



The Pros and Cons of Back Translation

Perhaps your organization requires back translation for certain materials. Or maybe you have heard the term and wonder if it is a service you should request from your translation service provider. This executive brief will give you an overview of back translation, including its benefits and disadvantages, as well as offer some guidance on how to manage a back translation process if your team decides to pursue one.

What is Back Translation?

Let's start with a basic translation—for example, an informed consent form (ICF) being translated into Spanish for the United States. The original ICF is written in English and you want a version of it in Spanish; you could also call this a "forward translation." This forward translation should be completed by a native Spanish speaker in the US. Depending upon the robustness of the quality process of your translation service provider, the forward translation may also include additional quality steps beyond the first-pass translation, such as independent editing and a quality control review, but not all translation service providers include these additional quality steps.

A back translation begins once this forward translation is complete. For the back translation, a native English speaker who translates *from Spanish* uses the Spanish "forward translation" as their source input; they translate it back to English, without looking at the original English version. Next, a third party "reconciles" the two versions of the English, checking where they differ and identifying any differences that impact the meaning. Any discrepancies they find are reviewed by the "forward," Spanish-speaking translator and the "back," English-speaking translator to ensure that both the Spanish forward translation and the English back translation are corrected where necessary. Let's look at an example:

Original English:

Even though you are being asked to participate, it is possible that you will not be enrolled in this study.

Acceptable Back Translation:

Although you are being invited to participate in this study, you might not be enrolled in it.

The wording is different than the original English, but the meaning remains the same.

Unacceptable Back Translation:

Even though you are being asked to participate in this study, you will not be enrolled.

The back translation is inaccurate because the meaning is different. Either the Spanish translation has an error or the back translation contains an error. Re-work is required.

Back Translation Pros

Why would you want a back translation? The short answer is that it adds an extra quality control step to the translation process. In some instances, there may be great value in bolstering quality control. In other cases, for instance where the forward translation already goes through multiple production steps designed to identify and correct translation errors, the addition of a back translation process may be overkill. In general, back translation is used most commonly for patient-facing content, such as informed consents and questionnaires, rather than documents designed for formal printing and publication.

Since back translation is effectively an independent process from the forward translation, some companies use it as evidence for their auditing bodies that certain translated documents have undergone an independent verification process. When the forward translation goes through multiple checks and balances, however, other records may serve as evidence of the various verification steps performed. For example, a certificate of accuracy from the translation service provider can confirm their compliance with the ISO 17100 translation standard, which dictates the need for an independent review of all translations.

The decision to add a back translation process (or not) is at the discretion of the team or company whose documentation is being translated. Not all teams will find that back translation offers an adequate return on investment. And not all document types lend themselves equally well to the back translation process.

Back Translation Cons

If the back translation process sounds like a lot of extra work, it absolutely is. In fact, it is precisely double the work of a forward translation alone, and this duplication of efforts has a substantial impact on both the cost and the turnaround. Two separate translators will be involved and, since the back translation cannot begin until the forward translation is complete, the addition of a back translation step doubles the overall timeline.

Among translation professionals, there is another, less obvious drawback to the back translation process: a descent toward literalism. In order to ensure that any project proceeds smoothly, it is important for each vendor to be aware of the expectations that they must fulfill. For a back translation process, it is therefore essential that the forward translator be aware that he or she should expect queries during the reconciliation process. However, the comparison of the back translation to the original source English often flags very minor discrepancies that are due not to an error in the forward translation but rather to the linguistic constraints of the “forward” language and standard turns of phrase used in that language. In order to avoid unnecessary red flags during the reconciliation process, it is not uncommon for a forward translator to unconsciously forego more natural and less strictly literal choices for translations that are slightly closer to the original English in their word choice or structure because these more literal translation choices are easier, once back translated, to reconcile against the original English source. Professional translators and translation service providers try to guard against such literalism, but it is common knowledge that when a back translation is involved, the forward translation ends up sounding a little more “translation-y” when compared with either a standard forward translation or a document that was originally drafted in the target language.

