

# Turkish Medical Translation: Hippocrates Meets Sherlock Holmes

By Nur (Gülmur) Reinhart



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**S**o you landed a Turkish medical translation assignment? Then, gather your French and English dictionaries, brush up on your phonetics skills, and put on your detective hat. Turkish medical translation work is more an exercise in sleuthing techniques and phonetics than a straightforward task conducted with the aid of stacks of trusty Turkish↔English medical dictionaries.

First of all, the stacks of Turkish↔English medical dictionaries just don't exist. The bible of the older generation of Turkish doctors, like my late grandfather, was Dr. Serafeddin Magmumi's *Kamus-u Tibbi*, a Turkish-language terminology dictionary published in 1911. With the explosive changes in medical terms and the radical transformation in the composition of the Turkish language since then, this work is now a venerable Ottoman antique.

A few Turkish-language medical terminology resources have been published since then, but the first English to Turkish medical dictionary of modern Turkey was published in 1964 by Pars Tuglaci, a one-man dictionary industry who has numerous dictionaries and encyclopedias to his credit. The recently revised edition of this volume still remains the most reliable source for medical translation from English into Turkish. The volume is only from English to Turkish, because as the author states clearly in his preface, it was specifically designed to help Turkish medical students with research. This is evident as entries often offer explanations rather than synonyms. Prolific as he has been, Mr. Tuglaci has not compiled a Turkish>English medical dictionary. For the medical translator faced with a Turkish microbiology article or autopsy report to translate into English, this is a major handicap.

But lack of resources is not the only difficulty facing the Turkish medical translator. The Turkish language has not kept up with medical terminology. Indigenous Turkish words are practically non-existent to communicate today's esoteric scientific techniques, and the Turkish medical community has dealt with this communication gap for decades by borrowing—wholesale—French and English medical terms and then phoneticizing them to fit them into the Turkish language. Hence, the need for French and English dictionaries as well as phonetics skills.

This wholesale borrowing makes Turkish medical terms a cosmopolitan bunch. Some are French or have French pronunciation: *anjin=angine* (tonsillitis); *pansuman=pansement* (bandage); *lavman=lavement* (enema); *regl=règles* (menstruation); and *lösemi=leucémie* (leukemia). Some are German: *röntgen=röntgen* (x-ray). However, an overwhelming majority of the current terminology is English (*mukoza=mucosa*; *antijen=antigen*; *epitel=epithelium*; and *glikojen=glycogen*). Just to confuse the translator, there is also a handful of newly coined Turkish terms (*ivegen=acute*; *tani=diagnosis*).

Another challenge in translating Turkish medical or pharmaceutical texts into English is the misspelling of foreign words. The names of older, well-established medical procedures are spelled more consistently by Turkish medical authors, but newer and more experimental terms may show spelling variations that confound the translator. Doctors and researchers spell foreign words based on their personal understanding of how a particular foreign word is correctly pronounced in the original language and how it should be phoneticized to fit the Turkish language. Naturally this may vary from doctor to doctor. For example, in one document, I have observed "pathogen" spelled as "patojen," but pathogenesis was "patogenez."

The task of the Turkish medical translator is not impossible, but to fulfill it successfully requires much time and patience as well as diverse skills, from a good ear for pronunciation to a sound knowledge of medical terms. Many words, like *pathogen/patojen*, are no-brainers. But with more challenging terms, the translator must first "sound out" the phoneticized word to discover the foreign original. If the word is part of a larger text, then the context can help. If, however, the word is in a doctor's cryptic bill for services, then the translator may indeed be searching a long time—sometimes in vain. If the word "sounds" French or English, then those dictionaries may be consulted. The translator must then confirm the accuracy of the "discovered" word with the help of the context or medical encyclopedias or doctors' manuals. Of course, it helps to contact scientist friends. In well over a decade of

*Continued on page 45*

## Turkish Medical Translation

*Continued from page 44*

medical translation work, I have even consulted the county coroner who enlightened me about the detailed differences between "livor mortis" (postmortem discoloration) and "rigor mortis" (postmortem rigidity).

There has always been demand in the U.S. for Turkish medical and pharmaceutical translation work. There are many American corporations which are marketing their products abroad, and this means a large bulk of product literature ranging from pesticide labels to new drug inserts. In many cases, a corporation may have the text of product labels translated into Turkish in Turkey through its distributor or joint venture partner, but then have them "back-translated" into English in the U.S. to verify accuracy. There is also demand for insurance-related medical translations, including personal medical reports as well as hospital and doctor bills. A smaller niche which can be much more challenging than the others is the demand for the translation of Turkish research articles into English for scientific or patent purposes.

Because of the nature of these assignments, the translator has a huge responsibility to produce a painstakingly precise and accurate translation: no paraphrasing, no omissions, and certainly, no guesses. First of all, translators would be well-advised to review the material before accepting an assignment to make sure their skills and resources are up to the task. Second, a rather substantial financial investment in diverse medical resources is required. Third, translators should negotiate deadlines to allow time for the research that is inevitable in this process. But most importantly, the Turkish translator should not feel embarrassed to consult the client via the translation agency regarding particularly difficult terms in view of the specific difficulties of Turkish medical translation mentioned above.

The translation agency can contribute in many ways to this process. In assignments where the budget allows, the agency can help by employing an editor—especially when the translator is not a medical specialist. It can also facilitate the clarification of terms without labeling the translator "inadequate" for making such requests. Many agencies are quick to help, but some try to answer such questions "in-house," because they do not wish to "bother" the client or because they are dealing with layers of bureaucracy in a large corporation and find it frustrating to be bounced from executive to executive in search of an answer.

I came across just such a problem several years ago when I was "back-translating" an insert for a product which was highly toxic, sometimes even causing fatalities. The translation which had been performed in Turkey included a single sentence that is typically used in many inserts: "The product's safety in pediatric use has been established." It was clear to me—and it should have been patently obvious to the careless translator in Turkey—that a product which may cause severe toxic reactions cannot possibly be safe in pediatric use. I immediately contacted the agency as I was under the impression that the product might already be available in the Turkish market with this heartrendingly incorrect insert. I asked the agency to contact its client at once. The busy agency executive told me to keep on

translating and not to worry because the client would see the material **after** I was finished. About 10 days after the translation had been submitted to the client, I found out that the client was—naturally—in an uproar over this matter. I was not informed of the ultimate outcome, but I highly suspect the client never knew that I tried my best—in vain—to sound alarms.

The source of this terrible error was extremely simple: the translator had missed one syllable to indicate that the product's safety in children had **not** been established. Since Turkish is an agglutinative language, the verb "saptamak" (to establish) should have taken a one-syllable suffix to denote that. Thus, instead of "saptanmıştır" (established), "saptanmamıştır" (not established) would have been accurate. Obviously, the translator had not bothered to edit his/her work.

I suspect many other foreign language translators are also faced with the specific difficulties that confront Turkish medical translators, such as the lack of up-to-date resources, the infiltration of foreign terms, etc. As English becomes more and more dominant as the language of medicine and medical advances increase on a daily basis, the borrowing of foreign words is often inevitable. So then, the most important and universal step in ensuring quality in medical translation is to shed the cavalier attitude exhibited by the careless translator above and to realize what is a rudimentary truth: Medical translation can be a matter of life and death. As such, it is also fraught with the potential for liability for the translator, the agency, and of course, the client. In today's litigious world, that can mean life and death for our livelihood as well.

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