



Challenges of bilingual publication—Translating a Spanish biomedical journal

by Iain Patten and Greg Morley



In many areas of medical science, the link between career progression and research output measured in terms of publication success inevitably places pressure on authors to publish in high-impact journals. While many countries have increased their investment in research, the results are often likely to be first communicated outside of that country and in a language that most of the population, investigators included, do not speak proficiently. While international communication of research generally benefits the larger scientific community, efforts are needed to ensure that this does not create a publications drain away from its original source. One solution is to raise the international profile of local journals, usually by gaining an impact factor or increasing it. Success in this endeavour requires local journals not only to reach a wider audience but also to succeed in attracting extensively cited articles from within their own community. Although some authors may choose to publish their best work in a local society journal out of loyalty, it seems self-evident that a larger number would follow their lead if those journals were to have a high impact and strong international reputation. Breaking the circle of limited international prestige that makes it difficult to attract the highest quality work is clearly a formidable task.

When seeking to strengthen their international profile, journals from non-English-speaking countries are faced with a choice—publish in English, the current lingua franca for scientific publication, or take a bilingual approach to gain access to a wider audience while continuing to support the local scientific and clinical language. Strong arguments have been made for the importance of retaining a local language for a country's scientific output [1], and this is perhaps most apparent in the case of the clinical sciences. Advances in treatment must filter back as quickly as possible to the clinic, where the working language is unlikely to be English. Furthermore, policy makers might reasonably expect that a country is not held back in reaping the benefit of its own research effort. Preventing non-English-speaking countries, particularly those in the developing world, from being handicapped by the need to access research published primarily in English is a question for global policy makers [2], but local scientific societies have the power to ensure that their own output reaches both local and international audiences quickly and effectively.

A case study in bilingual publication

In the case of Spain, although the country spends a lower proportion of its wealth on research and development

than many other European countries (1.27% of GDP in 2007 compared with 2.54% for Germany and 2.08% for France [3]), it still has a relatively large research community. This community is extended still further if we take into account Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America, which have both cultural and linguistic ties with Spain. Nevertheless, although Spain's scientific output has increased almost exponentially in the last 30 years, authors have largely favoured international English-language journals for publishing important research [4]. In an effort to compete, many Spanish journals have sought access to a wider scientific community by publishing their abstracts bilingually in English and Spanish, and many of these are listed on MEDLINE. More recently, however, some Spanish journals have introduced full-text translation of the articles destined to appear on MEDLINE. One such journal is *Actas Dermo-Sifiliográficas*, the official journal of the Spanish Academy of Dermatology and Venereology.

Actas Dermo-Sifiliográficas is currently celebrating its centenary year. It has been printed continuously since 1909, except for a brief pause during the Spanish Civil War, and is currently the primary dermatology publication in Spanish, attracting authors not only from Spain but also from Latin America. To increase the international profile of the journal, one of the stated aims of the editors is to obtain an impact factor [5], and at the beginning of 2007 they explored the possibility of English-language publication. Publishing solely in English was not considered an option, because aside from the cultural arguments outlined earlier for publishing in the native language, the editors were certainly not inclined to break with the journal's long and proud tradition of publication in Spanish. Bilingual Spanish-English publication was therefore necessary, the question now was how best to go about it.

Models for cover-to-cover translation

Evidently, bilingual publication requires cover-to-cover translation, or at least translation of those articles that are indexed in MEDLINE. This is not an easy task, and a number of different translation models, with varying degrees of complexity, have been used. Perhaps the simplest involves sending the articles to be translated by a single translator. While this approach may have certain benefits, for example uniformity of style and ease of contact between the journal and the translator, it is simply not feasible for larger journals. Even if an individual translator could handle the volume,

most freelance professionals would be wary of committing to such a large project with the consequence that almost all of their income would become reliant on a single client.

