

WHEN PHARMA MEETS PRAGMATICS IN TRANSLATION

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Abstract: Patient Information Leaflets (PILs) are essential tools in pharmaceutical communication, aimed at informing patients about the usage and the therapeutical effects of medicines available on the market. However, their translation involves more than linguistic accuracy—it requires both, cultural sensitivity, and pragmatic awareness. The paper examines recurring problems in translating PILs from English into Romanian, such as differences in medicines naming conventions, inconsistent references to regulatory institutions, and the need to adapt medical eponyms and politeness strategies. Additionally, the study analyses how textual formatting and suprasegmental features—like bolded warnings or imperative structures—may need to be reformulated in Romanian to maintain clarity without sounding overly direct or impolite. From the perspective of Nord’s functionalist approach, the article examines some context-sensitive strategies for producing culturally and pragmatically appropriate translations of PILs. The findings underline the importance of tailoring pharmaceutical texts not only to regulatory requirements but also to patient expectations, ultimately enhancing readability and understanding.

Keywords: functional translation, pragmatic problems, convention-related problems, medical/pharmaceutical translation, translation norms and conventions.

This article investigates the *pragmatic and cultural challenges* encountered in the translation of PILs, from English into Romanian, using Christiane Nord’s *functionalist approach* as a theoretical framework. Nord’s model emphasizes that translators’ decisions should be guided by the intended function of the target text and the needs of the target audience, rather than by strict compliance to source-text structure. Within this framework, the paper examines how issues such as differences in drug names, references to health institutions, forms of address and politeness, and even text formatting and suprasegmental features can affect how translated leaflets are understood and received. By highlighting these issues and proposing function-oriented solutions, the article argues that the translator’s role is not merely linguistic but fundamentally communicative and intercultural.

In her study (*Translating as a Purposeful Activity* 2018:61), Nord states that the *pragmatic problems* can be identified by analysing the extratextual factors outlined in the translation-oriented text analysis model. Since these types of problems are present in any translation process, they can be generalized regardless of the languages involved or the direction of the translation. The identification of the *pragmatic problems* should represent the first stage of any translation process. Another aspect noted by Nord (2018:44) is that in any translation, even when the factors of source text analysis are similar to those of the target text, the translator faces two different situations (source text and target text). The differences between these situations lead to various pragmatic problems.

An important aspect to be considered when dealing with pragmatic problems is the situation of the receiver. Nord underlines the fact that the translator needs to be aware of the fact that the ST and the TT receivers are different from the point of view of at least one aspect: they belong to different linguistic and cultural communities (2005:57). The addressees’ “knowledge presuppositions” (ibid: 57), are extremely important for translation-oriented text analysis. After the understanding of the receivers’ knowledge background, the translator has to adjust the translation not only by selecting the right linguistic elements, but also by providing further information or explanations in the situation where the receiver’s cultural background is

different, and s/he might not be aware of some aspects presented in the source text (2005:58-9). In the situation of standardized genres, such as Patient Information Leaflets, the receivers will always have standardized expectations. In general, the potential users of PILs include non-specialist readers, pharmacists, or other health professionals. They expect to receive information about the therapeutic effects of a particular medicine and its use. In the TT, the translator will keep the conventionalized form of the ST but will adjust the text to the cultural background and expectations of the target audience providing explanations when necessary.

A first pragmatic problem we have identified is related to the fact that certain medicines have different names in the United Kingdom and Romania. The translator should consider this aspect and adapt the translation accordingly, in order to meet the expectations of the target audience.

1. ST: Rosuvastatin / TT: Astrium;
ST: Viani Accuhaler / TT: Pavtide Diskus;
ST: Bublex / TT: Adagin.
2. ST: Emtricitabine / TT: Emtricitabină;
ST: Bleomycin / TT: Bleomicină;
ST: Ibadronic Acid/ TT: Acid Ibadronic;
ST: Augumentin / TT:Augumentin Bis
ST: Gaviscon Papermint/TT: Gaviscon Mentol

As examples indicate, the first category of medicines is commercialized under a completely different name when marketed in Romanian. The translation of these medicines is problematic since the translator must be aware of the situation and consult an updated nomenclature (i.e.: *Nomenclatorul medicamentelor de uz uman – ANMDMR, updated in 30.09.2021*), to find the appropriate Romanian equivalent for their names. As regards the second category of medicines (2), their translation is less problematic since they have almost similar names in Romanian. Yet, the translator needs to consider various factors, including spelling variations (i.e.: *Emitricitabine / Emitricitabină*), Romanian word order, where the adjective is typically placed after the noun (i.e.: *Ibadronic Acid /Acid Ibadronic*) and the translation of specific elements in open compounds (i.e.: *Gaviscon Papermint/ Gaviscon Mentol*).

