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## Beliefs, attitudes and expectations on how to translate medical and biomedical content: The perspective of the novice translator

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### Abstract

In contrast to medical interpreting, there is much less information on translators' beliefs about how to translate written medical content and how these beliefs differ from the translation preferences and expectations of health professionals. Investigating translators' beliefs is nevertheless important if we want a more nuanced understanding of how translators' choices are influenced by how they believe they should translate and what they believe health professionals expect from them.

Adopting a sociological and philosophical approach to the study of expectations, this paper reports on the findings from a survey investigating novice translators' beliefs about medical and biomedical translation from English to European Portuguese. The data suggests that translators' beliefs about how they think they should translate do not coincide with their expectations about how readers believe they should translate. The research results represent a further step towards a fuller picture of the role of expectations about medical translation, as well as having implications for translators' training.

**Keywords:** *medical translation; novice translators; expectations; readers; reception*

### Introduction

Researchers within Translation Studies have showed an increasing interest in examining “real readers”—as opposed to ideal readers —, as well as their evaluation of particular translation options, their cognitive response to the reception of translated products, and the effect of different aspects, such as linguistic or technical elements on reception (Brems & Pinto, 2013).

Apart from a recognized need to gather empirical data on readers' assessment of translations and their expectations regarding translators and revisers' work, it is also relevant to compare these readers' expectations with the beliefs of translators with different levels of experience to understand if translators' and readers' beliefs and expectations converge.

However, as far as medical and biomedical translation is concerned, although much progress has been made in research in interpreting, there is, to the best of our knowledge, little to no research that empirically and descriptively examines not only medical translators' expectations, but also health professionals' reception of translations. Concerning expectation in medical interpreting, research has focused, for instance, on interpreters and clinicians' expectations of the role of professional interpreters (Crezee, Zucchi, & Jülich, 2020) or on the attitudes and expectations of stakeholders regarding interpreters as patient allies (Hsieh, 2006).

This article adopts a sociological and philosophical approach based on game theory and social norms towards the study of expectations to differentiate between agents' beliefs about him/herself, agents' beliefs about other agents' actions and agents' beliefs about other agents' beliefs (mainly Bicchieri, 2006, 2017; Bicchieri, Muldoon, & Sontuoso, 2018). This approach provides a means of differentiating types of beliefs which are often overlooked in Social Sciences and Translation Studies. In Social Sciences questionnaires, Bicchieri (2017) reports, questions about attitudes are often too vague to capture distinctions between beliefs: "all the researcher attains with such questions are just nonspecific personal normative beliefs of the responder" (Kindle location 347). Since behavior may be more influenced by what the agent believes others expect from him/her, than what the agent believes he/she should do, it is particularly relevant to differentiate and elicit different types of beliefs (Bicchieri, 2017, Chapter 1).

Having in mind the outlined research gaps, this paper reports on the findings of a survey study addressing novice translators' beliefs regarding:

- how they should translate;
- how readers assess translations; and
- what readers consider an appropriate translation and how readers believe translators should translate.

The study is described in the next section, followed by the results of the survey. These are discussed in the last section, along with implications, limitations, and avenues for future research.

## Methods

As part of a larger empirical research project on biomedical translation from English to European Portuguese (Valdez, 2019; Valdez & Vandepitte, 2021), a questionnaire was designed using the survey tool SurveyMonkey. This questionnaire aimed to elicit novice translators' beliefs concerning the translation of medical and biomedical content aimed

at novice translators and consisted of 21 open- and close-ended questions, divided into four sections: (1) profile; (2) beliefs about translators; (3) beliefs about revisers; (4) beliefs about target readers. The data collection period was between June 2017 and January 2018. The final version of the questionnaire is the result of a pilot. This paper reports on part of the data elicited in the questionnaire.

To elicit different types of beliefs, including the translators' beliefs about him/herself, about readers' actions and readers' beliefs about translators, Bicchieri's typology of self-beliefs and beliefs about other agents was adapted (see Table 1).

*Table 1. Overview of self-beliefs and beliefs about other agents  
(adapted from Bicchieri, 2017, Kindle location 1153)*

| What the agent<br>believes about →<br>Type of belief ↓ | Self-beliefs  | Beliefs about other agents'<br>actions                             | Beliefs about other agents'<br>beliefs   |
|--|---|--|--|
| <b>EMPIRICAL</b>                                       | <i>what s/he does</i><br>= <b>personal empirical beliefs</b>      | <i>what other agents do</i><br>= <b>empirical expectations</b>     | <i>what others believe s/he does</i><br>= <b>second-order empirical expectations</b> |
| <b>NORMATIVE</b>                                       | <i>what s/he should do</i><br>= <b>personal normative beliefs</b> | <i>what other agents should do</i><br>= <b>normative attitudes</b> | <i>what others believe s/he should do</i><br>= <b>normative expectations</b>         |

More concretely, we focused on what translators believe about:

- *what s/he should do*, in this case, how translators should translate (personal normative beliefs);
- *what other agents do and what other agents should do*, in this case, how readers assess translations and how readers should assess the quality of a translation (empirical expectations and normative attitudes);
- *what others believe s/he does and what others believe s/he should do*, in this case, what readers consider an appropriate translation and how readers believe translators should translate (second-order empirical expectations and normative expectations).

