

## Gained in translation

### Science at the multilingual crossroads

In this issue's translation section, we learn how a Spanish biomedical journal—and its Spanish-to-English translators—deal with the challenge of making Spanish-language content available to an international audience. The editors of *Actas Dermo-Sifiliográficas* have committed themselves to continuing the journal's centenary tradition of publishing in the country's common vernacular language, Castilian. Since 2007, however, articles indexed in Medline have also been translated into English.

The case study by Iain Patten and Greg Morley is a best-practice example of a team of translators working together to produce high-quality output. What makes their approach stand out is the experienced project coordinators themselves not merely managing but being part of the translation team and all team members being able and willing to freely interact with each other.

Also, this case study impressively illustrates the powerful concept of a *lingua franca*: through English translation, a journal originally targeted to an exclusively Spanish-speaking readership becomes accessible not only to the Anglophone world but to specialists around the globe—from France to Japan, from Norway to India, from South Africa to Greenland.

*The Encyclopædia Britannica* defines translation as “a continuous concomitant of contact between two mutually incomprehensible tongues and one that does not lead either to suppression or extension of either” [1]. Indeed, one argument in favour of publishing research in authors' native languages rather than in English is to allow vernaculars to continue to develop as languages of modern science. Conversely, it is only fair to expect that the English translation be of high linguistic quality to make

sure that English, today spoken and written by more non-native than native speakers, does not itself fall prey to globalisation. The team-based approach described below appears to guarantee both.

“Language”, the afore quoted encyclopaedia tells us, is a system of conventional “symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. [...] Even between the languages of communities whose cultures are fairly closely allied, there is by no means a one-to-one relation of exact lexical equivalence between the items of their vocabularies” [2]. Should you now be searching for an example, look no further: Diana Epstein gives a taste of some of the linguistic idiosyncrasies of ‘Glaswegian’, which have even led to Glaswegian-to-English interpreters being in high demand.

We are also in this issue given the honour of the last of three visits by Señor y Señora Malaprop, whose lexical concoctions are again expertly transposed into proper Spanish by Fernando Navarro in the last of his three-part series on medical malapropisms.

Finally, there's an immensely reassuring bit on machine translation, proving once more that human translators will remain indispensable for some time to come. Overall, therefore, the Italian saying *Traduttore traditore*, “The translator is a traitor”, is only half true at best.

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#### References:

1. *Encyclopædia Britannica* Online <[www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/342377/lingua-franca](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/342377/lingua-franca)>, retrieved 29 October 2009.
2. *Encyclopædia Britannica* Online <[www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/329791/language](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/329791/language)>, retrieved 29 October 2009.



## Patientspeak: A Spanish-English glossary of lay medical malapropisms—Part 3

by *Fernando A. Navarro*

Malapropisms are common among patients with scant formal education when attempting to pronounce technical terms they have never seen in writing. Such malapropisms do not, however, normally pose any particular difficulty in conversations between native speakers of the same language. The experienced English-speaking physician will readily recognize in nonsense expressions such as *Low Overall*, *moral reflex*, *sick-as-hell anaemia*, *TV test* or *watery tension* a medically unsophisticated person's version of *Lo/Ovral*, *Moro reflex*, *sickle cell anaemia*, *TB test* or *water retention*, respectively.

The situation is much more complex when two languages are involved. English-speaking physicians or interpreters may find it extremely difficult to understand what Spanish-speaking patients mean by phrases such as *desarrollo ciclomotor*, *riesgo sanguíneo*, *tic cerebral*, *traca de tórax* or *vagina urinaria*.

Translators, interpreters, and healthcare professionals working in settings involving Spanish as one of their working languages can now draw from an extensive Spanish-English glossary which lists nearly four thousand medical malapropisms frequently used by Spanish-speaking patients. This glossary is designed to be easy to use so that readers can go straight to the word they want. Its structure, marks and style labels were explained in a previous article published in the June 2009 issue of *TWS* [18(2):149-150].

The third and final part of the glossary, covering the letters from N to Z, has now been made available on the EMWA website at [www.emwa.org/Journal-public.html](http://www.emwa.org/Journal-public.html).

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