Another pragmatic problem arises when translating the names of regulatory institutions and the internet websites where the potential side effects of medicines can be reported. Since this information is different in the source and target countries, the translator must make changes in the Romanian patient information leaflets (i.e.: “You can also report side effects directly via the Yellow Card Scheme at: www.mhra.gov.uk/yellowcard”/ “De asemenea, puteți raporta reacțiile adverse direct prin intermediul sistemului național de raportare, ale carui detalii sunt publicate pe web-site-ul Agenției Naționale a Medicamentului și a Dispozitivelor Medicale din România <http://www.anm.ro>”)¹.

An additional aspect worth mentioning when discussing about the adaptation of the translation according to the receiver’s orientation refers to the section addressed to the potential patients with visual impairments. The English patient information leaflets offer additional information in the section “*Other formats*”, providing a free of charge phone number where

¹ All the examples discussed in this article (from the source and target texts) have been selected from the following internet sites: *Agenția Națională a Medicamentului și a Dispozitivelor Medicale din România* (www.anm.ro), respectively from *The Electronic Medicines Compendium* (www.medicines.org.uk), which contain updated information concerning the medicines approved for human use in Romania and the United Kingdom.

the patients can ask for a leaflet in Braille or for an audio version. Since this type of information is not available in our country, the translation of this section is omitted in Romanian.

Nord also mentions that “receiver orientation becomes relevant in the translation of *culture-bound terms*” (2018:61, our italics). An example in this direction might be the structure: ‘*it is OK to lie down*’ [1 our italics], rendered in Romanian by ‘*puteți să stați culcată*’, [1, our italics]. According to *Merriam - Webster Dictionary*, the term OK stands for the ‘*abbreviation of all korrekt, facetious alteration of all correct*’. This term, used to express approval or agreement, initially in American English, can be perceived as a strong cultural reference, especially when occurring in a highly standardised text. The translator has opted for a restructuring of the source text, replacing the cultural term ‘*ok*’ by the second person plural form of the verb ‘*puteți*’, an indicator of the Romanian norm of implied politeness.

A further example in the translation of *culture-bound terms* could be:

ST1: St. John’s Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*; *herbal medicine for depression*) [1, our italics].

TT1: *Hypericum perforatum* (*sunătoare*) [1, our italics].

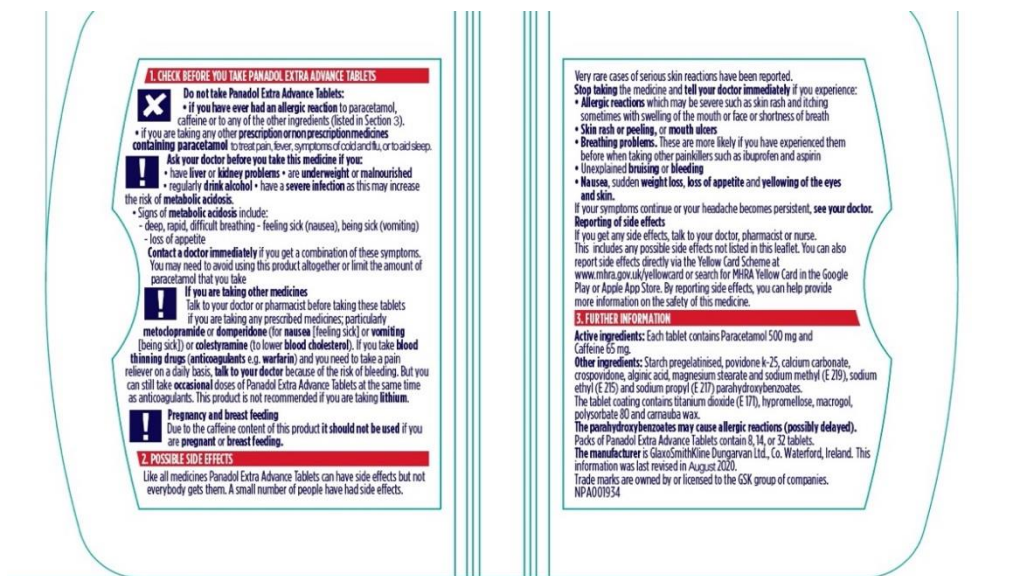
St. John’s Wort is the name of a medicinal plant used to treat the symptoms of depression. In British popular culture it is said that the name of the plant comes from St. John’s the Baptist’s Day because its flowers usually bloom around this period of the year. The word ‘*wort*’ used to signify ‘*root*’ or ‘*herb*’ in Middle English. The source text provides the Latin scientific denomination of this term as well and accompanies it by another explanation (*‘herbal medicine for depression’*) in order to make sure that the non-specialist readers are able to understand the utility of this medicine. In the target text, the popular name of the medicine (*St. John’s Wort*) is omitted, because it would confuse the readers. The Latin scientific name is preserved, but instead of providing a literal translation for the structure ‘*herbal medicine for depression*’, the translator chooses to use the term ‘*sunătoare*’, which is the Romanian equivalent for ‘*St. John’s Wort*’.