How to Run an Optimal Back Translation

Feasibility

If you are considering adding a back translation process for a given project, the first step is to talk to your translation service provider so they can confirm for you that:

- the document lends itself to standard back translation procedures and
- the language(s) have adequate resources for the back translation process.

Informed consents and patient questionnaires are easily back translated. Although the cost and timeline are doubled over the forward translation alone, neither becomes so excessive given the relatively short length and simple file build of such patient-facing documentation. On the other hand, user manuals and instructions for use (IFUs) are rarely back translated

because both their overall length and their specialized formatting present significant obstacles that dramatically reduce the return on investment for a back translation.

The language of the forward translation also plays a significant role in the feasibility of a back translation. A language like Spanish has countless translators working with the language in either direction: from English into Spanish and from Spanish into English. For other languages, however, there may be relatively few native English speakers, competent in the medical domain, who work from the language into English. For instance, the pool of Estonian-to-English medical translators is significantly smaller than the pool of Spanish-to-English medical translators. Simple supply-and-demand economics imply that it is going to be harder to perform a back translation with Estonian than with Spanish, and this fact will impact the relative cost and turnaround for each of the two languages.

Timing

Given that a back translation process requires double the timeline of a forward translation, it is tempting to ask your translation service provider to deliver the forward translation while they work on the back translation. If your team plans to use the forward translation before the full back translation is complete, however, you are effectively denying yourself the benefit of back translation that is doubling your cost: namely, an extra quality control step on the forward translation before it goes into use. Let's consider another informed consent form that is translated into Spanish. Your team begins using the Spanish version while the English back translation and reconciliation processes are still ongoing. Meanwhile, a minor error is identified by back translation and reconciliation, so your translation service provider delivers a corrected Spanish translation together with the English back translation. What do you do? Having jumped the gun on using the Spanish translation, you must now disentangle your internal process and figure out how to deal with these two versions of the Spanish (one correct and one with a minor error). If the purpose of a back translation process is to identify and correct any errors that snuck through the forward translation process, and your team has decided that this additional step is worth the cost, it is best to allow your translation service provider to complete the full process, forward and back, to deliver to you both the final, forward translation, together with the back translation, at the same time.

Verification

If you have paid for a back translation, you may be tempted to run your own verification, in the form of an independent reconciliation, between the original English and the back translated English. What should you be looking for? Since the vocabularies and grammars of different languages are not in a one-to-one relationship, the back translation likely looks very different than the original English. So your focus should be on places where the *meaning* differs between the two English versions. This is easier said than done, of course, and it is very easy to get wrapped up in minor differences in word choice. Two good rules of thumb: Would a patient, reading a sentence in either version, have the same basic understanding? And could your team have crafted the sentence either way in the original English? These are confirmation that the back translation process has clearly established the semantic accuracy of the forward translation.

In summary, back translation can serve to strengthen the quality control processes associated with document translation. It is not a universal solution, however. Due to additional costs and longer lead times, as well as the complexities presented by different document types and languages, not all projects will benefit from a solid return on investment by adding a back translation step. If your team is suffering from sub-par translations, it may be time to find a new partner rather than paying double to keep your current provider in line with a back translation process. Don't suffer: read our briefs on dealing with [mediocre translation vendors](#) and planning a [seamless transition](#) to a new one.

About Idem Translations

Founded in 1983, Idem Translations, Inc. is a full-service provider of translation and localization services. Idem specializes in certified translations for medical device, biomedical, and pharmaceutical companies, as well as other organizations and entities working in the life sciences sector, such as contract research organizations, healthcare research centers, and institutional review boards. The company is a WBENC-certified woman-owned business and holds certifications to ISO 9001:2015, ISO 13485:2016, and ISO 17100:2015.

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