

Exploring veterinary science, a little-known translation specialisation

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Abstract

Although closely linked to human health, veterinary science remains a relatively unexplored field for medical translators. The key to the specialisation may lie in the translators' ability to answer several key questions:

- Who is the end reader?
- What is the context?
- How is the document organised?

Only then will they be able to adapt the terminology and register (or tone) to the target audience (mainly veterinary surgeons, pet owners, or farmers), make the best translation decisions for the text's context, and make sure they use the right industry references. All these aspects are vital to ensuring high-quality translations in this field and to building long-term relationships with veterinary customers.

Keywords: Veterinary science, Animal health, Veterinary readers, Context, Veterinary market, Regulatory documents

In any modern society, there is an enormous need for medical and health information and, thus, an equally great need for specialised medical translators and editors.¹ Veterinary science is no exception. It plays a vital role in environmental protection, food safety, and animal health, as well as in public health. Indeed, at least 60% of all known human infectious diseases, and 75% of emerging human diseases, originate in animals.²

Despite the inextricable link between human and animal health, veterinary science remains a relatively unknown field for medical translators, just as it does for medical writers.³ Nevertheless, it is an extremely specialised field in its own right, in which mere extrapolation from human medicine is not enough.^{4,5} There is thus a clear need for specialised veterinary translators.

This paper aims to offer interested medical translators an introduction to the specialisation and to certain key aspects that will help them produce high-quality translations in the field. To this end, it will analyse how to successfully approach veterinary texts by replying to three of the classic questions of journalism: who, what, and how. Unsurprisingly, like journalism itself, translation is a communicative act.

Who is the end reader of my translation?

One of the first questions a translator needs to answer is 'who am I writing for?' Indeed, both the choice of terminology and the register of the final text should be driven by the end readers' characteristics: 'who are they and what do they know?'⁶ Failing to take the readership into account when making translation decisions can distort or obscure a text's intended message and, thus, diminish the quality of the translation. In veterinary science, there are three main audiences to consider.

The first audience consists of veterinary surgeons. These are professionals who have completed a specialised degree encompassing a wide variety of fields: from animal nutrition, parasitology, and bovine reproduction to equine medicine, dermatology, animal behaviour, and anaesthesiology. Not only is the specialised knowledge they have acquired diverse, so is the practice of the profession itself: veterinary surgeons may work in clinical practice, research organisations, academia, industry (nutrition, diagnostic, or pharmaceutical companies), or government. When they are the target audience, the translation will be very demanding in terms of content and specialisation.

At the other end of the spectrum lies the second potential audience: pet owners. This non-specialised, heterogeneous group includes anyone who owns a cat or dog (the so-called 'small animals'), a

horse, or other species such as ferrets, snakes, or parrots (the ‘exotic animals’). A wide variety of documents target this group, from leaflets on diagnostic tests and web pages on specific diseases to pet food booklets or information on emerging diseases. All these texts share a common challenge: the terminology and register need to be carefully adapted to the layman’s language.

Somewhere in between vets and owners lies the third, rather unique, potential audience: farmers. While they lack vets’ formal academic training, they have a deep knowledge of their animals (mainly cattle, swine, or poultry) gained through practical experience such as regularly monitoring their performance and growth. The terminology of texts targeting farmers must thus be chosen carefully, as a profusion of lay terms could in some cases be regarded as offensive.

So why is becoming familiar with these readers so important to ensuring the quality of the final text? Experience suggests that specialised translation is more than just specialised terminology. Sometimes a discipline’s most common terms can pose its greatest pitfalls.

Take the example of veterinary surgeons. These readers may be called ‘veterinarians’ (the preferred term in the USA), ‘veterinary surgeons’ (in the UK), ‘practitioners’ or ‘clinicians’ (if they work in clinics), ‘veterinary physicians’, or simply ‘vets’. In many languages, and depending on the context, a single term covers all of these English alternatives (such as ‘*veterinario*’ in Spanish), whereas literal translations of the different English variations (e.g. false friends such as ‘*cirujano veterinario*’ in Spanish) can sound awkward, create confusion, or even change the meaning of the text. By understanding ‘who our reader is’, we reduce the risk of inaccurately translating many of these common specialised terms.

As mentioned earlier, the end reader also greatly influences the choice of terminology. It is worth noting that it is not just a matter of following the source text: what constitutes a lay or scientific term in one language is not always the same in another. In English, for example, both vets and owners use the term ‘heartworm disease’ to refer to the condition caused by the roundworm *Dirofilaria immitis*. This is not the case in languages such as Spanish, in which two different terms are used. Only by bearing in mind who their reader is can specialised Spanish translators make the right terminological choice for a document targeting vets (*filariosis*) or pet owners (*enfermedad del gusano del corazón*).

While some might argue that failing to make these terminological distinctions is not a major issue, there

is no denying that a text that takes them into account conveys a much higher degree of specialisation and, thus, quality. That, in turn, is something that readers and clients alike are bound to notice.

Now that we have addressed the question of *who*, it is time to turn to *what*, specifically: ‘what is the context of the original and how can understanding its challenges help us in our work?’

What is the context of my original?

The decision to specialise in a new field can be quite tough for a translator. In animal health, the first documents received will offer mere glimpses into a much broader world. Eventually, one hopes, these glimpses will come together to paint a portrait for the translator of the veterinary universe as a whole. Only then will he or she understand not only what is being said (the words) but also what has been left unspoken (the context).

To illustrate this idea, imagine that you receive a marketing piece from a US customer on a medicinal product used to treat coccidiosis in poultry. The text mentions that the product has a withdrawal period of 0 days. You start the translation, bearing in mind who your end reader is and choosing the right terminology. Will that be enough? Probably.