The volume of work would certainly not be a problem if the journal were sent to a translation agency, and this solution may be attractive to publishers because it allows translation to be seen as a ‘black box’ that requires no further action or interaction on their part. This black box may also be the source of problems, however. While the best agencies can reasonably be expected to review individual translations, poor translations—particularly of something as complex as a research article—may not be easy to salvage. Consequently, the final quality of the product is inevitably linked to the skills of the individual translators, and these may well vary according to availability. In Spain, many skilled and experienced medical translators have enough work from direct clients to mean that their availability for collaboration with agencies, which generally pay lower rates, can be sporadic at best. Even if an agency has access to a pool of top-quality translators, it may be difficult to maintain a strong, stable team over a long period.

But finding skilled and experienced translators is not the only challenge. Research articles are often highly complex texts that may be ambiguous or contain problems, such as inconsistencies or omissions, that have yet to be picked up in the publication process. Consequently, the only way to clarify the author’s intended meaning, or resolve errors that have slipped through the net prior to translation, may be through a query, either to the author directly or via the publisher. In many cases, agencies discourage contact between the translator and the end client, and the conditions are not conducive to the kind of dialogue required to address problems in unclear and sometimes imperfect texts.

A team-based model

An alternative approach, pioneered in different Spanish journals by Mary Ellen Kerans and Karen Shashok, has a central coordinator responsible for developing a translation team and, depending on the model used, for implementing quality control procedures [6]. Given the reputation for quality gained by journals that had previously used a team-based translation model, and also the success of those journals in achieving and improving their impact factors, the editors of *Actas Dermo-Sifiliográficas* placed their faith in such a model, with a dedicated team of freelance translators and initially two coordinators who would share responsibility for interacting directly with the journal and publisher and for overseeing quality control through revision. Bilingual publication has now been continuous since 2007, with the English translations appearing free online via MEDLINE soon after publication of the Spanish articles, which are available in print and online.

Two features distinguish translation models such as the one applied for bilingual publication of *Actas Dermo-Sifiliográficas*—teamwork and dialogue. A key role of

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the coordinator is to establish a reliable translation team. This is an ongoing process that extends well beyond recruitment and orientation, and may involve additional aspects such as establishing and maintaining systems for sharing translation memories and other resources such as corpora [7], all of which aim to raise the overall quality of the product. In addition to assigning texts to the most appropriate translator (according to preferences, experience, etc.), the coordinator usually also translates for the team and is therefore familiar with the challenges the other translators in the team may be faced with. Unlike the situation normally found when working with agencies, in this model translators gain a strong sense of belonging to a group with a common goal. Teamwork not only extends the available pool of knowledge but also makes the translators feel more empowered and, in our experience, more likely to take pride in their work. The team becomes the first port of call for addressing doubts, and in most cases, group queries are sufficient to resolve them. When further clarification is required, either the translator or the coordinator will query the author (using a tested format and protocol to maximise the chance of getting a useful answer while not offending the sensibilities of the authors). In this model, lines of communication are deliberately opened—between individual translators and others on the team, between the team and the author of the article, between the coordinator and the journal, etc.—at all times to provide opportunities to resolve doubts and improve the quality of the published article [6].

Revision—The lynchpin of the model

By far the most important area of dialogue in this model, however, is during translation revision, which is a defining feature of the approach. All translations are revised before the final version is returned to the publisher. This includes texts translated by the coordinator—in the case of *Actas Dermo-Sifiliográficas*, having more than one coordinator/reviser means that all texts can be treated similarly. Rather than representing a unidirectional quality control step, revision in this case is an ongoing dialogue and may involve multiple stages before a final version of the text is agreed. The first round of revision may throw up doubts that were not addressed at an earlier stage. If these are not resolved easily by reviser and translator, they can be discussed by the group or they may necessitate an author query. This process takes time, and it is preferable for the coordinator/reviser to receive the translation some time before the deadline to return it to the publisher. The production process must therefore be established in such a way that sufficiently long timelines are allowed for translation. After the first revision, the text is returned to the translator for comment. We believe this is an important step—the coordinator/reviser is not infallible and may wrongly edit what appears an unusual turn of phrase or word that, on the basis of the translator’s research, is actually the most correct rendering. Including translators in this revision loop also helps to make them feel more involved in the process, ➤

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- providing further general motivation to do top-quality work (see Box). These revision loops will continue until both coordinator and translator are happy with the final version of the text. They also represent an opportunity for the coordinator to act as a mentor to individual translators, especially those with less experience—an investment that will pay ample dividends over time.

