



# Lost in translation

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**Abstract:** Many issues can occur during the translation process. This chapter, “Lost in translation” will delve deeper into these specific issues and problems faced by both translators and non-native English-speaking authors. It will help to address the significant issues faced by those writers who are trying to write academically about various research topics. This manuscript is divided into four main problem area parts: Part 1, general translation issues; Part 2, idioms, homophones and homonyms; Part 3 translating names of institutions and technical words; Part 4, how and why authors should write more plainly.

**Keywords:** Academic writing; translation; editorial process; non-native English writing

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## Part 1: introduction

Winston Churchill once said, “*All men make mistakes, but only wise men learn from their mistakes*” (1). One of the biggest struggles for a foreign author in academic writing is writing academically in a foreign language. It is an enormous struggle to translate technical medical words, especially from a non-English mother tongue into English. It can be tricky to know if the translation is correct, let alone used correctly in the specific sentence regarding grammar, tone, style, and other considerations.

There are many expressions and terms which are prone to mistakes or erroneous use, no matter if the individual writer is a native English speaker or a foreign writer; however, mastering these terms is just a matter of memorization.

Many foreign authors will feel as though they will be at a disadvantage when it comes to writing academic works of literature. Learning a language is like learning any skill. For example, a professional chef will be much more likely to produce better tasting food. Thus, just like the professional chef, the individuals who do not have a grasp on strong English language ability will find it much harder to be a virtuous writer. However, not all is lost, and foreign writers should not feel helpless when learning to write academically. Foreign writers are much more careful writers than native English writers since they are very conscious that they

might make a mistake while writing than a native English writer. This is because international, non-native English-speaking writers have learned the origins and systemic details of the English language thoroughly, they would be able to understand the principles that make the academic writing process up far better than those who speak English natively.

The chapter, “Lost in translation”, will dive deeper into common issues that writers face during the translation process and help them learn how to avoid these mistakes. It will cover common errors like symptom and disease translation, incorrectly translated idiomatic expressions, language conversion of the names of an institute, made up words, and many others.

## Part 2: translation issues

These days, English is the most significant language in academic publishing. Many authors who feel as though they are not as fluent as they would like to be in speaking English will opt for their manuscript to be drafted in their mother tongue first. In the second step, a professional translator or a colleague whose native language is English will then translate it.

In this case, the quality of the manuscript would wholly and substantially depend on the language ability of the

person who is doing the translation. Due to this, it is up to the translator alone to capture the beauty of the science and the language of the manuscript. The success of the alternate language version of the paper then relies on the ability of the translator to understand the underlying structure of both two languages at once. Therefore, for many documents that undergo translation, a lot of the original essence is lost in the translation process.

However, it is not just the essence lost in the translation; in many cases, the science itself could be mistranslated, resulting in the work having an entirely different meaning than the original. For example, in one case, a paper sent into the office for language review and editing had this exact issue. In the article, the objective sentence had claimed that there was “no negative correlation” between the tested group and the usage of medicine. However, throughout the paper, it became apparent that there had been a translation issue, as the entire document was about there being a correlation. From a linguistic standpoint, the language usage was entirely correct, and there were no issues; however, from a scientific standpoint, a wholly different meaning had been communicated and was scientifically inappropriate for the context.

It is essential for the translator to understand the logic and reasoning behind the research being translated to provide a more accurate translation. One of the most significant sources of a mistake in academic writing for foreign writers is careless, incomplete, or even an incorrect interpretation of the source material. The bad translations can come from two places; for one, on a fundamental level, words might have similar spelling and pronunciation, but their use may vary considerably. For example, a translator might come across a word they are not very familiar with, so they will check a dictionary or a thesaurus. The resource will provide them a word that might be linguistically inappropriate for the context. There are many times where a translator will have insufficient knowledge of a medical term used, even in their language, so it is possible that they will mistranslate it.

For example, some words have similar spellings but can have different meanings entirely. In English, they are called homonyms, and a homonym is any two words that are spelled the same and sound the same, but they have different meanings. Some examples of homonyms would be words like “address” which can mean to speak to someone or it could mean a location. The word “current” can refer to the flow of something, or it can refer to something that

is up to date. These are one of the most significant issues caused during the translation process. It is so important to have someone proofread and check over the translation works done, due to this kind of mistranslation.

Another example of this are words that have similar spellings but can mean two different things while not being homonyms. One of the most prominent examples of this in medical writing is the usage of the phrase, “key words” versus “keywords”. In actuality, both of these words have entirely different meanings. When adding a space between the word, “key words” the word, “key”, now becomes a separate word entirely and now functions as an adjective, denoting something that is crucial. On the other hand, the term keyword is a word that has a well-defined meaning which is entirely different when using, “key word” as two separate words. For example, in the context of search engines or websites, it typically means search term; that is, the thing you are searching for, which this is the meaning of “keywords” in a science abstract, not “key words”.

