



Is a literal back translation always the best option for PRO documents?

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Objectives: Back translation is considered by many to be an integral part of the translation methodology for PRO documents: the ISPOR Task Force paper (2005)¹ describes it as a critical component in the translation process, without which there is a risk of final translations differing in their content from the source document. However, it is criticised by McKenna et al. (2005) for having “no clear scientific basis”², and for leading to potentially misleading impressions of the translation. In contrast to forward translation, using back translations as a tool when translating PRO documents usually requires a more literal rendering of the source text in order for project managers to gauge the extent to which the translation reflects the source text.

This research compares literal and non-literal back translations in a sample of PRO translation projects, and aims to ascertain the circumstances in which each type of back translation would be most appropriate. The ISPOR Task Force paper (2005) suggests that a literal translation is preferable for medical symptoms, whereas “more subjective constructs”³, such as those asking about quality of life, may require a more conceptual back translation.

Method: A selection of PRO translation projects were reviewed, and the type of back translation used was noted. In some cases translators had been specifically instructed to provide a literal or a conceptual translation, and in other examples the translator had chosen their own approach to the task.

The back translations were then examined to determine which type of back translation presented a more useful reflection of the forward translation.

Results: The results showed that for some items, either method can be appropriate. However in some cases, one method was preferable over the other. Unless otherwise specified, the back translations in the table below are literal.

Measure and language	Original English	Forward translation	First Back translation	Second Back translation	Comments (limited to literal / conceptual issues for the purposes of this study)	Best type of back translation in this instance and type of phrase / word
German Vineland II	Understands sayings that are not meant to be taken word for word (for example, “Button your lip”; “Hit the road”; etc.).	Versteht Aussagen, die nicht wörtlich aufzufassen sind (z. B. „Schreib dir das hinter die Ohren“, „Mach dich aus dem Staube“ usw.)	Understands statements which are not meant literally (e.g. “My ears are burning”, “Take a leaf out of my book”, etc.) These are just random examples which do not literally reflect the meaning of the German.	Understands sayings that can't be interpreted literally (e.g. “Get that into your thick head”, “Clear off”, etc.) [Literal translations of the German phrases: “Write that behind your ears” and “Turn yourself to dust”].	Oxford Outcomes: Ok	Conceptual Idiomatic phrase Literal translations of idiomatic phrases do not usually make sense and may require asking for confirmation that the translation is suitable. Conceptually, however, the right idea has been included and no change is necessary.
Italian Hauser diary video script	Your doctors have asked you to complete a Parkinson's disease motor diary in order to understand how your Parkinson's disease is doing throughout the day.	I suoi medici le hanno chiesto di compilare un diario della malattia motoria di Parkinson per capire come si comporta la malattia di Parkinson durante il giorno.	Your doctors have asked you to fill out a Parkinson's Disease [literal translation = Parkinson's motor disorder] diary in order to understand how Parkinson's Disease behaves during the day.	Only one Back Translation needed for this project	Oxford Outcomes Wording accepted	Literal Introductory phrase Literal translation shows that “motor” is included in the forward translation, which removes the need for querying this.
Czech SGRQ-C	For each statement please tick in the box that applies to you these days	U každého tvrzení zaškrtněte čtvereček, který se hodí na Vaši situaci v těchto dnech	For each statement tick the box that matches your situation at the present time [Conceptual translation. Literally it means “these days”].	Only one Back Translation needed for this project	Oxford Outcomes: Wording accepted.	Literal Instruction A literal translation is better here as the conceptual “at the present time” might suggest “right now this second.” The translation does not need to be changed.
Norwegian bowel study script	please enter your access code followed by the # key	vennligst tast inn adgangskoden din etterfulgt av firkanttast	please enter your access code followed by the hash key (conceptual translation of “hash key”)	Please key in your security code followed by the Hash key. Conceptual translation of “hash key”. “Firkanttast” (literally “square key”) is quite OK when referring to the hash key	Oxford Outcomes Wording accepted.	Conceptual Technical term If just a literal translation had been provided the impression would have been given that the Norwegian is incorrect but the explanation by the back translator shows it is suitable and no change is necessary.
Turkish TDSS	Over the past 24 hours, have you experienced any dizziness or lightheadedness?	Son 24 saat içinde baş dönmeniz veya sersemlemeniz oldu mu?	Have you experienced any dizziness or confusion during the last 24 hours?	Did your head turn or felt drowsy over the last 24 hours?	Oxford Outcomes Please confirm that the translation says “dizziness” and not “head turn” and that it includes “light headedness”. “Light-headed” means “dizzy and slightly faint”. Turkish Investigator: this is a simple Turkish idiom. Baş dönmesi means feeling dizzy as well as feeling slightly faint and can also mean “the world spinning slightly” but not all at the same time.	Conceptual Idiomatic phrase Again, the literal translation does not make much sense as the Turkish phrase was idiomatic. No change was necessary here.
French Hauser diary video script	“Dyskinesia” refers to involuntary twisting, turning movements.	Le mot « dyskésie » correspond à des mouvements de rotations involontaires et incoordonnés.	The word “dyskinesia” corresponds to repetitive, involuntary, uncoordinated (purposeless – seen in the literature) movements. I used “repetitive” for the translation of “rotations,” even though this isn't literal, as it was common in the Parkinson's literature.	Only one Back Translation needed for this project	Oxford Outcomes Please confirm that the translation includes the idea of “rotating” Investigator: confirmed	Literal Symptoms This results in a non-literal back translation which is quite different from the forward translation, whereas a more literal Back Translation would have given a closer reflection of the forward translation. The issue needs to be queried but no change is necessary.
German heartburn diary	Daily Heartburn Symptom Questionnaire	Täglich auszufüllender Fragebogen zu Sodbrennen	Questionnaire on heartburn to be filled in daily	Daily heartburn questionnaire (non-literal translation)	Oxford Outcomes: Please confirm that it is the questionnaire (as in back translation 1), not the heartburn, that is daily. Investigator: Confirmed – the German version reads ‘to be filled in daily’	Literal Title Here, the conceptual translation leads to a need for clarification to be obtained, but no change is necessary.
Dutch MDQ	3. How confident are you in your ability to exercise regularly?	3. Hoeveel vertrouwen heeft u erin dat u regelmatig zult bewegen en sporten?	3. How much confidence do you have that you will regularly move and exercise?	3. How much confidence do you have that you will take regular activity and sport? (conceptual translation)	Oxford Outcomes: Back Translator 1's translation seems a little unnatural – please confirm it is ok in the Dutch and change, if necessary, throughout . Investigator: I am not entirely happy with the Dutch now. Therefore I have changed it throughout into lichaamsbeweging , (“exercise i.e. physical activities”) to avoid confusion.	Literal Common QoL style question The literal back translation shows an unnatural Dutch phrase which results in the translation being changed.
Czech ITSQ	Item 8: How confident are you that you can avoid severe episodes of low blood sugar that result in loss of consciousness (fainting or passing out) with the insulin you currently use?	Nakolik jste přesvědčen/a, že se při Vaší současné inzulinové léčbě nedostaví závažné záchvaty nízké hladiny cukru v krvi, které končí ztrátou vědomí (bezvědomím)?	How convinced are you that serious seizures of low blood sugar level leading to loss of consciousness (unconsciousness) will not appear with your current insulin treatment? “Seizures” - a literal translation from the Czech.	How much are you convinced that, with your current insulin treatment, serious attacks of low blood sugar level, culminating in loss of consciousness (unconsciousness) will not appear? (“attacks” – a more conceptual translation)	Oxford Outcomes Can we find an alternative wording for episodes? In this context it means cases or incidences. Investigator: OK, replaced by “cases”.	Literal Symptom The literal back translation of the Czech for “seizure” shows an error in the Czech whereas the conceptual back translation does not highlight this. A change is indeed needed here.

