



Medical Writing in

PORTUGUESE

English to Portuguese translation: Know your audience!

Portuguese is a globally spoken language, serving as the official language in several countries including Portugal, Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, and East Timor. This geographical spread emphasises the importance of Portuguese in disseminating medical information and the need for accurate, culturally sensitive translations. However, each Portuguese-speaking country has its own language variant with significant differences, making it crucial to identify the target audience's locale to ensure translations align with local practices.

Below are some examples of the many challenges I face when translating into Portuguese (Portugal variant):

Register and terminology: Translators must switch between formal and informal registers depending on the target audience, ensuring that materials like patient instructions are clear and clinical reports are precise. Classic examples of this can be found in the Summary of Product Characteristics (SmPC) and Patient Information Leaflet (PIL) of a medicinal product, where you have the exact same English term (e.g. “headache”) in both documents, but different Portuguese equivalents (*cefaleia* in the SmPC and *dor de cabeça* in the PIL).

Gendered language: Portuguese, like many languages, assigns gender to nouns, pronouns, and adjectives, challenging translators to use inclusive language while maintaining grammatical correctness. Unfortunately, there are still no formal and generally accepted guidelines and recommendations for inclusive language which would help standardise practices for inclusive communication. Translators must balance grammatical correctness with inclusivity, often requiring creative solutions such as replacing gender-specific nouns with gender-neutral alternatives where possible, and rewriting sentences to avoid gendered language.

False cognates: Words that look similar in English and Portuguese but have different meanings require careful translation to avoid errors. For example: “infusion” (English for “administration method”) vs. *infusão*

(Portuguese for “tea/ herbal drink”) – where the correct translation for “infusion” is *perfusão*.

Language-specific reference sources: Most online medical content is in Brazilian Portuguese, which can complicate the fact-checking process for other variants. Using the example of “infusion” above, while *infusão* is the correct term in Brazilian Portuguese, *perfusão* is the appropriate term in Portugal. Another example of this is “randomised,” where the correct term in European Portuguese is *aleatorizado*, but Brazilian Portuguese remains closer to its English counterpart (*randomizado*).

Inconsistent terminology: Even authoritative sources in Portuguese can sometimes use inconsistent terminology. This can stem from excessive use of Anglicisms in the industry, misuse of terminology from other variants, evolving medical knowledge, differences between academic and clinical usage, and a lack of expert writing/translation professionals in content development. Translators must navigate these inconsistencies and often need to make judgment calls on which term to use based on the context and target audience.

Designation of health professions: Healthcare systems and professional titles vary, so translators need to find appropriate equivalents in Portuguese-speaking countries. For example, the role of “Nurse Practitioner” in English-speaking countries often includes responsibilities that are performed by doctors in Portuguese-speaking countries, and their level of autonomy and scope of practice can vary significantly.

Legal and regulatory requirements: While there are international regulations, each country has its own set of requirements and legislation governing clinical research and care provision. Translators must be familiar with both global guidelines and national regulations, ensuring translations comply with local standards.

The challenges I have shared here are to some extent, common to medical translation in general, regardless of the source and target languages. My hope is that it helps clarify why translation is never merely about transferring words from one language to another.



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