### **Part 3: idioms, homonyms, and homophones**

The translation process can often be challenging in medical writing at times due to the high level of English fluency required as well as the high level of English writing ability needed to understand the vast knowledge and vocabulary about the various topics. Each field has its particular jargon, technical terms, and specific grammar rules associated with it. Knowing how to use these words if the writer is not familiar with them is very challenging, primarily if the writer has not fully understood the word they are trying to translate. A dictionary can only explain to a writer so much about a word, but in academic writing, it can lack nuance or the nuance required to master these words in academic writing.

This lack of nuance can leave written work with serious issues that can only arise during the translation process. Some of the most significant areas that are a challenge for writers when doing the translation process, especially foreign ones, can be found in five main areas. The translation of idioms; describing surgical procedures and medical operations; describing symptoms and diseases from the patients or the tested group; translating the name of an institute or award for a specific research paper; untranslatable words, or a word like an adjective that doesn't exist in English.

To begin in academic writing, using an idiomatic

expression can be difficult; in fact, it is better to ignore them entirely and avoid them altogether. Idiomatic expressions are based on some mystical or historical backstory and do not make sense anymore as most people do not even remember the origin. To anyone who hears these idioms for the first time, they would be a string of words that are nonsense. Moreover, trying to apply another language's idioms in a sentence could cause unnecessary trouble for a foreign writer since many of these idiomatic expressions do not follow a traditional grammar ruleset and thus need to be memorized or just known by native speakers naturally. It is also reasonably easy to misunderstand common idioms and miswrite them, which is an issue for both native English speakers as well as foreign writers. Therefore, it is better for both the author and the reviewer to avoid using them entirely in medical writing to prevent a troublesome revision process. Using idioms comes from experience gained from both reading and speaking to foreign authors.

Here are some commonly misused idioms:

| Common mistake             | Correct usage                |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Golden standard            | The gold standard            |
| An escape goat             | A scapegoat                  |
| Mute point                 | A moot point                 |
| First come first serve     | First come, first served     |
| One in the same            | One and the same             |
| By in large                | By and large                 |
| For all intensive purposes | For all intents and purposes |
| Statue of limitations      | Statute of limitations       |

Articles written by foreign doctors undergo a more intense revision process. There might be additional granted leeway for ambiguous technical writing areas like clarity, tone, and style for the native speaking writers during the editorial process which is not provided to the foreign writers. In general, if a native English speaker is writing the paper, there will be a lesser degree of scrutiny in these regards for the writing. Therefore, it is critical in the translation process for the works to be reread by a native speaker.

Translation from a foreign language into English can be awkward, especially if the translator's mother tongue is not also English. It might be easy to reach for a dictionary or a thesaurus when doing a translation, but these resources can cause more issues than they solve. For example, the homonym is two words with the same spellings and the same sounds but have entirely different meanings.

One example that can showcase this is a humorous example from the American comedian Groucho Marx which says, *"time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana."* The first "flies" here is a verb, which indicates that something is flying away fast. The second the word "flies" is a noun, as in the fly the insect.

English is the most widely spoken language in the world, but despite this, there are many times it can be very confusing and defy logic. Unlike homonyms, homophones are words that sound alike but have an entirely different meaning. Additionally, many homophones also have different spellings. Native speakers will read words as written, so using the wrong word, or being confused with a homophone will cause issues with the reviewer.

The built-in Microsoft Word spell checker is lovely, but it is utterly useless for detecting misused homonyms, near-homonyms, and homophones. As a result, these homonyms are the most common mistakes in any processed text or submitted manuscript. Here are some commonly misused words that are important to look out for (2):

| Phrases:              |                             |                        |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Its, it's             | Affect, effect              | New, knew              |
| Their, there, they're | Discrete, discreet          | Illicit, elicit        |
| Whether, weather      | Forth, fourth               | Complement, compliment |
| To, too, two          | Past, passed                | Extent, extend         |
| Site, cite, sight     | Roll, role                  | Obtain, attain         |
| Waste, waist          | Lead, led                   | Pair, pare             |
| Whole, hole           | Lie, lye                    | Suit, suite            |
| Fare, fair            | Throughout, through<br>out, | Principal, principle   |
| Great, grate          | Seem, seam                  | Bear, bare             |

Please study all of these and make sure that the difference between these words is all known and apparent. Learning these words should not be too much of a burden and will help in convincing the readers of the paper that competent and trustworthy doctors write the work.

Another two words that fall under this category which can be confusing for foreign doctors is when to use "but" or "however". Although these words have similar meanings, they are not interchangeable. Due to comma punctuation and sentence conjunction rules, if there is a correct sentence containing "but" and replaced with "however" or vice versa, the result will almost always be incorrect.

For example, an author wrote in a paper *“It could be regulated by PAR6(45), but, this pathway has yet to be identified in lung cancer”*. It is clear from a native English reader that the author should have written, “however” instead of “but” in this example. Since the author has written “but” instead, it has produced a sentence with a slightly different meaning and used a comma awkwardly.

