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"DON'T FIX BAD TRANSLATIONS": A NETNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF TRANSLATORS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF BACK TRANSLATION IN THE MEDICAL DOMAIN

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Abstract

Back translation (BT) means taking a translation and translating it back into the original language to check the accuracy of the translation. In the Health Sciences, BT is widely used and considered the gold standard for quality assurance. However, BT has received very limited attention within Translation Studies, and at the same time, there seems to be a lack of consensus in guidelines on BT within the medical field on the appropriate approach to BT. This begs the question of whether translators know what BT is and how they understand and approach BT. Using a netnographic approach, we explored translators' utterances related to BT in two online translator forums. The analysis showed some confusion as to the appropriate approach to BT which underlines the importance of providing translators with a brief. This, however, requires that clients are aware of the purpose and limitations of BT.

Zusammenfassung

Bei der Rückübersetzung wird eine Übersetzung zurück in die Ausgangssprache übersetzt um die Genauigkeit der Übersetzung zu prüfen. In den Gesundheitswissenschaften hat die Rückübersetzung sich als Standard durchgesetzt und zwar als Teil der Qualitätssicherung bei der Übersetzung von Forschungsinstrumenten. Der Methode der Rückübersetzung wird aber in der Translationswissenschaft wenig Aufmerksamkeit

geschenkt. Gleichzeitig scheint es einen mangelnden Konsens über den passenden Ansatz zur Rückübersetzung zu geben. Damit drängt es sich die Frage auf, ob Übersetzer wissen, was Rückübersetzung ist, wie sie Rückübersetzung verstehen und wie sie an Rückübersetzung herangehen. Mithilfe von der Methode der Netnographie haben wir die Äußerungen von Übersetzern über Rückübersetzung in zwei Online-Foren für Übersetzer analysiert. Die Analyse hat eine gewisse Verwirrung hinsichtlich des passenden Ansatzes zur Rückübersetzung gezeigt. Dies unterstreicht die Wichtigkeit, dass Übersetzern ein Übersetzungsauftrag zur Verfügung gestellt wird. Dies sieht aber voraus, dass die Kunden sich dem Zweck und den Beschränkungen der Rückübersetzung bewusst sind.

Keywords: Back translation. Medical translation. Netnography. Translation strategy.

Schlagwörter: Rückübersetzung. Medizinische Übersetzung. Netnographie. Übersetzungsstrategie.

1. Introduction

Back translation (BT) means taking a translated document and translating it back into the source language (Paegelow 2008; Klein & Van Til 2014). BT is one of the most widely used quality assurance tools for cross-cultural adaptation of research instruments within the medical field (Douglas & Craig 2007, Ozolins 2009). In 2009, Ozolins stated that "[b]ack translation is a practice little studied in translation literature yet surprisingly prevalent in many areas of technical, particularly medical translation" (2009: 1). Now, eight years later, limited attention is still given to BT in the Translation Studies (TS) literature. Searches on "back translation" (or "back-translation") in "All fields" within Translation Studies Bibliography and BITRA yield 37 and 68 results, respectively; however, many of these are not related to the medical domain, and the 12 that are related are publications from medical journals and dissertations from the medical field, with only four published in TS journals. By contrast, a search on "back translation" or "back-translation" in "All fields" in the biomedical database PubMed yields 1,330 results. Even though we acknowledge that PubMed is a much larger database, judging from these preliminary searches, it appears that BT within the medical domain has been given limited attention in TS. Considering the widespread use of and importance assigned to BT within the medical domain, the method of BT demands attention within TS.

BT has been applied within TS, but has mainly been used as a tool to ensure accuracy in the translation of religious (Beekman 1967; Blight 1980; Al-Khawalda 2004) and literary texts (Giaccio 2012; Gaskill 2013), to evaluate Machine Translation output (Somers 2005; Aiken & Park 2010), as a method within translation training (Titford 1983; González Davies & Scott-Tennent 2005), and to study TS-related phenomena such as explicitation (Klaudy 1996; Makkos & Robin 2014) or implicitation (Makkos & Robin 2014).