To analyze the elicited data, the data from the open-ended questions were exported to the qualitative data tool ATLAS.ti to be coded using inductive coding. The data from the close-ended questions was processed using descriptive statistical analysis.

## Respondents

A total of fifteen novice translators took part in the survey. All the participants were native speakers of European Portuguese, and English was one of their source languages. The novice translators had up to two years of full-time experience, held a

higher education degree and reported having experience translating medical and biomedical texts.

The translators were recruited via social media, Proz.com and the websites of Portuguese translation associations (APT and APTRAD). There was no compensation for participating. All data are anonymous and for the drafting of this paper respondents were assigned fictitious names.

## Results

### What translators believe about how they should translate (personal normative beliefs)

To understand the personal normative beliefs, respondents were asked “How do you believe you should translate?” by indicating to which extent they agreed or disagreed with five statements (see Table 2). The order of the statements was randomized to avoid primacy and recency bias.

*Table 2. Translators’ personal normative beliefs*

| Answer Choices  | Strongly disagree | Disagree   | Agree       | Strongly Agree | Don't know |
|---|-------------------|------------|-------------|----------------|------------|
| A-The translator’s goal should be a faithful translation of the message as the author intended.   | 0 (0%)            | 0 (0%)     | 12 (80%)    | 3 (20%)        | 0 (0%)     |
| B-The translator is required to convey the meaning faithfully   | 0 (0%)            | 1 (6.67%)  | 10 (66.67%) | 3 (20%)        | 1 (6.67%)  |
| C-The main goal of a translator is to aim for the most natural-sounding translation conveying the meaning of the source text.   | 0 (0%)            | 1 (6.67%)  | 2 (13.33%)  | 11 (73.33%)    | 1 (6.67%)  |
| D-The translator’s job is to convey the full meaning of the source in the target language respecting its grammatical, syntactical and stylistic rules; consistently following the client’s terminology and the style guide. | 0 (0%)            | 2 (13.33%) | 5 (33.33%)  | 8 (53.33%)     | 0 (0%)     |
| E- The English text is just a starting point. The task of the translator is to translate as if the text was written in Portuguese originally.   | 1 (6.67%)         | 1 (6.67%)  | 6 (40%)     | 7 (46.67%)     | 0 (0%)     |

All respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the most source-oriented statement (Option A). Interestingly, the other options also garnered a high percentage of agreement (86.67% agreed or strongly agreed with options B, C, D and E). The statements which gathered the most disagreement were the most target-oriented (options D and E), with 3 novice translators strongly disagreeing or disagreeing with each of these statements.

### What translators believe about how readers assess translations (empirical expectations)

When asked the open-ended question “In general, how do you think the readers of the translation assess a translation?”, answered by 15 respondents, three main themes emerged from the data (see Table 3 below). The most common expressed empirical expectation was “language clarity” (10 mentions, 66.66%), followed by “as if the text was written originally in the target language” (3 mentions, 20%), and “literal translation or faithfulness” (2 mentions, 13.33%).

*Table 3. Translators’ empirical expectations — most common themes with examples of belief statements*

|  |  |
|--|--|
| “language clarity”   | <p>“I would guess that the readers assess a translation by how understandable and natural it is. I don't think that a faithful or source-oriented translation is the main focus of the reader.” (Gonçalo)</p> <p>“The naturalness of the text, mostly. If it is unreadable, they won't read it through.” (Francisco)</p> |
| “as if the text was written originally in the target language” | <p>“If they forget they are reading a translation, it's good” (Daniela)</p> <p>“if it sounds like an original work” (Laura)</p>  |
| “literal translation or faithfulness”                          | <p>“if it was literally translated or not” (Anabela)</p>   |

### What translators believe about how readers should assess the quality of a translation (normative attitudes)

Translators were also asked “In general, what criteria do you think the reader of the translation should use to judge the quality of a translation?” The responses to this open-ended question could be grouped into similar themes as before. The theme “language clarity” (8 mentions, 53.33%) was the most frequent, followed by “as if the text was written originally in the target language” (5 mentions, 33.33%), and “sameness or faithfulness” (4 mentions, 26.66%).