But let’s consider the same example from another perspective. You start the translation and, after a bit of research, learn that coccidiosis is the most prevalent disease affecting the US broiler industry.⁷ You now understand why a short withdrawal period is such a big selling point for veterinary pharmaceutical companies: the shorter it is, the faster farmers can sell the meat from their animals and earn a profit.

Would you approach the translation the same way in the first and second scenarios? Clearly, the translator in the second scenario has a much broader understanding of the context, and the quality of his or her translation can only benefit from that. Texts do not exist in a vacuum; they are framed by the trends and key concepts that shape the field they deal with. By familiarising themselves with this context, translators will thus be better equipped to understand the ‘unspoken’ aspects of each text and to take the best decisions accordingly.

As translators, understanding this specific context also offers us insight into the veterinary market as a whole. Being aware of the challenges posed by this market allows us to better grasp our customers’ needs and, thus, improves our communication with them. Ultimately, it is this knowledge that will allow our customers to look to us as truly specialised partners.

For instance, veterinary translators know that in recent years farm animal welfare has engendered increasing concern. The EU has approved several directives in this regard, covering broilers, laying hens, pigs, and calves.⁸ Their implementation has impacted (or will impact) the economics and operations of EU animal husbandry. It is thus not surprising – and can even make for interesting observations to share with our customers – to receive, for example, documents dealing with alternatives to the surgical castration of male piglets, a once routine procedure that will be definitively abandoned from 1 January 2018 because of welfare concerns.⁹

Such challenges and trends are the reason we suddenly find ourselves receiving more documents on a given topic. Recognising them not only leads to a better informed translation process, but also conveys a much more specialised image of our work in our exchanges with customers. It is not always easy to keep abreast of these market trends, but, as in any specialised field, the effort pays off by helping us build long-term relationships with our customers. It is also what makes translation such a passionate and rewarding career: we are not merely language specialists; we are constantly learning about our field.

Is understanding our readership and the context of our project enough to start building our veterinary expertise and ensure quality? Not quite. We have one more question to consider: how?

How is my source text organised?

As in other specialised fields, when you receive a veterinary text to translate, you must ask yourself whether the source document follows an official structure or format. Especially where regulatory documents are concerned, the original may be using a specific ‘regulated’ wording or template that, if an official translation exists, will need to be reproduced in the target language too.

One of the best known examples for both medical and veterinary translators is the product information (PI) included in the market authorization application for medicinal products. When drafting this document, pharmaceutical companies must use the latest version of the template published in their language by the European Medicines Agency;¹⁰ the template includes the wording for each section and subsection, as well as several standard sentences of the PI.

As for the medicinal product’s dosage form, route of administration, and container, the terms chosen for the PI must be included in the approved list of

standard terms published by the European Directorate for the Quality of Medicines and Healthcare.¹¹

As both the PI templates and the list of standard terms are available in all EU languages, a translator receiving the PI for a medicinal product for veterinary use will need to refer to these official documents too. There is no shortcut: if they are not followed, the translation will be of no use to the customer, as it will not be compliant with the requirements set by the regulatory authorities.

Medical translators familiar with medicinal products for human use should be cautious with veterinary PIs. Whereas some of the sections from the PI for human medicines are quite similar to those from the vet PI, other information, such as the target species or withdrawal period, is not applicable to humans and, thus, not included in the human template.

Likewise, they will notice how different the standard terms for veterinary medicines are from those for human medicines. In short, they must be ready to immerse themselves in a world of premixes for medicated feeding stuff, spot-on applicators, in-ovo injection devices, teat dip solutions, and drinking water/milk use, among many other things, for those will be their companions on the road to veterinary specialisation.

In addition to the veterinary pharmaceutical sector, other key fields in veterinary science have regulatory documents as well. One very recent example is animal nutrition. This field underwent a major legislative change in 2010 when Regulation (EC) 767/2009,¹² which aims to simplify feed legislation, came into force. The new regulation sets out new requirements for the labelling and marketing of feeds and pet food.

For veterinary translators, this new regulation, along with its associated legislation, has emerged as an essential reference. Its approval has led to the establishment of a specific set of ‘compliant’ terms and headings that need to be used in some of the label sections.

As Regulation (EC) 767/2009 is, of course, available in all official EU languages, it goes without saying that when translating a label, translators must take all the ‘regulated’ terms from the version of the regulation in their language to ensure a linguistically ‘compliant’ label.

Not following the official formats or regulations can have several consequences for our customers. In the examples given, it can lead to delays in a medicinal product’s approval or, in the case of ‘non-compliant’ labels, to a waste of time (due to negotiations with national authorities) and money (fines).¹³ Quality in ‘regulated’ documents is by no means

subjective: it is closely linked to the translator's capacity to recognise and follow official wording to fully meet the customer's needs.

Conclusion

Human health is affected by animal health and vice versa. This reality brings together not only scientists from different disciplines but also specialised translators and editors. Veterinary science is an important, and long neglected, field of specialisation for any life sciences translator.

As seen in this paper, veterinary specialisation requires much more than simply choosing the right words in the target language. Not only must translators consider who their target audience will be in order to use the appropriate terminology and register, they must also constantly review the context, market trends, and regulatory documents affecting the sector in order to consistently take the best translation decisions and fulfil their customers' needs.

In short, veterinary translations require both taking a questioning approach to the original and a strong commitment to continuous learning in the field. It is this questioning approach that will allow translators to unravel the complexity of the originals, a key step to both high-quality translations and, in the long term, a steady workflow.

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