The four TS publications found in the databases that related to BT in the medical domain were Ozolins (2009), Tyupa (2011), Bolaños-Medina & González-Ruiz (2012) and Karwacka (2014). Bolaños-Medina & González-Ruiz (2012) document the BT process for psychological tests and discuss BT from a TS perspective, and Karwacka (2014) describes BT as one of the main

quality control methods for medical translation. Ozolins (2009) presents a case study of the BT process for a medical diagnostic tool, and Tyupa (2011) argues for embedding BT in the theoretical linguistic framework of Cognitive Grammar.

The purpose of this article is to shed more light on how BT is used in practice and more specifically, how professional translators approach BT assignments. To do so, in the following, we first present BT as a method within the medical domain and discuss the necessary approach to BT, which leads us to our research question (Section 2): *How do professional translators understand and approach back translation?* We then outline the method we applied to answer the research question (Section 3). Next, we present the results of our analysis (Section 4). Finally, we discuss the results and outline conclusions, including further perspectives (Section 5).

2. Back translation as a method in the medical domain

Despite the limited focus on BT within TS, BT is actually considered to be the gold standard for quality assurance in the medical field (Ozolins 2009). Translation is a very important part of cross-cultural adaptation of tests and research instruments as the majority of these are devised in English. Instead of producing a new test or instrument from scratch in the new language, the English version is usually translated. There are two reasons for this. First, it is faster and less expensive to adapt an existing instrument than to create a new one to measure the same construct in another culture. Second, it enables the implementation of cross-national studies (Hambleton 1993; Bolaños-Medina & González-Ruiz 2012). In relation to cross-national studies, the importance of quality translations is linked to "ensuring that the results obtained in cross-cultural research are not due to errors in translation, but rather are due to real differences or similarities between cultures in the phenomena being measured" (Maneesriwongul & Dixon 2004). Thus, when used in the medical domain, BT has a very specific application and meaning, and it plays a specific role in a larger process of cross-cultural adaptation. This process usually consists of the following steps (Tyupa 2011: 36):

forward translation → back translation → back translation review and discussion → finalization

Typically, an English-language ST is translated into another language by one translator (forward translation). This forward translation is then back translated into English by another translator (back translation). Subsequently, the

BT and the original ST are compared with the aim of identifying and solving discrepancies (back translation review and discussion). Lastly, the final TT is made (finalization). For BT to fulfil its purpose, it is generally agreed that the forward and back translations must be carried out by different translators (Brislin 1970, 1986; Several Authors 2017a; Several Authors 2017b), and that the back translator should not be provided with the original ST (Several Authors 2014). Even though BT has been the subject of criticism (e.g. McKenna and Doward 2005), a large number of translators perform BT as part of their professional services (Ozolins 2009).

2.1. Approach to back translation

Since the aim of BT is to identify discrepancies between the original ST and the BT, and thus between the original ST and the forward translation, the appropriate approach to BT would seem to be a literal strategy. This is also supported by some sources in which it is claimed that for BT to fulfil its purpose, back translators need to use a "literal" or "faithful" translation strategy (Grunwald & Goldfarb 2006; Klein & Van Til 2014; MHCS 2014; Several Authors 2017a). Even though these sources do not discuss BT from a translation-theoretical perspective, their utterances resonate well with a functionalist approach to translation as advocated by, for example, Reiß & Vermeer (1984) and Nord (1997). This is supported by Bolaños-Medina & González-Ruiz who state that "the functionalist theories are especially well equipped to provide a thorough understanding of the process of test adaptation" (2012: 729). The reason why functionalist approaches seem to be a particularly suitable paradigm for regarding the overall translation process is that the forward and back translations have clearly different functions (or skopoi). While the skopos of the forward translation is to produce "a fully functional version of a test in a different language and culture" (Bolaños-Medina & González-Ruiz 2012: 715), i.e. a publishable text in its own right, the BT needs to document the forward translation. Thus, Nord's distinction between documentary and instrumental translation seems useful when exploring the concept of BT as part of a cross-cultural adaptation process (Nord 1997). While the forward translation should be an instrument, BT requires a documentary approach or strategy in the sense that the back translator documents the source text, in this case the forward translation. Similarly, Klein and Van Til (2014: 13) argue that the translation strategies required for forward and back translation, respectively, are placed on different ends of a continuum:

> Unlike the forward translator, who will usually follow a more communicative approach and translate with the target audience in mind, the back translator

> must refrain from embellishing the translation in any manner to make it sound "natural" in the target language. Instead, the back translator must try to translate as literally as the rules of the target language permit. Such a literal approach will likely result in some unnatural, sometimes even awkward-sounding, sentences, but that is acceptable and even necessary in back translation.

