

# Gained in Translation

## Editorial



We often write articles to satisfy two states of mind: pleasure and curiosity. In my case, this means the curiosity to delve into some of the intricacies of translation on the one hand, and, on the other, the desire to work together with colleagues with whom I share a passion for the transfer of knowl-

edge through culture and time. Translation is involved in every level of knowledge production and distribution in medicine. It presents a wealth of opportunities to combine the insights of literary, historical, and cultural studies of science. Scott L Montgomery says in his 'Science in Translation'<sup>1</sup> that 'As the second oldest profession on the streets of authorship, it is generally conceived in fairly obvious terms, as a matter of rendering the words of one language into those of another, hopefully with little or no spillage of meaning'. Yet, this is more a description than a definition and it does not deal with the enormous complexity of the inevitable sharing of knowledge in this global and multi-lingual world we now live in.

The chance to run this section is a real opportunity and I am grateful to Gabrielle Berghammer who produced it for several years. This means that I am not starting from scratch – although it will not be easy to keep up with the quality of the articles

Gaby published; my thanks are also due to Medical Writing's Editor-in-Chief, Phil Leventhal, who kindly accepted my proposal to follow in Gaby's footsteps, and whose patience is a model of the editorial art.

My aim is to make this section a medium for open discussion among translators and writers interested in this field, as well as those using translation services, but I also envisage a written agora where we can exchange different and, maybe, amusing experiences. If you have anything you would like to contribute, please contact me at [laura.collada@ontranslation.it](mailto:laura.collada@ontranslation.it). You are warmly invited to share your knowledge and thoughts.

Our first article deals with a frequent dilemma we need to solve when addressing medical translations: whether to retain euphemisms in the original text or not. The issue is not that simple, because euphemisms are highly influenced by culture and, yes, we transfer culture through language and not only words. Enjoy the article!

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## 'Safe', 'safety', and 'potential risk': Examples of euphemisms used by the pharma industry

### *Euphemisms and political correctness*

What is a 'euphemism'? In this paper we have specifically avoided expressions such as 'politically correct' and 'political correctness' as these are, in our opinion too vague to be useful: for example, what does politics have to do with the fact that some writers may now use – or recommend the use of – the term 'differently-abled-people' instead of 'disabled', 'disabled people' or 'the handicapped'? These one-word or compound terms, labelled as politically correct, are

actually euphemisms. In all scientific or specific jargon and languages there are words that – by implicit or explicit agreement among speakers – are not spoken or written. We refer to these as taboo words, and any spokesperson – not always voluntarily – substitutes them with other words: words that form euphemisms.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary<sup>1</sup> defines 'euphemism' as follows:

1. the substitution of a mild or indirect expression for one thought to be offensive or blunt.
2. the expression so substituted.

Collins Dictionary,<sup>2</sup> as follows:

1. an inoffensive word or phrase substituted for one considered offensive or hurtful, esp one concerned with religion, sex, death, or excreta. Examples of euphemisms are *sleep with* for *have sexual intercourse with*; *departed for dead*; *relieve oneself* for *urinate*
2. the use of such inoffensive words or phrases

And the *Diccionario de la lengua española*, issued by the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE) (22<sup>nd</sup> edition)<sup>3</sup> defines 'euphemism' in its first meaning as:

1. Manifestación suave o decorosa de ideas cuya recta y franca expresión sería dura o malsonante. (Use of a gentle and polite expression of ideas instead of direct and rude wording).

*What do we mean with the euphemisms 'safe' and 'safety'?*

Many medical writers and translators may have noticed the increasingly frequent use of the words 'safe' and 'safety', either as words on their own or as part of compounds (such as 'safety evaluation', 'safe procedure', 'safety data'), particularly in texts written by pharma companies for investigators (clinical trial protocols, investigator's brochure), health authorities (Summary of Product Characteristics) or subjects and patients (patient information sheet and leaflet).

Unfortunately, in Spanish texts – in both original language texts and translations from English – we read the words 'seguro' and 'seguridad' too often. This is mainly because there is a tendency to translate in a mechanical and uncritical way, or in its worst form, to write in what some call 'Spanglish' when dealing with medical content. It is obviously one of the bad influences of having a universal and vehicular language for science.