Revision is of course not unique to this model and indeed is the cornerstone of the recently introduced EN15038 quality standard for translation [8]. However, in most situations, including EN15038, this extensive dialogue between translator and reviser is far less likely to occur.

Practical implications and challenges

While we believe that this system can deliver the highest-quality translations, it comes at a cost. The coordination and revision work can be demanding and needs to be paid for, thereby increasing the total cost of the project (though we also note that, contrary to an agency, no percentage of the overall cost goes to the ‘middle-man’ figure). Without sufficient remuneration, it may prove difficult to retain coordinators, detracting from the stability that is necessary for such a set-up to be viable. Coordinator ‘burn-out’ can be a problem, although sharing the burden, as we have done for *Actas Dermo-Sifiliográficas*, can help. Translators should also be well paid to reflect the high demands placed on them, as their task often extends beyond the normal remit of the translator.

It is not only the translation team that faces substantial demands, however. Bilingual publication is more than simple publication of translations. Just as acceptance of an article for publication in a monolingual journal is far from the only element required to produce a final, corrected and formatted version in print or online, there are many elements beyond translation per se that must be effected in the English component of a Spanish–English bilingual journal. An example is in the preparation of article proofs. The style applied in English will usually differ from that in the other language—in *Actas Dermo-Sifiliográficas*, for instance, the English version uses American Medical Association style. Consequently, if the same typesetters and production editors are used in both versions of the journal, it may be difficult to strictly differentiate between the style conventions used in the local- and English-language editions. To help avoid errors, it was agreed that translators should proofread their own translations (a privilege not often afforded to translators in other settings, but one that usually benefits the final product).

Publication processes are inevitably complex, and there are many points at which errors can be introduced. This is particularly the case, of course, when there are subtle stylistic differences between two versions of a bilingual publication. Consequently, the translation team, through the coordinator, tries to ensure that the publisher does not make any changes in the English version without prior consultation. But this requires a great deal of trust and flexibility on the part of both publisher and editors. Publishers