Thus, the skopos of the BT is quite unique, as it allows for unnatural and awkward-sounding language. Such a skopos is not the most often used within specialised translation where an instrumental strategy is typically required (Nord 2006: 40). This underlines the importance of a translation brief. Several Authors (2014) supports this by stating that the translators "should be made aware that they are making a back-translation" (6), indicating that translators are not always provided with translation instructions. Therefore, while the importance of a translation brief is generally stressed within functionalist approaches to translation, it might, in the context of BT, be especially important, not least because the text type would usually prompt the translator to opt for an instrumental strategy. A lack of brief could have undesirable consequences, as witnessed from personal experience by one of the authors working as a translator, who was asked to translate a patient questionnaire back into English (from Danish), and that was all the information given. If the translator had had no previous experience or knowledge of BT, she would have ignored source text errors such as "whether the information was credibility", and just translated into the correct target language phrase. This would have defeated the purpose of BT, as it would not have been possible to know that there was an error in the Danish version, which was actually the version to be used in practice.

Even though the above shows the importance of a literal or documentary strategy in BT, interestingly, Wild et al. (2005), in their review of 12 major guidelines for translation and cultural adaptation, found that there was little agreement regarding how BT should be carried out. This suggests a lack of awareness that different strategies might be applied in translation, and that forward and back translation require different strategies. A widely used guideline, the WHO guideline for the translation and adaptation of instruments, does in fact provide instructions on the strategy: "As in the initial translation, emphasis in the back-translation should be on conceptual and cultural equivalence and not linguistic equivalence" (WHO 2017). However, this stands in contrast to the above argument that different strategies are needed for the forward and back translation, respectively. Also, they seem to argue for an instrumental strategy, in Nord's terminology, for BT, which as we argued above, seems to defeat the purpose of BT. This lack of consensus on the appropriate approach to BT and the fact that BT is not widely used and known in TS beg

the question of whether translators know what BT is and how to approach it. To explore this further, we formulated the following research question: *How do professional translators understand and approach back translation?*

3. Method

To answer our research question, we used the methodology of netnography (Kozinets 2002; 2010), also sometimes referred to as cyberethnography or online ethnography (Jiménez-Crespo 2017). Netnography is a "qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications" (Kozinets 2002: 62). Originally developed for online marketing research, netnography is now used within a multitude of fields. However, within TS, netnography is a new method. Searches for "netnography" and "netnographic" in Translation Studies Bibliography and BITRA yielded only two results; Dombek (2014), who studied translation crowdsourcing, and Li (2015), who studied fansubbing.

As a marketing research technique, netnography "uses the information publicly available in online forums to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups" (Kozinets 2002: 62-63). Here, we use it for a slightly different purpose, i.e. we use the information publicly available in online forums to identify and understand translators' understandings of and approaches to BT. Netnography, compared to traditional ethnography, is entirely unobtrusive (Kozinets 2002: 63), and compared to interview and focus group studies, it employs naturalistic data. This combination of naturalistic data collected without obtrusion makes netnographic studies unique. One of the main limitations is that only the utterances of groups or individuals who have participated actively online are studied.

We find online communities to be a relevant research setting for our purposes. Online communities play an increasingly important role in the way in which the translation profession is practiced, and for many translators, especially freelancers, online networks are a way of interacting with other translators and securing new contracts (McDonough 2007). Inspired by Kozinets, we went through the following steps: (1) Entré: formulation of research questions and identification of appropriate online fora for study, (2) Data collection: direct copy from the computer-mediated communications of online community members, (3) Analysis and interpretation: classification, coding analysis and contextualization of communicative acts, and 4) Research ethics.

In relation to step 1, based on our research question, we identified Proz (proz.com) and Translators Café (translatorscafe.com) as the best-known

online translation communities (Garcia 2015) with Proz advertising itself as the "largest network of translation professionals" (McDonough Dolmaya 2011: 48) and self-reporting over 600,000 members on its website, and Translators Café, self-reporting just under 200,000 (Garcia 2015). Biel (2008) has described Proz as "a global translator community, which offers its members a possibility to advertise their services, quote on translation jobs (marketplace), verify clients' payment practices, as well as to ask terminological questions and search previous questions and members' glossaries" (32). The same functionalities are available in the Translators Café community.