That said, what does 'safe' mean exactly in the context of drug development? Does it mean it does not have any adverse effects? (Note we use the wording 'adverse effect' as a superordinate of 'side effect' or 'adverse reaction'). Does it mean that it has adverse effects, but that they are not frequent, or that they are also only minor? As is usual with euphemisms, 'safe' and 'safety' are vague, imprecise words that therefore act against clarity and precision, which should always be the principal objective of scientific language.

Using the word safe to describe any drug might therefore suggest that it does not have any side effects. Thus, not only have we used an imprecise word – this is also tantamount to deceptive

advertising if used when advertising the product to consumers.

There is no 'zero' risk in clinical medicine, which means that all diagnostic and therapeutic procedures entail risk. Thus, how can we speak of 'safe drugs'? Does this mean that the drug does not cause any risk for patients?

The *Diccionario de la lengua española* (22<sup>nd</sup> edition)<sup>3</sup> issued by the RAE states that the first meaning of 'safe' is (bolding from authors):

'Libre y exento de **todo peligro**, daño o riesgo'.  
(Free from danger, harm or risk).

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary<sup>1</sup> defines 'safe' in its first meaning as (bolding from authors):

'Not able or likely to be **hurt or harmed** in any way: not in danger'.

And Collins Dictionary,<sup>2</sup> defines it as follows:

1. 'affording security or protection from harm
2. (postpositive) free from danger
3. secure from risk; certain; sound'

In our opinion, the health authorities responsible for regulating the production, distribution and marketing of drugs, such as the Food and Drug Administration, the European Medicines Agency and the Spanish Agency of Medicines and Medical Devices should forbid the use of the terms 'safe' and 'safety' in texts targeting clinical trial subjects, investigators, patients, media, and their own staff, as, even in the best case scenario, their meaning is vague and inaccurate, and in the worst-case scenario, they constitute deceptive information.

*'Potential risk': Euphemism by softening of meaning*

Another euphemism very often used by the pharmaceutical industry is 'potential risk' – and its synonym, 'potential threat or danger'. In this case, it is a subtle euphemism, and therefore, difficult to detect: we consider it to be a euphemism because the adjective 'potential' softens the clearly negative meaning of the noun 'risk'.

We need to consider that the concept of 'risk' – and the same applies to 'threat' – already contains the idea of possibility or probability, and thus 'potential' is redundant. Something entails risk or not: it is not possible to have a 'potential' risk or a 'non-potential' risk. Furthermore, something may constitute a risk independent of the final outcome of the risk situation: someone driving while drunk may usually arrive at their destination safe and

sound, but this certainly does not mean that drinking and driving does not entail risk. In the same way, if sudden death has been associated with a drug in some patients, even if its incidence is very low, the risk of sudden death exists and may affect all patients who receive the drug. To talk about a potential risk of sudden death is therefore euphemistic. Additional use of the word 'potential' has the sole aim of reducing the absolute negative meaning of 'sudden death'. This lack of accuracy and clarity in the choice of words in a scientific text actually leads to deceptive information and deceptive advertising, which is even worse.

Other redundant and euphemistic wordings are 'This may be a risk', or 'It may be harmful' and, in general, all statements in which the verb 'may' is combined with words such as 'risk' or 'threat' – indeed, any statement where the 'blow' dealt by the main noun is softened by adjectival modification thus generating a euphemism. The most outstanding redundant and euphemistic statement in our type of text is 'There may be a potential risk of ...', which contains a triple redundancy. The most popular and completely uncritical Spanish translation '*Puede existir el riesgo potencial de (...)*' is just as bad, and often it even appears in Spanish original texts (not translated from English).

Far more frequent in Spanish is to use the adjective '*posible*' before the noun and not the anglicism '*potencial*' after the noun.<sup>4</sup> Thus, '*posibles efectos secundarios*', '*posibles secuelas de la enfermedad*', '*posibles complicaciones del posoperatorio*' are idiomatic, that is natural, Spanish wordings, and '*efectos secundarios potenciales*', '*secuelas potenciales de la enfermedad*' and '*complicaciones potenciales del posoperatorio*' are not. Note that in the same way, the Spanish equivalent of the English wording 'may be potential' –also redundant or euphemistic– obviously translates as '*poder*': '*A dosis elevadas, el fármaco puede producir* (or *produce en algunos casos*) *náuseas, vómitos y diarrea*', instead of '*A dosis elevadas, el fármaco tiene el potencial de producir náuseas, vómitos*

