



Medical English for Portuguese family doctors: Beware of false friends and other traps in translation

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As we begin a new phase with a new editorial board of RPMGE, it may be helpful to reflect on some of the lessons learned during previous three-year term. The journal has applied for indexation in an international database, so additional efforts are being made to improve the quality of the journal. One aspect of quality improvement is the quality of English in the titles, abstracts and articles that we publish. This piece will summarize some of the lessons learned while editing recent submissions that may help authors with their efforts to write in this rich, puzzling, and frustrating language.

One deceptive and often humorous trap is called the false friend. Words that look and sound alike in Portuguese and English may have very different meanings. When authors write: “In this study we pretend to estimate the prevalence of hypertension”, one may guess that they have incorrectly translated the original Portuguese verb. “Pretende-se” does not mean pretend (fazer de conta). The sentence should say: “In this study we intend to estimate...”

Other famous examples of false friends are “constipação” (upper respiratory tract infection) and “constipation”. They are related, of course, because one is a blockage of the nose and the other is a blockage of the bowels. “Preservativo” (condom) used in contraception is not the same as “preservatives”, used in food. In the same way “discutir” (argue) does not mean discuss, “esquisito” (weird) does not mean exquisite, “letras” (lyrics) are not letters and a “novela” (soap opera) is not a novel. There are many good lists of false cognates on-line

that can help authors avoid embarrassing errors.ⁱ

Another trap is the use of automatic translators, also found on line. In the medical context, “utente” is not a wearer. It is a patient, user or client. (“Morte de utente” is not “death of the wearer”, as the authors of a recent conference abstract submitted for review tried to suggest.) A careful look at the title, text and key words of the original English articles quoted in their references can help authors ensure that the most important words in their submission have been translated correctly.

Verbose translations of Portuguese medical jargon have also provided a challenge for our editors. The KISS rule applies here. (Keep it Short and Simple.) It is not clear why some authors choose to write “pharmacologic therapeutic interventions in the paediatric age group” when they mean: “drugs for children”. Translators who are paid by the word (based on the Portuguese version) may profit from this, but this journal favours simple writing.

Another bad habit that we have encountered is the use of weasel words. The weasel is a sleek animal who can dig under fences and turn up anywhere on a farm, often doing damage along the way. So can these words. They do no good in scientific writing. Words like “globalmente” or “basicamente” mean nothing and take up space. We delete them in our editing of titles, abstracts and articles.

Some parts of speech are tricky for non-native speakers. The possessive case in English can be indicated by the use of apostrophe-s at the end of a word or by a prepositional phrase beginning with the word “of”. Terms like “recommendation’s strength” sound strange in English compared to the correct form “strength of recom-

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mentation". Authors are advised to show manuscripts to a native English speaker whenever possible before submission to avoid this.

The use of the different forms of the verbs "to be" and "to have" can be confusing for English speakers of Portuguese. A patient "is 65 years old" and does not "have 65 years". Another common error arising from this concept of age is the incorrect use of the phrase "patients with over 65 years" rather than "patients who are over 65".

It is hoped that readers will receive this piece in the light-hearted and supportive tone in which it was written. Members of the editorial board of RPMGF are proud that English is one of the three official languages of the journal. We make the effort to translate titles and abstracts of all our articles into English to help in the dis-

semination of our articles to the rest of the world. This will be especially important when we expand our forms of indexation. We are always ready to help our valued contributors to produce the highest quality journal that we can and will continue to edit your submissions with this in mind.

REFERENCES

1. False friends. Available at: <http://web.lettras.up.pt/egalvao/5543219-False-Friends-English-and-Portuguese.pdf> (accessed 04/22/2014).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author is a native English speaker and a member of the editorial board of RPMGF and has no conflict of interest in the publication of this editorial.

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