In step 2, data collection, we used the advanced search function to search in the discussion forums on Proz for English posts with "back translation" in the title and asked to see results as topics. This means that somewhere within the whole thread, at least one contributor posted a comment with "back translation" in the title. A similar search was conducted in the discussion forums on Translators Café for threads where "back translation" was in the subject. As a result of this, 39 and 4 threads were retrieved from Proz and Translators Café, respectively. All the results were copied and filed.

In step 3, analysis and interpretation, all threads were closely read by both authors in order to determine their relevance. In this process, we excluded threads in which the concept of BT was only mentioned, but was not further described as well as threads in which it was unclear whether the included posts were referring to BT in the medical domain. For example, threads related to BT used within other domains, such as marketing, were excluded from the data set. We determined posts to be related to the medical domain when the thread initiator had addressed BT in a medical context, or when the posters explicitly referred to BT in the context of the translation of research instruments such as medical questionnaires, surveys and tests, i.e. in the medical or pharmaceutical field. Furthermore, we included posts added by posters who had said elsewhere in the thread or in another thread included in the data set that he or she had experience with BT in the context of translation of such research instruments. This led to the exclusion of 23 and 2 threads from Proz and Translators Café, respectively. The final data set thus included 16 threads from Proz and 2 from Translators Café. Of the included threads, the earliest were started in 2003 and the last posts were added in 2016. Thus, the analysis included posts added by translators over a time span of 14 years. The data were analysed using an inductive approach and, following Saldanha & O'Brien, we used our research question "as a prism through which to view the information and choose relevant items" (2013: 189). All data were analysed with both authors sitting together – all codes and subsequent themes were discussed and negotiated.

For step 4, research ethics, Kozinets suggests several points including full disclosure of presence, affiliations, and intentions to online community members and contacting community members to obtain their permission (informed consent) to use any specific postings that are to be directly quoted in the research. We chose, in line with Convery & Cox (2012), a research-specific ethical approach, which means taking into consideration the particular features of the investigated online community, the selected methodology and the research questions. The data used were publicly available, and we judged that a minimal risk was associated with reporting on utterances published in an open-access forum. Therefore, we did not disclose our presence and we did not obtain informed consent from the contributors.

4. Results

The included discussion forum threads carried titles such as "Back Translation", "Approach to backtranslation – dispute with an agency", "the ethics of translation tests", "back translation – what is it?" and "Poll: Have you ever been asked to do back translation?". The latter thread contained comments in response to a poll created on 11 March 2015, for which 1,301 translators had provided their answer. Although the poll was general, and not domain-specific, it was interesting to note that 50% of the translators had answered *yes* to this question, particularly in the light of the limited attention given to BT in TS literature, as mentioned above.

During our analysis, we identified three overall themes: 1) purpose of back translation, 2) translation strategy, and 3) attitudes towards back translation. These are described and illustrated using quotes in the following section.

4.1. Purpose of back translation

When explaining the purpose of BT, contributors describe it as a "common method of quality control", and it is performed "to be very sure there's no loss of meaning". They also describe BT as different from regular translation as "back translation is used for quality assurance, not to be published". Some contributors addressed the purpose of BT very briefly, using expressions such as "accuracy", and other contributors explained its purpose in a very elaborate way, also demonstrating knowledge of the larger context in which BT is applied. For instance, one contributor stated:

> It increases the scientific validity of tests too: It's a method used to verify the accuracy and to capture the nuances of connotations in translated text […] This accuracy enhances the similarity of test validity that might need to be

> done when the translated test is used as a research instrument in the target language. If an instrument is translated accurately (an intelligence test, for instance) then the researchers in the target language can collect data from their participants with the knowledge that each question is as similar to the original […]

Thus, the contributor is well aware of the role of BT in the broader process of cross-cultural adaptation of research instruments, enabling comparison of research results across different countries. Along the same lines, another contributor stressed that within the medical domain, BT is often required by ethics committees or institutional review boards.

