do not, however, normally pose any particular difficulty in conversations between native speakers of the same language. For an experienced English-speaking physician, expressions such as *very coarse veins*, *ox vomit*, *electric lights*, *brown kitties*, *blood vile*, *Queen Ann* or *curly B lines*, for instance, can be readily identified with what the patient actually intended to say, i.e., *varicose veins*, *nux vomica*, *electrolytes*, *bronchitis*, *blood vial*, *quinine* or *Kerley B lines*, respectively.

The situation is much more complex, however, when two languages are involved, such as in interpretation services in

hospitals, emergency wards, healthcare facilities and surgeries. English-speaking physicians or interpreters may find it tremendously difficult to understand what Spanish-speaking patients mean by phrases such as *espina del rosal*, *dolor asiático*, *glóbulos vaginales*, *pólipo frenético* or *tiritas radiactivas*. The traditional absence of such malapropisms in dictionaries, lexicons or other typical reference materials, precisely because they are regarded to be incorrect, compounds that difficulty.

Such, at least, has been the situation to date. Now, however, *TWS* readers can draw from the extensive Spanish-English glossary, the first part covering the letters A–C has now been made available on the EMWA website at www.emwa.org/Journal-public.html. The entire glossary, which will gradually be completed in upcoming issues of *TWS*, will list nearly four thousand medical malapropisms frequently used by Spanish-speaking patients. Very simply structured, the glossary contains two types of terms, lemmata or headwords. A glimpse of the glossary is provided in Figure 1.

The **green headwords** or standard entries, set in boxes, that form the backbone of the glossary are correct terms or technical words often mispronounced by patients. Each headword in Spanish is followed by the usual English equivalent and, on a separate line preceded by the abbreviation *Mal.*, a list of the most common mispronunciations of the term in Spanish. Certain selected headword entries also contain the symbol ■, followed by a Spanish phrase illus-

Patientspeak: A Spanish-English glossary of lay medical malapropisms

<p>cataclismo = <i>cateterismo</i> ▶ Actual meaning: natural disaster.</p> <p>catalítica = <i>analítica</i> ▶ Actual meaning: catalytic.</p> <p>catanas = <i>cataratas</i> ▶ Actual meaning: katanas.</p> <p>cataratas: cataract. Mal.: <i>catanas, cazaratas, tataratas</i>. □ «Mi madre se opera de tataratas el mes que viene».</p> <p>catatarismo = <i>cateterismo</i></p> <p>cataterismo = <i>cateterismo</i></p> <p>catatónico, -ca: catatonic, catatonic. Mal.: <i>patatónico, -ca</i>.</p> <p>catecismo = <i>cateterismo</i> ▶ Actual meaning: catechism.</p> <p>cateclismo = <i>cateterismo</i></p> <p>catéter: catheter. Mal.: <i>cadete, cartéter, casquete, cateto</i>. □ «Le metieron un cadete hasta el corazón».</p> <p>cateterismo: catheterization. Mal.: <i>cafeterismo, cataclismo, catatarismo, cataterismo, catecismo, cateclismo, catetismo</i>. □ «Le van a hacer un cafeterismo pediátrico».</p> <p>catetismo = <i>cateterismo</i></p>	<p>cedular = <i>celular</i></p> <p>cefádrico, -ca 1 = <i>cefálico, -ca</i> 2 = <i>encefálico, -ca</i></p> <p>cefalea: headache. Mal.: <i>cefalia, cefalitis, encefalea</i>. • <i>encefalea idiopática</i> (idiopathic headache).</p> <p>cefalia = <i>cefalea</i></p> <p>cefálico, -ca 1 cephalic, head. Mal.: <i>cefádrico</i>. • <i>perimetro cefádrico</i> (head circumference). 2 = <i>encefálico, -ca</i></p> <p>cefalitis 1 = <i>cefalea</i> 2 = <i>encefalitis</i></p> <p>cefalorraquídeo, -a: cerebrospinal (fluid). Mal.: <i>cefaloterráqueo</i>. • <i>liquido cefaloterráqueo</i> (cerebrospinal fluid).</p> <p>cefaloterráqueo, -a = <i>cefalorraquídeo, -a</i></p> <p>cegar: to blind. Mal.: <i>ciegar, enciegar</i>.</p> <p>celebral = <i>cerebral</i></p> <p>celebrar = <i>cerebral</i> ▶ Actual meaning: to celebrate.</p>
--	---

Figure 1 Excerpt from the Spanish-English glossary of lay medical malapropisms
For a complete list, please go to www.emwa.org/Journal-public.html.

trating the use and meaning of the word in a broader context, along with one or several expressions, preceded by a ●, with examples of the malapropisms listed in the entry.

If a green headword is itself sometimes misused in medical contexts, the correct definition is followed by the term or terms for which it is mistaken, duly numbered with red numerals. Such is the case, for instance, of the word *laxante*, which patients may use properly to mean *laxative*, or as a malapropism for *lactante* (infant).

The **red headwords**, which account for the better part of the glossary, are medical malapropisms whose entries refer the reader directly to the correct Spanish term (where the English translation can be found): e.g., *oxinófilo* = *eosinófilo*. Many of these malapropisms are the result of widespread distortions, mispronunciations or mistaken association with technical or general terms with a similar spelling, phonetics or meaning, resulting in words either non-existent or nonsensical in Spanish. Others, by contrast, concur with words that do exist in the language with a meaning of their own; in such cases, the definition is not numbered, but given in a separate note preceded by a ▶. This same symbol is used to flag notes on usage or other relevant remarks. Examples would be the word *escarnio*, which actually means ‘derision’ or ‘ridicule’, but is a common medical malapropism for *escáner* (CT scan); *soltera* (single woman), in turn, may be heard as a malapropism for *solitaria* (pork tapeworm).

In addition to the above symbols, the glossary includes a few abbreviations for parts of speech or similar (*adj.*, adjective; *m.*, masculine noun; *f.*, feminine noun; *sgl.*, sin-

gular; *pl.*, plural) which are used when a distinction must be drawn between different meanings of the same word, e.g.: when used as an adjective, *profiláctico* means ‘prophylactic’ or ‘preventive’, while as a noun the same word means ‘condom’. A few other abbreviations whose meaning is more obvious may also be found in certain entries: *abbr.*, abbreviation; *coll.*, colloquial term; *US*, lexical or spelling variation used in America.

Inasmuch as patients’ use of medical jargon is primarily oral, this glossary will prove to be of particular assistance (I hope) for healthcare interpreters. But it may also be helpful for translators confronted with handwritten notes or patient diaries composed by people with no medical training, and perhaps more generally, for anyone drawn to the study of medical language and its usage.

Fernando A. Navarro

Physician and Medical Translator,
Cabrerizos, Salamanca, Spain
fernando.a.navarro@telefonica.net

Acknowledgement of translators

Translators are rarely mentioned in the acknowledgements sections of biomedical articles. An exception is the English edition of *Deutsches Arzteblatt International*, the Journal of the German Medical Association, which always names translators. For examples see <http://www.aerzteblatt.de/int/article.asp?src=heft&id=60459> and <http://www.aerzteblatt.de/int/article.asp?src=heft&id=60390>.