



## Good pharma: a linguistic approach

There are different definitions of the adjective 'good', e.g. morally excellent; satisfactory in quality, quantity or degree; of high quality; excellent; well-

behaved; etc. as the web dictionary tells us. In 'good pharma' the meaning of 'good' is most probably a moral one. 'Good pharma' corresponds more to the morally outstanding performance of the pharmaceutical industry and less to the quality of pharmaceutical products or financial performance of the industry. However, if you think about a 'good medical writer' the term 'good' does not stand for a morally excellent professional but for a person doing his or her job very well. Thus, 'good' seems to change its meaning when used in connection with different words. This is the semantic information carried within the phrase which is – by the way – mostly ignored by automatic translation systems. There is a whole research area focusing on dictionaries or systems that do not only translate the words one by one but also the meaning they carry – even for proverbs. An impression on semantic translation is contained here:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semantic\\_translation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semantic_translation).

The linguistic measure known as 'mutual information' provides information about how strongly two words are linked, i.e. indicating how often they are used together in the same document (e.g. 'London' and 'UK' score high on this measure). The measure itself is a statistical probability for the occurrence of one word after the other appeared in a text. For those who are eager to read more about this, I can recommend this site – even if it looks a

little bit like a complex math explanation, it presents some useful examples:

<http://nlp.stanford.edu/IR-book/html/htmledition/mutual-information-1.html>.

One can only guess how strong the mutual information ratio between 'good' and 'pharma' might be. However, picking up the example of 'good medical writing', 'good writing' is obviously not the same as 'correct writing'. Beside orthography there are many more factors that contribute to 'good writing' – and these are necessary to make a text useful or interesting or simply entertaining for the intended readers. A short discourse about these factors – probably not new but nice to remember – is given here:

<http://grammar.about.com/od/yourwriting/a/characteristics.htm>.

Eventually, a Google search on 'good pharma' gave a few sites of pharmaceutical companies with a name composed of these two terms – as well as a book 'bad pharma' and an article 'good pharma, bad pharma'. The above mentioned dictionary defines 'pharma' as a pharmaceutical company or pharmaceutical companies when considered together as an industry. Thus the word 'pharma' is the short form for pharmaceutical. According to another definition, 'good pharma' also relates to good pharmaceutical products, e.g. effective and safe drugs. In this context – and as a reward to those who managed to struggle through all this linguistic stuff – a humorous approach to the topic can be found here:

<http://www.pharmamanufacturing.com/articles/2012/145.html>.

Franziska Meister  
Novartis Pharma GmbH  
franziska.meister@novartis.com