Apart from stating that the overall purpose of BT is to ensure accuracy, some contributors gave more detailed descriptions of the purpose of the BT process such as "back translation is meant to point to any inconsistencies/ambiguities" and that it is "often the only way to catch the wrong choice of register for a word/or ambiguity". Another contributor stated that:

> Most of the back translations I do are surveys and medical questionnaires, where it is important to distinguish between frequency and severity of symptoms, for instance, or different types and patterns of symptoms. Here it is important that sometimes intimate subjects are appropriately and correctly described, and that the scales from mild to severe etc. are correctly understood, as they can skew results and invalidate the survey if the translation does not reflect the researchers' intentions. You can never be 100% sure, but this is one way of looking for errors.

Thus, this contributor seems to have extensive experience of BT and demonstrates thorough awareness of important aspects to consider in BT, such as precision when explaining symptoms as well as using comparable scales.

As seen above, the data suggested a good grasp of the purpose of BT; however, we also saw contributors who did not know what BT is and what it entails, and had come to the forum to ask fellow translators for help, e.g. after receiving a BT assignment. This led to experienced contributors describing the process as well as some of the essential factors that should be taken into account.

4.1.1. Brief

Contributors mentioned that translators need to be informed that the assignment is a BT. For example, one contributor stated that "you have to know it is a back translation". Another said that he is always informed that he is to perform a BT and how to do it:

> And I've always been informed of the nature of the work before beginning it. It's to ensure the quality of a translation, by translating it back to the original/source language, and then comparing the back-translation to the original text. I'm also often asked to comment on the differences after completion of the back translation.

However, we also saw contributors stating that they are not always told, and one example where the translator had even asked the client whether it was a BT:

> I have had a few assignments that I strongly suspected were back-translations, but inquiries to the agency resulted in the instruction, "the client says, no, it's all there is, just translate it as well as you can." In the absence of instructions to the contrary, I follow, as X said above, the usual policy of creating a top quality text. If it was indeed a back-translation, and the client thought to get an unbiased evaluation by not revealing that fact, then the exercise was a failure.

The problem is not only that the translator is not informed that s/he is supposed to do a BT, but also that the client did not want the translator to know for some reason. This translator as well as other contributors argued that BT becomes pointless if translators are not told that they are performing a BT. In that case, the client will instead receive a text which has not been translated literally, and which cannot be used in the larger translation process where it is to be compared with the forward translation. If the translator is not informed, s/he cannot even educate the client and argue why the exercise is problematic.

> Translators need briefs with information on the purpose, but clients also need to know the purpose of BT and what it entails. The fact that some clients do not want translators to know, resulting in pointless BTs, indicates that they need to be more knowledgeable about BT. In the following, quotes related to clients' knowledge of BT are presented.

4.1.2. Clients

We saw contributors arguing that some clients are ignorant in relation to the workings of BT as witnessed by the following quote:

> Through all these projects, the client constantly complains that our back translations do NOT use "... exactly the same wording as the original text." I repeatedly tell them that we back translate the EXACT meaning and nuance we find in the translation. If there are differences between our back translation & the forward translation, then the first part of the back translation process has been successful: Identify areas of potential translation misunderstandings/meaning differences to the original. At first they asked us to simply change the back translation to reflect the original. Of course I refused, pointing out that this was futile and would not improve the forward translation (which we believe is one goal of a back translation).

This illustrates a situation in which a client does not seem to understand the purpose of BT judging by their failure to understand why the BT does not match the original ST and by the fact that they ask the translator to change the BT. The same situation was experienced by another translator:

> Having said that, a few weeks ago I had a situation where the end client instructed the agency that my back-translation had to be tweaked so that it used exactly the same terms as the original. I refused to do so, as it would no longer have been a translation of the text provided, but instead provided comments on why my translation was justified. […] At the end of that little experience, I was left wondering whether it was the client who didn't know what back-translations are for, or me!

In conclusion, contributors generally seemed to agree that everyone involved in the BT process, including client and back translator, need to understand the purpose of BT, as well as its strengths and limitations. For instance, the client must understand that minor variations in wording do not indicate a problem, but that changes in meaning often do.

4.2. Translation strategy

As seen in section 2, the guidelines for BT seem to differ in their description of the appropriate translation strategy. However, the analysis showed that many of the contributors said that a back translator should follow a literal translation strategy:

> Backtranslation is always literal and even word-for-word, no literature or style required here.

Thus, in functionalist terms, it seems that the contributors see BT as requiring a documentary strategy in the sense that the back translator documents the source text. Along the same lines, some contributors made it very clear that the back translator should not "fix" problems in the forward translation. One contributor posted a comment with the title "Extremely important: don't fix bad translations" and added that it would be a disservice to the forward translator to fix bad parts of his or her translation in the BT. Another contributor even stated that the "temptation" to make improvements has to be resisted.

