Medical writing in English: The problem with Google Translate

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It cannot be denied that online translation is becoming increasingly sophisticated, and the use of tools available on the internet increasingly common. Online dictionaries sometimes include forums in which people can exchange information and ideas on equivalents and translations [1]. In particular, the capacity of Google Translate to respond to the needs of those seeking translations seems limitless. The attraction of such tools is clear. Much quicker than leafing through a dictionary, much cheaper than paying a professional translator, Google Translate appears to solve our problems and overcome the eternal language barrier. Its ability to translate not only from French into English but between 57 languages as of today, including Arabic, Chinese and Korean, has allowed it to spread widely. It is possible, for example, to translate between Italian and Spanish, or between Italian and Dutch. The sheer number of languages supported by Google Translate underlines the huge demand for this kind of service. Furthermore, it is probably used in a range of subjects and disciplines [2], although statistical data on Google Translate output are rare, and hard evidence on who exactly uses this service, why and in which countries, is scarce and probably inaccurate [3]. In the field of medical writing, where the ability to communicate effectively in English is paramount, Google Translate may be becoming an essential tool for some researchers. Dependence on this kind of service is inevitable for a society in which information is increasingly available at the press of a button. But what about the potential disadvantages? This paper will examine the drawbacks of Google Translate in its current form, and argues that no amount of technology can replace the services of a trained language professional.

Why Google Translate is used

In France, medical researchers wishing to become well known internationally need to be able to communicate in English. This is true not only for publications in international medical journals, but also for calls for projects, which often require a translation into English. In this context, Google...
Translate can be used to search for vocabulary, or to help translate whole sentences or even entire paragraphs.

**Drawbacks and comparisons with professional language services**

One of the issues with Google Translate is that it will never admit to not having an answer. It will always find a translation, whether the word typed in the source language exists or not. The potential for error thus becomes apparent, even for individual pieces of vocabulary. This is exacerbated by the fact that Google Translate is not necessarily sensitive to context. Although it may offer a range of possibilities for any particular word, it is necessary to choose the one which fits best in each specific case, and Google Translate cannot do this for us. The issue of context is particularly significant for full sentences. Google Translate cannot adapt a sentence to the individual requirements of a scientific researcher, which may result in numerous errors.

Indeed, translating full sentences using Google Translate is, even now, a risky business. Although Google has clearly worked on improving longer translations (by drawing on the expertise of volunteer translators, for example), accuracy is still an issue. Syntax inevitably differs between languages, whereas online translation services generally translate content word for word. A complicated or technical French sentence typed into Google Translate for translation into English can therefore come out riddled with mistakes, or worse, with text which does not make sense. For a researcher in a hurry to submit a study proposal for a call for projects, for instance, this is a problem indeed.

The effect of these issues on an entire document can be considerable. A long file involving technical or specialised subject matter translated using Google Translate may be hard to read, especially if no post-translation improvements are made to it prior to submission for a call for projects, for example. The writing style produced by an online translation tool is also unlikely to be suited to the requirements of a formal scientific document. In any case, style itself differs between languages, and translated content must be adapted to the target language and culture [4]. Furthermore, when a low standard of English is regularly produced in scientific documents and publications, low standards risk becoming generally more acceptable. It is then impossible to expect the English language skills of researchers whose mother tongue is not English to improve.

Quite apart from language problems and far more disturbingly, there is also the issue of confidentiality. It would appear that Google has the right to use the information typed into it to improve its service by making similar future translations more accurate [5,6]. Its access to potentially highly sensitive information is particularly awkward for researchers working on calls for projects or those wishing to submit patent applications. It is, however, only natural that researchers should question the advantages of paying a language professional for a translation when free online tools are so accessible and user-friendly. Professional translations are expensive, costing perhaps up to 20 centimes per word in France depending on language combination, type and length of text and the deadline, while proofreading costs are lower. Furthermore, translations of articles for publication should be given only to translators with experience of the style required by international journals. For researchers willing to write articles in English, drawing on a proofreading service before submission often makes a significant difference to linguistic quality. Although the work of a translator takes more time than entering text into Google Translate, a well-written document will ultimately save time for the researcher, thus offsetting the financial costs.

**Conclusion**

In an age of constant technological progress, Google Translate will no doubt continue to evolve and improve in the years to come. Of course, tools such as this are highly useful for researchers in France who struggle with English, but it is essential to be aware of its limitations in order to use it as effectively as possible. These include its inability to select the appropriate equivalent according to context, and its tendency to translate word for word. Its lack of sensitivity to syntax and idiomatic expressions inevitably produces flawed translations. Confidentiality issues must also be considered. It is therefore still preferable to draw on the services of a trained language professional when writing important scientific documents in English. Such services represent a much better guarantee of producing a high quality text, thereby saving time and maximising the chances of success in calls for projects and publications [7].

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**References**