Approximately two-thirds of cases suggest that a literal back translation is preferable. This may be because translators who are creating conceptual back translations will add their own interpretation of the text, which may be incorrect. However, in certain cases – for idiomatic phrases and in one case, a technical term - we can see that a literal translation is misleading and a conceptual translation is superior. In cases such as these, literal back translations can be confusing, sound unnatural, or suggest that the forward translation is incorrect, where this is not necessarily the case.

Conclusion: With a few exceptions, literal back translations are generally preferable to conceptual back translations when translating Patient Reported Outcomes documents. They are usually more beneficial when translating symptoms, titles, instructions and questions about quality of life. However, literal back translations carry some risks, such as being misleading when translating idiomatic and technical phrases.

(Footnotes)

¹ Wild D., Grove A., Martin M., Eremenco S., McElroy S., Verjee-Lorenz A. & Erikson P. (2005). Principles of Good Practice for the Translation and Cultural Adaptation Process for Patient-Reported Outcomes (PRO) Measures: Report of the ISPOR Task Force for Translation and Cultural Adaptation. Value in Health, 8 (2): p100

² McKenna S & Doward L. The Translation and Cultural Adaptation of Patient-Reported Outcome Measures. Value in Health, 8 (2) (2005), p89

³ Wild D., Grove A., Martin M., Eremenco S., McElroy S., Verjee-Lorenz A. & Erikson P. (2005). Principles of Good Practice for the Translation and Cultural Adaptation Process for Patient-Reported Outcomes (PRO) Measures: Report of the ISPOR Task Force for Translation and Cultural Adaptation. Value in Health, 8 (2): p100