#### **Part 4: translating nouns, disease name, and institutions**

Translating the name of a foreign institution from its original language to English can be one of the toughest aspects of the entire translation process. For names of a department or an institution that does not have any English translation available, it is entirely up to the translator to create one. If the translator is not a native English speaker or someone with a lot of copywriting experience, this can result in some bizarre sounding translations that will come off as humorous and even embarrassing. For example, one paper that gives the most significant mistranslation was when a doctor had submitted a paper regarding colon and rectal surgery. The author had called the Colon and Rectal surgery department, “The Department of Anal” which in English has an entirely different and even lewd meaning than what the author was attempting to say. Therefore, it is critical to make sure that the names of proper nouns and diseases are properly translated for the correct context. These are some simple tips that can help avoid incorrect translations:

##### **Tip number 1**

Avoid unnecessary capitalization. When in doubt, use lower case. Capitalization is only for specifically named, individual items or people. For example, “Department of Health” should be capitalized, but “health department” should not. When in doubt, use lower case.

##### **Tip number 2**

Search online on google.com for hospitals with similar departments. If searching online does not yield any hospital in the world having a “Department of Anal” then it should be evident that it is mistranslated. Do not use local search engines; for example, if in China, do not use Baidu to do this research. Baidu is developed for a particular market

and will show specific results tailored to a foreign person. Stick to using Google; it is for native English speakers and searches for things that a native English speaker would say.

##### **Tip number 3**

Utilize resources like Google scholar. Google scholar has millions of papers in its databases, mostly all written by native English speakers. Search for papers with similar topics and try to find how native English speakers are describing a particular symptom in their language. For example, if trying to describe the pathology of sepsis, type into google scholar, “Sepsis pathology” and it will return millions of results of papers discussing this. It can be used as a reference for writing to avoid making mistakes.

#### **Part 5: expressing ideas simply**

Another issue that can occur during the translation process can arise with vocabulary choice. One of the most significant problems is when the translator uses a word that is very exotic or fancy but has minimal usage among native speakers. It is important for translators to understand that the goal of academic writing in English is not to impress the readers by using exotic or fancy words, but to express ideas as simply as possible.

Albert Einstein once said, *“Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.”* He also said, *“If you cannot explain it simply, you do not understand it well enough.”* It is essential to use this quote as a guide during the writing and translation process to produce work that does not fall under this language trap. No one is impressed by the use of fancy or obscure words when reading scientific findings.

Furthermore, it could potentially harm the author’s image and have the opposite effect entirely. Using advanced words to sound smart can come off as arrogant. The word, sesquipedalian can be used to describe someone or something that overuses big words, like a chemistry textbook or a philosophy professor. Not being viewed as a sesquipedalian is vital for the overall health and tone of the paper. No doctor wants to stop each time they come across some obscure or fancy word to check a dictionary for a synonym they understand. They will probably give up instead and opt not to read the paper entirely.

English is one of the most powerful languages in writing. When wielding the English language correctly, it is possible to express ideas in the shortest way possible. The shorter

the sentences, the better. The fastest way to get somewhere is by taking the most direct route, and this is the philosophy one should use in academic writing. Academic writing is about finding the truth, so it is mainly irrelevant to use many words trying to describe something, and thinking of more complicated words to sound erudite does not add anything to a scientific argument. Therefore, there are four steps a writer should take to make sure that their writing is as simple as possible:

### ***Organize the writing beforehand***

Write on a piece of paper the significant points that need discussing and figure out where they need to go within the article. Make sure to plan things out accordingly based on these topics. Think about how to present these topics and main points. Think about the tone of the writing before writing it. Academic writing should be written in the active voice, and not the passive voice, so it is critical that the sentences are planned to be written this way before writing them to avoid having to rewrite them later. With a clear picture of what to write, it will save time in not only the writing process but also the revision process.

### ***Use adverbs and adjectives sparingly***

During the writing process, think deeply about what kind of words to use. Instead of starting a paper and writing whatever comes to mind, try to be conscious of the word choice and usage of adverbs and adjectives. In general, adverbs and adjectives generally do not add anything of value to a scientific argument and will only detract the readers from the discussions and data points.

### ***Pay attention to the length of sentences***

Many readers these days are very impatient and do not have all day to spend reading a single paper. For example, the title of this section is, “Expressing ideas simply” and not “The methods one can take to learn how to write academic works in a more simple and clear manner”. They both mean the same thing, yet one is only three words long, and the other is almost 20 words long. It might feel impossible to be able to express an idea in a short and straightforward sentence. If this is the case, it might be better in such examples to break the sentence up into shorter ones and start new ones. It is better for native English speakers to

read many shorter sentences than a very long one.

### ***Consider how formatting helps the reader to understand ideas more clearly***

Consider if a chart can replace a paragraph of words for example. Using some specific formatting technique will help your reader along with following the presented scientific argument in the paper. Do not be afraid to use headers, bullet points, numbered lists, bolded key terms, and paragraph spacings to help the user navigate the piece of writing.

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