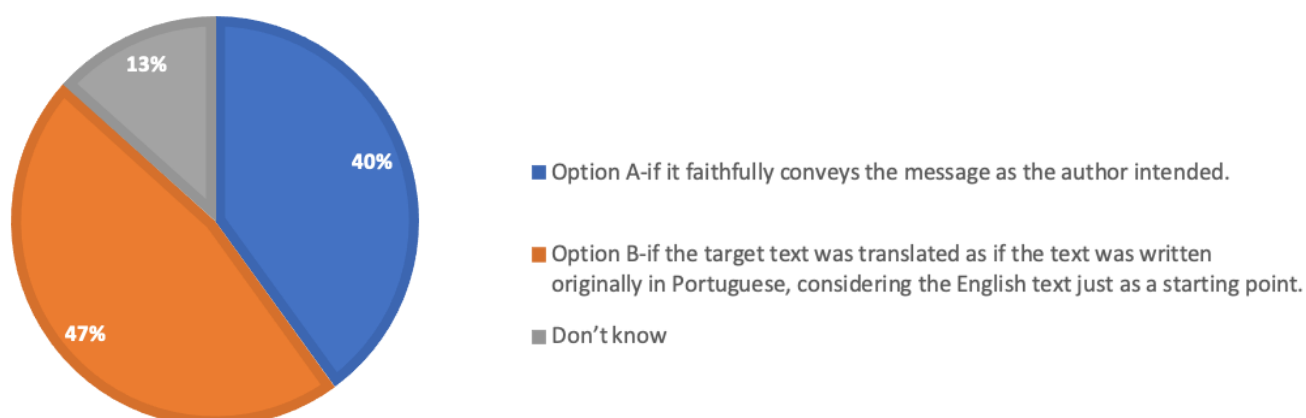
*Table 4. Translators' normative attitudes — most common themes with examples of belief statements*

|  |  |
|--|--|
| "language clarity"   | <p>"if the reader can understand the text" (Anabela)</p> <p>"If it is understandable, clear, natural-sounding" (Gonçalo)</p> <p>"I think it is important that the reader fully understands the message of the text and it's terminology. It is also important that the text is fluent and coherent." (Orlando)</p> |
| "as if the text was written originally in the target language" | <p>"The main criteria is if the reader actually does not notice the translation to be a translation." (Joana)</p> <p>"If it sounds like an original piece of work and not like a translation." (Laura)</p>   |
| "sameness or faithfulness"                                     | <p>"if when the reader has access to the original does not find a different "thing"" (Elsa)</p>  |

### What translators believe about what readers consider an appropriate translation (second-order empirical expectations)

Translators were also asked to select the statement that best described how the readers of the translation actually consider a translation appropriate. The order of the statements was also randomized.

As it can be seen from Figure 1 (below), no significant difference between the statements was evident. Nonetheless, the majority of respondents opted for the most target-oriented statement (Option B).



*Figure 1. Translators' second-order empirical expectations about what readers consider an appropriate translation*

## What translators believe about how readers believe they should translate (normative expectations)

In responding to the open-ended question “In general, what expectations do you think the readers of the translation have of your work?”, answered by 14 respondents, two main themes emerged. The theme of “language clarity”, the most commonly expressed normative expectation, with 5 mentions (35.71%), followed by the theme of “faithfulness” mentioned 4 times (28.57%).

*Table 5. Translators’ normative expectations — most common themes with examples of belief statements*

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| “language clarity” | <p>“Readers expect me to be clear and precise when needed” (Anabela)</p> <p>“It goes without saying that it needs to make sense in the target language” (Gonçalo)</p> <p>“That it is a clear and coherent text, totally understandable.” (Orlando)</p>         |
| “faithfulness”     | <p>“Readers expect access to the same document, except in their target language. They expect it to be correct and are reliant in your text to convey the information.” (Francisco)</p> <p>“That we are faithful to the meaning of the source text” (Núria)</p> |

## Discussion and Conclusions

In reviewing the literature, no research was found on medical translators’ beliefs about how they think they should translate and about what they think readers expect from their work (first section). With this survey study, we set out to investigate this topic building on the work of Bicchieri (mainly Bicchieri, 2006, 2017; Bicchieri et al., 2018) on the role of different types of beliefs on decision-making (second section).

Overall, the results of this study indicate that novice medical translators believe that they should faithfully translate the source message as the author intended (personal normative beliefs). The results also indicate that the majority of these novice translators believe that readers expect translators to prioritize language clarity and translate as if the text was written originally in the target language, in what concerns the beliefs about readers’ actions and about readers’ beliefs (third section). Thus, there seems to be a contradiction between self-beliefs and beliefs about others.

This discrepancy between the belief of what translators should do and what they believe readers expect from them should be further tested by comparing it to their behavior regularities (Bicchieri, 2017). In other words, their beliefs and expectations should be compared to their translations in order to confirm if their behavior converges with their self-beliefs or with their beliefs about what readers expect from them. If this discrepancy is confirmed, these results can mean that translators’ self-beliefs about how they should translate have more influence on their behavior



than what they believe it is expected of them. If beliefs about source-orientation are more influential on translators' behavior than the expectations of readers, this can have implications for translators' training.

This study has several limitations however, particularly the limited number of respondents and the focus on general expectations on medical translation as opposed to eliciting expectations on specific translation strategies. Larger-scale experimental studies triangulating process- and participant-oriented data are needed.

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