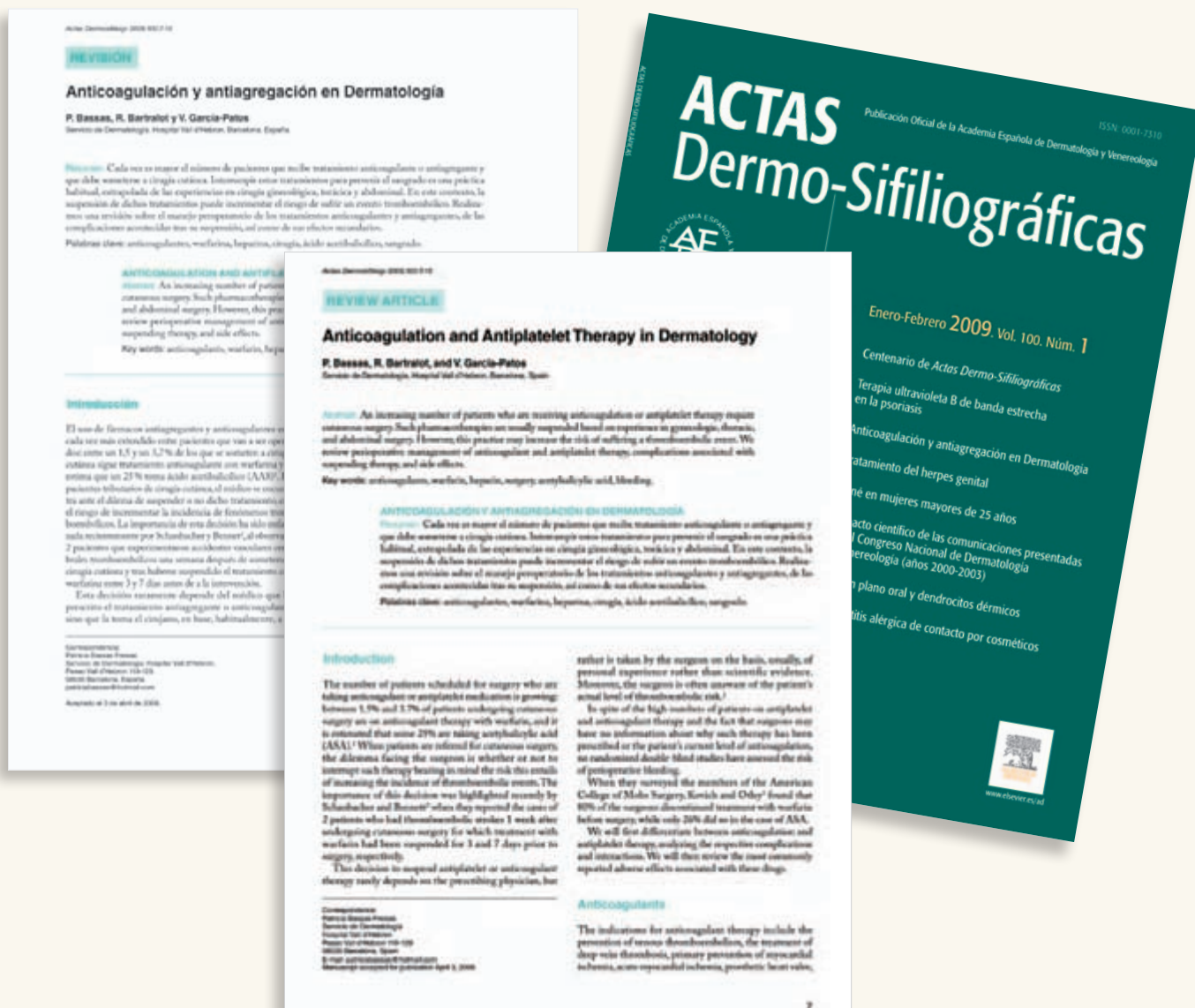
will naturally be reluctant to allow anyone to interfere with processes that they have taken time to establish and they will be concerned not to introduce additional costs as a result of errors or time spent negotiating changes. Editors will also wish to ensure that the translators have an adequate grasp of the material to guarantee that apparently beautiful translations are not plagued with scientific inaccuracies. Although this may appear self-evident, some editors have had experiences of poor translations and are understandably keen to oversee the process. Likewise, many translators also have experience of errors being introduced in good translations as a result of linguistic subtleties that may not have been fully understood by the person attempting to *correct* them. All these and other factors mean that developing trust between all parties is a key element in ensuring the success of a bilingual publication project. In the case of *Actas Dermo-Sifiliográficas*, we have been lucky to have had dedicated contacts with both the publisher and the editorial board. Discussing any potential issues as and when they arise is just one way to increase the likelihood of avoiding or resolving problems in a project of this type.

Bilingual publication—Beyond translation

As it enters its fourth year of bilingual publication, *Actas Dermo-Sifiliográficas* faces a new and interesting challenge. Following a publishing trend to make accepted articles available online as soon as possible, the translation team will no longer receive full issues of the journal in a single batch. Instead, articles will be received as and when they are available and translation timetables will not be so closely linked to a publication date. Although it remains to be seen how this will affect the translation process, it may provide an exciting opportunity for greater integration of the English and Spanish versions.

Bilingual publication is usually a two-tier process in which translation is seen as an additional step following the production of the original version in the local language. This is perhaps an understandable response to the problem created by adding a lengthy translation step into tight publication schedules. Rather than hold up publication in the original language, translations can follow as soon as possible after publication of the definitive original versions. However, this approach relies on the assumption that while the translation is dependent upon the original, the original is unaffected by the translation. Yet, the rigour required to achieve high-quality translations involves many of the same skills used in the traditional copyediting process (which has now all but disappeared from many publishing houses as a result of downward pressure on production costs). The translation team, who often read a text more closely than practically anyone else, may be ideally positioned to highlight errors in the original texts without any additional effort beyond that already required to produce a high-quality translation. For bilingual publication to be considered a truly valid model, however, errors should either be corrected in both languages or not at all. This requires that we either wait for both versions to be ready

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before finally going to print or risk the cost (financial and otherwise) of publishing errata.

