



## Ever-Changing English: A Translator's Headache

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*English language is alive and kicking. Problem is: it keeps kicking me!*

Aside from the obvious vocabulary changes due to the emergence of an extraordinary array of new objects and processes, whether in daily life (satellite TV in remote parts of China) or highly specialized situations (biotechnology bots of various sorts), English is undergoing changes in usage that I believe are the true headache for a translator. It is usually possible to discover the meaning of an unusual word by finding either glossary definitions or clear context on the billions of Web sites that have been made accessible by search engines, not to mention the age-old method of talking to the author. Usage, on the other hand, is a more slippery matter, so slippery that even when the translator has access to the author of a document, the result of a consultation may not yield a translatable unit like a definition.

What I would like to discuss are some specific instances of usage that I have come across in translating standard operating procedure documents in the pharmaceutical industry that gave me pause. I translate primarily into Spanish, but I will not be proposing any translation solutions here for any particular language. What I am addressing are what I feel to be difficulties in parsing English, a task that is independent of the ultimate target language. Specifically, I am going to address three kinds of usage that I have found to be prevalent and troublesome: conversion of the part of speech, a virgule placed between two words and the ellipsis.

Perhaps the part of speech conversion that is most commented on is verbalization, noun-to-verb conversion, also called "verbing" (an example itself of the phenomenon). We find that things are to be **centrifuged, autoclaved, pipetted, chromatographed** or **filtered**. All of these are verbs that originated in nouns describing an instrument or a process, and the only one not usually found as a verb in common dictionaries is **autoclave**. Verbalizations of this kind seem natural to me, a transformation of the instrument or process into a verb makes language more concise, making it unnecessary to say "process in the centrifuge," "sterilize in the autoclave," "dispense with the pipette," "analyze using chromatography," or "pass through a filter."

What does not seem quite as natural is a transformation based on the object of the action, for example with the word "gown." "The associate shall gown" does not mean that the worker will put on an actual gown, but that the worker will put on the required sanitary clothing and accessories. In the documents I handled, the verb replaced the phrase "don the gown," in which an archaic verb would have persisted. While disconcerting at first, it was understandable. What stumped me was this instruction: "If there is no data, NA it." As it turned out, the idea was for the person to write NA (N/A or Not Applicable) in the space provided for writing the data. The object of the action became the name of the action itself, as with the gown.

In any case, these conversions are constantly used in English and may or may not be directly translatable. It may be necessary to determine what the instrument does, what the process consists of, or what must be done to the object, all of which have been masked in the conversion of the part of speech. It could be that rather than dispensing with the pipette there is aspiration with the pipette, for example. The on-line Translation Journal recently published a useful article by translators Hernandez and Cabrera on this topic, available at the Accurapid Web site, <http://accurapid.com/journal/31conversion.htm>.



I centrifuge; you centrifuge; they centrifuge

Another usage that has become prevalent is placing a virgule, perhaps better known as a slash (/), between two words. The trend may have started with the usage "and/or," which is almost universally condemned. There is no translation for "and/or" because it is a term of unfathomable meaning. The term "and/or" purports to achieve concision, yet in phrases such as "quality degradation and/or bioburden contamination" just "or" is sufficient. It seems to me that part of the issue in "and/or" phrases is that the relationship between the elements is really of a hierarchical nature in which one element could be an example of another. If there is bioburden contamination, by definition there is quality degradation. What the writer meant was "quality degradation, as for example, by bioburden contamination," not "quality degradation or bioburden contamination or both," which is the long version of an "and/or" phrase.



As evidence from another field, I offer this from a World Trade Organization Document:

### **3. Interpretation of "and/or"**

7.81 The interpretations of the parties are also in a sharp contrast with each other regarding the meaning of "and/or" in Article 6.2. As noted above, according to Pakistan, a subject domestic industry consists of producers of (i) like products, or (ii) directly competitive products, or (iii) both like products and directly competitive products. In contrast, the United States argued that Members are permitted to identify a "domestic industry" as an industry producing a product that is: (i) like but not directly competitive; or (ii) unlike but directly competitive; or (iii) both like and directly competitive. -WT/DS192/R, 31 May 2001(01-2567).

Due to space restrictions, I will limit the discussion to the paragraph above extracted from the WTO website on the interpretation of "and/or." The consequences of the lack of meaning of "and/or" in this case affected an important part of world trade, the cotton trade.

Then there is the usage in a situation of elements that are not subsets of each other, as in the instruction "place on a table and/or rack." Here the issue is really of a physical impossibility: you cannot place the same object on a table and a rack at the same time. I could give many more examples, but what I am trying to emphasize is that the translator is faced with a real problem, not just a stylistic quibble, as some would like to classify the "and/or problem." That there are millions of examples of "and/or" being used does not mean that the users are being clear.

The usage of the slash has spilled over to its acceptance in countless formations like "manager/supervisor," "purchaser/planner," "cleaning/sanitizing," "transcription/translation." The slash cannot be used to indicate only one relationship between the two words:

*manager/supervisor = manager or supervisor*  
*purchaser/planner = purchaser-planner*  
*cleaning/sanitizing = cleaning and sanitizing OR cleaning or sanitizing,*  
*depending on the context...*

However, in the case of "transcription/translation," with reference to biotechnology, it may be that we will see transcription/translation as a fixed form, or a lexicalization, the virgule having become the contemporary version of the hyphen in the creation of compound terms. There may be a certain carryover effect from seeing so many virgules in computer addresses and other computer-associated uses. Whatever the origin, this is one more reason to reach for the aspirin.



For further reading on the virgule, I recommend "Slash the Slash," by Stephen deLooze at the European Medical Writers Association Web site and "Use of the Solidus between Words, Symbols and Abbreviations," (no author shown) at the American Physical Society website. I have found that trying to understand why and how the slash is used so much has helped me better understand the text I am translating, and these two articles are quite useful references on this subject.

The final kind of nail I feel driving into my skull is the nail of ellipsis. In the phrase, "line to permeate," where is the article to tell me that "permeate" is a noun and not a verb? How should I know that a "pre-integrity test" is a test of integrity before a given process or step? And an "aseptic fill," which is not filling anything? Rather, is it a test performed to verify that the aseptic level has been maintained? Would you want to generate a nonconformance? Of course not! You want to generate a nonconformance report. A "temperature EN" was explained to me as a device with an **E**quipment **N**umber that is used to measure temperature. And the engineer triumphantly informed me that "temperature is not a noun!" Another example:

An HPLC injection valve is placed in-line between the tee and the column for sample introduction... The flow through the column is changed by adjusting the length of the restriction capillary or by varying the flow rate **from the HPLC** slightly.

HPLC is High Pressure Liquid Chromatography. How can there be something *from* the High Pressure Liquid Chromatography? Obviously, it is from the HPLC system, valve or device.

I could continue, but my purpose here is to assure my colleagues, who will forever be accused of treason, that English is like any other language: a language in constant change, whose users will do what they please, stylebooks and scolding editors notwithstanding. Translators of non-fiction documents, if lucky, will have access to people who will be able to clarify texts that have hard to crack nuts like those I have mentioned. I hope that these comments will be useful to those who face these issues in their work.

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