However, one contributor, although suggesting that he would use a literal strategy when producing a BT, also indicated that he would make the BT more comprehensible than the forward translation:

> In any case, since my priority is normally to produce top quality work, I find myself being able to produce something comprehensible out of something that is not very comprehensible in the source text. Yet to truly reflect the quality of that source text (the translation I am returning to the original language),

> I would have to produce something that looks horrible. In such cases all I can really do is leave a note to the effect that "yes, this English version I have produced looks fairly good, but the Spanish version I worked from would not be very comprehensible to a reader.

The contributor's comment suggests that conflicting strategies are at play in the sense that s/he seems to translate in a documentary manner (reflecting the quality of the forward translation and producing something that "looks horrible") and at the same time produces something that is more comprehensible than the forward translation which suggests a more instrumental strategy. This led another poster to reply that "if something is incomprehensible or ambiguous in the original translation, it is your duty to render it in the same way in the back translation", also arguing for a documentary strategy. In relation to comments that suggest this strategy, a number of contributors stated that back translators should feel free to add explanatory notes and comments "indicating ambiguities or connotations that may be undesired".

As stated in section 4.1., contributors describe BT as being different from regular translation. One contributor also stated that the strategy to be applied in BT stands in contrast with the strategy that should be applied in forward translation, suggesting that the forward translation should be fluent (or instrumental), and that the BT should be a faithful (or documentary) translation:

> I find backtranslation quite interesting as there is a different priority order compared to a forward translation (the old fluency vs fidelity dilemma).

Interestingly, referring to the forward translation process that precedes BT, one contributor stated that:

> I've noticed that some of my colleagues, when they know their translation is going to be backtranslated, do not think in rendering a good translation, they prefer to do a literal translation (that sometimes means nothing or it does not sound fluent in the translated language) instead.

This suggests that the forward translator might change his or her translation strategy into a more literal or documentary one if he or she knows that the translation is going to be back-translated, thus potentially increasing the degree of overlap between the original source text and the BT. Another contributor followed up by stating that if he knew his forward translation was supposed to be back-translated, he might translate it in a way that facilitates better BT. He added that:

> [this] isn't always a bad thing, but it's not always good either, because it dilutes the effectiveness of the back translation, since most problems that may be identified by a back translation would have already been eliminated by the forward translator.

This not only dilutes the effectiveness of the BT as pointed out by the contributor, it can also lead to a low-quality forward translation, and thus to an inadequate instrument. This point has also been problematized in the literature, for example by Bolaños-Medina & González-Ruiz (2012) and Epstein et al. (2015).

4.3. Attitudes towards back translation

When exploring the translators' understandings of and approaches to BT, we found conflicting attitudes. Many contributors were quite critical of BT, with attitudes ranging from scepticism to pure hate:

> don't think it works very well at all. But then it's easy money so […]
>
> Back translations - I HATE THEM!!!

Some contributors stated that BT is a very "blunt instrument", which can only catch some basic errors like missing sentences. It is compared to "gauging a translation by running the spelling checker on it" as it will say "very little about the text's fitness for purpose".

On the other hand, some contributors seemed surprised about such sceptical attitudes, as they had positive experience with BT:

> For many translators it is an article of almost religious faith that "back-translations are useless." But the fact is, when done properly for a client who is used to working with back-translations and knows their limitations, they are tremendously useful.

Other contributors expressed positive attitudes towards BT, for example stating that "there are very good reasons for back-translation in certain fields, medical being one of them", and that "back translation can be a valuable exercise for ensuring that everything is correct".

We also saw sceptical attitudes that did not seem to be related to BT itself, but to the ignorance of some of the parties involved. A poster who reported that 50% of his workload is BT work stated that:

> Unfortunately it's hardly a perfect process, and it's designed to serve clients who have no working knowledge of a language, and as such it is rife with problems, especially when managed by project managers who have no clue what they're doing (I can't tell you how many PMs I've actually had to educate on the process, despite the fact THEY were asking ME to perform the task (and asking me to do so in an erroneous manner)).