Table 1: Spanish translation of some English complex forms

English expressions	Spanish translation <sup>4</sup>
Safe drug	Medicamento inocuo; sin efectos adversos importantes
Food safety	Inocuidad de los alimentos
Preclinical safety	Toxicidad en animales; en voluntarios sanos
Safety event	Efecto secundario; reacción adversa
Safety profile	Toxicidad del medicamento; tolerabilidad del medicamento
Safety evaluation or assessment	Evaluación de la toxicidad; de la tolerabilidad
Safety studies	Estudios de toxicidad

Table 2: Legally imposed terminology

English term	Standard translation	Comment
Ethics Committee	Comité Ético	'Comité de Ética' is, no doubt, the correct wording in Spanish, as 'ético' is an adjective. In the same way, we say 'libro de ética' (ethics book), 'profesor de ética' (ethics teacher).
Informed consent	Consentimiento informado	A person can be 'informado', not a 'consent', that is a legal procedure and, as such, it cannot be informed or non-informed.
Adverse event	Acontecimiento adverso	'Acontecimiento' means 'fact', 'happening' or 'contest', but does not refer to a given actual or final outcome.

These terms are cited, for example in the 'REAL DECRETO 223/2004, de 6 de febrero, por el que se regulan los ensayos clínicos con medicamentos'.<sup>5</sup>

*y diarrea*', which is clearly a translation from English where due care has not been taken.

#### What should Spanish writers and translators do?

We believe that ideally professionals should follow the wording and translations recommended in the 'safe' and 'safety' definitions of the *Diccionario crítico de dudas inglés-español de medicina* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)<sup>4</sup> by Fernando A Navarro. However, many compounds including these words are so well established through usage that changing them means risking that readers may no longer know what is meant.

Examples of these complex forms are presented in Table 1.

On other occasions, health authorities force translation from English in one way or another by legally imposing words, and there is nothing the translator or writer can do about this.<sup>5,6</sup> There are, however, still many complex terms where translators and writers may vary the standard wording, as they are not collocations or required by the health authorities. From the dictionary of Fernando A Navarro<sup>4</sup> (words 'safe' and 'safety'):

Table 3: Spanish translation of the words 'safe' and 'safety'

English expressions	Spanish translation <sup>4</sup>
Safe blood	Sangre que no está contaminada, ni infectada
Safe disposal	Evacuación higiénica
Safe food	Alimento salubre
Safe maternity	Maternidad sin riesgo
Safe sex	Relaciones sexuales sin riesgo; con protección
Safe water	Agua salubre
Drug safety monitoring	Farmacovigilancia

For 'potential risk', we advise that simple '*riesgo*' be used, without adding anything else, but if an author wants us to keep the redundancy in Spanish, we believe it is better to write '*posible riesgo*' than the calque '*riesgo potencial*'. We generally advise not to translate 'potential' when it modifies nouns such as 'risk' and 'threat'. 'Potentially' can be omitted in most cases, and, if it is translated, '*posiblemente*' and not '*potencialmente*' should be used. It is also advisable to omit the verb 'may' if it is unnecessary. For example, 'The drug may cause skin rash in about 34% of patients' should be translated as follows: '*El medicamento produce sarpullido en aproximadamente el 34 % de los pacientes*', rather than '*El medicamento puede producir sarpullido en aproximadamente el 34 % de los pacientes*'. Indeed, authors and translators should strive to avoid such imprecise terminology when writing English.

It is advisable to avoid the redundancy of '*Puede existir el riesgo potencial ...*' in Spanish which is a calque from the English 'There may be the potential risk ...'. And the unnatural and stiff '*Tiene el potencial de causar ...*' should also be avoided in Spanish. It is enough to say '*Puede causar*' or omit the English wording, as in the example: 'Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors have the potential to cause erectile dysfunction', '*Los inhibidores selectivos de la recaptación de serotonina producen (or causan) disfunción eréctil*'.

Last, it is important that the writer and translator are aware that the best equivalent of the English adjective 'safe' is not always '*seguro*'. For example, in our opinion, '*Este producto es apto para diabéticos*' is a better translation of 'This product is safe for diabetic persons' than '*Este producto es seguro para diabéticos*', and '*El procedimiento conlleva cierto riesgo*' is a better translation of 'The procedure is not safe' than the calque '*El procedimiento no es*

*seguro*'. In general, the words 'safe' and 'safety' are used much less frequently in Spanish than in English – except in the case of texts translated from English – which means that we need to look for more accurate and idiomatic equivalents when translating or writing texts for the biomedical sciences.

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