Clearly the need for rapid publication must be balanced against the added value obtained from allowing the results of the translation process to feed back into the original articles. This requires careful negotiation of production schedules and processes. Some streamlining can be achieved by initiating translation while the finalised version of the source-language article is being laid out. However, there may be ways of improving the process further by shifting the conceptual focus towards a truly bilingual model, with translation as a central element. Technology is now becoming available, for instance, that will allow translators to work with the publication software used to lay out the articles for publication. This allows a formatted text provided by the publisher to be returned as a similarly formatted version in another language, thereby removing the need to typeset the translated articles from scratch. It remains to be seen whether such approaches could be applicable within the new production system to be used by

Actas Dermo-Sifiliográficas or whether greater integration of the Spanish and English versions will be possible. In principle, publication of the articles as *early online* versions could allow greater scope for ensuring parity between articles in both languages before the final version in Spanish goes to print in the event that any changes are necessary. However, we will have to see what the future holds.

Conclusions

Bilingual publication presents a number of challenges. Producing high-quality translations is necessarily time-consuming and costly and so may be considered a luxury by some. When publishers and editors decide which model they wish to use for translation, they must clearly consider how important it is to them that the translation be of the highest quality, and whether they can afford the time, money and effort involved. The availability of new technologies, whereby translators can hand in formatted and typeset documents, may help streamline the publication process and save on production costs. Ultimately, the ideal approach is to see bilingual publication as a single process

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- in which both versions carry equal weight and publication processes ensure that both of their needs are taken into consideration.

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Revision makes for quality texts and translation experiences

As a freelance translator and new member of the *Actas Dermo-Sifiliográficas* translation team, I was asked to deliver a 20-minute presentation on my experiences of revision processes with agencies and direct clients at the Mediterranean Editors and Translators Meeting (METM) in Split, Croatia, in September 2008.

I trained in-house as a translator and editor for the Inter-Press Service (IPS) in Montevideo, Uruguay, and have worked for various Latin American NGOs including UNICEF-TACRO over the last 15 years. Since my return to the UK in 2000 I have also worked with a selection of European translation agencies.

The following questions formed the basis of my presentation:

1. Do you know for sure that your work for agencies gets revised?
2. Do you as a translator get any feedback about this revision process?
3. Do you have the opportunity to dispute a correction you think is wrong?
4. Are comments constructive? (Would they help you to make a better translation next time, or is there a lack of explanation?)

I looked at each of my clients—in two groups as agencies and direct clients—and simply answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to each question on the basis of my experience and the documentation provided by each client. I then tabulated the outcomes and totted up the number of positive responses.

Only six out of a potential 32 responses were positive for the eight agencies, whereas all 20 potential responses were positive for the five direct clients. The most striking difference was with questions 3 and 4, where the

agencies provided no feedback except in the case of one direct error and one case where the agency allowed me to establish a direct working relationship with the client on my own initiative.

After a few years of working freelance for agencies I felt that I was largely left adrift, and the irregular workflow, low pay, tight deadlines, poor feedback and general insecurity discouraged me from pursuing further work with them. Meanwhile, direct clients tended to agree to more realistic deadlines, pay better and be willing to provide and accept professional feedback—all elements that form the basis of satisfying long-term working relationships.

My personal best case scenario has occurred with the *Actas Dermo-Sifiliográficas* project. All texts for translation are delivered with deadlines that allow time for thorough research of unknown concepts and terminology. We use the American Medical Association's style guide, our shared translation memory and a group internet dermatology searchroll (created by Iain Patten) to advise our choices, and any remaining doubts can generally be resolved by other members of the team—a group that includes medics, life-scientists and experienced professional translators.

Each text goes from the translator to the senior editor and back at least twice, allowing for respectful professional discussion of points of style and terminology. As a new medical translator I feel secure, supported and confident in my work. Many members of the team encounter opportunities for professional development on the project and in the group, and the end client receives a superior product as an outcome of our efforts.

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Original presentation available at
http://www.griffin-mason.com/pages/pub_art/revisions.pdf