This underlines the issue described above, i.e. that all parties need to have a thorough understanding of BT, an issue that was also mentioned by other contributors:

> The fact that most agencies and translators seem to have limited insight into the process doesn't make it a bad one. The process itself, when executed properly - which by definition must mean without reference to the original source - is in fact very useful.

One of the main reasons given for the scepticism was that some translators think that a thorough review of the forward translation would yield the same or better results, as witnessed by the following quote:

> I cannot see how back-translation can ever be as good as having a couple of native translators check the original translation in the normal manner. It's a flawed process.

One contributor even argued that it would be both easier and cheaper to assess the forward translation than to conduct BT. Comparing BT to review, another translator stated sarcastically that a translator could "switch off thinking for a while, turn on the back translation machine, and somehow the errors will magically become obvious". However, according to another translator's experience, BT may lead to the identification of problematic issues that are not identified in a review: "I have also found that a back translation highlights possible issues which are not always apparent when simply evaluating the original translation." Another translator's comment supported this view: "I've worked on many projects where the back-translation process picked up errors in the original source text that had gotten past everyone, or errors or problems in the translation that no one had noticed using the more traditional approaches to quality control." So, even though there were many critical voices, it also became clear that many found BT to be a valuable method.

5. Discussion and conclusions

In light of the profound importance assigned to BT as a method within the medical domain, in our search for TS literature on BT, we were quite surprised by the apparent lack of attention given to the method. Our analysis showed that some translators had extensive practical experience with and knowledge of BT. Other translators did not know what BT is and what it entails. This is problematic as BT has a specific skopos and requires a documentary translation strategy, as discussed in section 2. This is in line with the argument put forward in functionalist approaches, i.e. that a translated text is not exclusively determined by the ST and that its own purpose or skopos must be borne in mind. Thus, a BT assignment cannot be given to translators without instructions since their standard procedure for the text type, research instruments, would be to fix bad translations and produce a well-written, fluent text.

Based on our review of the existing literature and guidelines on BT, we found a lack of guidance or even conflicting attitudes concerning the appropriate strategy for BT, even though it is clear that a documentary strategy is needed. In our analysis, we found several translators arguing for a documentary approach, and a translator suggesting that one should make an instrumental translation. The attitudes towards BT varied, but it is a topic that can make translators exasperated. The main frustrations were linked to the lack of a brief, clients' lack of knowledge or mismatched expectations. Thus, the analysis underlines the importance of giving a brief with information on the purpose of BT and the needed approach. This brief has to be provided by the client. However, this can be problematic, as the results showed that some clients seemed to be ignorant of the purpose of BT which was evident when they, for example, suggested that the translator should change the BT to match the original ST or refused to inform that s/he was doing a BT.

In conclusion, if all parties to the BT process know the purpose of BT and its limitations, then it seems to be a valuable tool. We therefore recommend that the widely used BT guidelines (such as WHO and EORTC) include an explicit statement that translators should be given instructions on the purpose of BT and the needed strategy.

5.1. Limitations

One limitation of our study is that our data draw on only two translator forums, and that only the utterances of translators who have actively participated in the forums can be included in the data set. This means that translators who are not members of or who do not contribute actively to these forums could have other approaches to and understandings of BT to which we do not have access. Also, although the threads included in the analysis covered a time span of 14 years, many of the quotes included above stem from two extensive threads from 2007 and 2015; however, from the posts of many individual translators. Thus, they represent viewpoints of many different translators. Furthermore, Proz and Translators Café are advertised as networks for *professional* translators. However, for example, translation students might participate in the networks as well. Moreover, there might be many people performing BT who are not professional translators. According to Hambleton, this has often been the case in the past at least, where back translators were hired just because they "happened to be available – a friend, a wife of a colleague, someone who could be hired cheaply, and so on" (2005: 10). The input of such non-professional translators would have been valuable as well.

5.2. Further perspectives

We believe that BT requires further attention in TS. For example, inspired by the results of the above analysis, it would be interesting to explore whether BT is, in fact, a more effective means of quality control than a thorough review of the forward translation. This could, for instance, be explored in product- and process-oriented studies (Saldanha & O'Brien 2013) of the translation of tests and instruments from the medical domain. Also, it would be highly interesting to explore who BT translators are, as Hambleton (2005) states that non-professionals were often used in the past. We hope that other scholars will take an interest in the method of BT, which is widely used, but given little academic attention at least in TS.

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