The *cultural adaptation* of the transmitted message represents a salient aspect in *instrumental translation*, particularly in the translation of *Patient Information Leaflets*. Nord states that *convention-related translation problems* “are a result of the differences in the norms and conventions guiding verbal and non-verbal behaviour in the two cultures involved” (2018:61). Consequently, the translator needs to be aware of these aspects and adapt the translation accordingly. For instance, the translation of a Patient Information Leaflet can be considered functional only if it conforms to the conventions of this text-type in the target culture. Though pharmaceutical texts are intended to transmit referential information by means of an objective, specialised language, and a standardized layout, they still contain cultural references which need to be adapted.

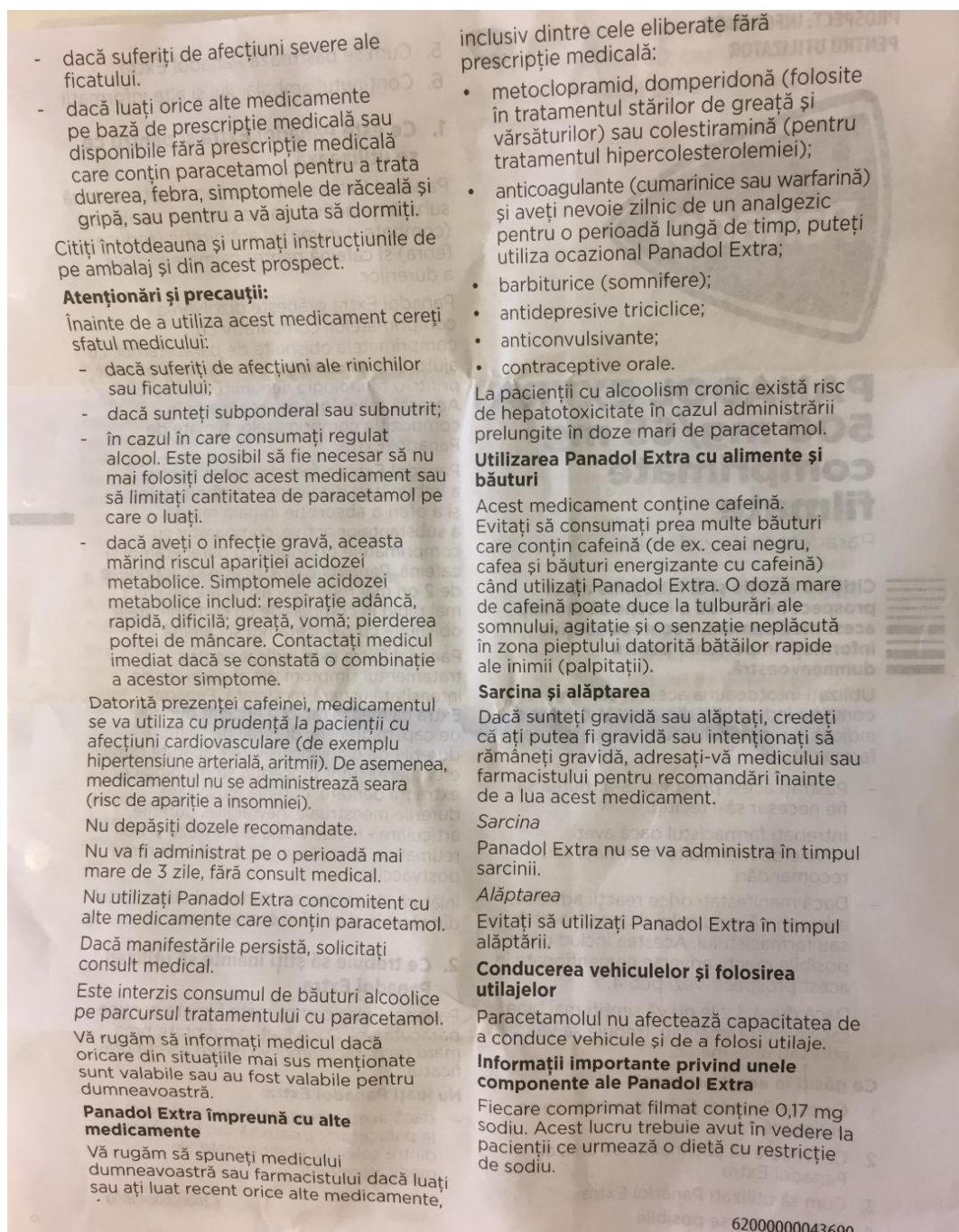
In the situation of PILs, both, the source and target texts have the same *referential/informative function* with an *appellative sub-function* providing information and instructions regarding the usage of a specific medicine. As a result, the analysis of this factor does not identify any pragmatic translation problems. However, in the case of some medicines, (e.g.: *Augumentin, Zovirax, Zinnat, Crestor*), there is a difference in formatting between the English versions where headings are highlighted in black, and the Romanian PILs where a bold font is used to mark the headings. While this particularity may not be considered a translation ‘problem’, we have to point out that Romanian translations conform to the textual conventions dictated by the specificity of the genre and adjust the format according to the Romanian regulations.

A separate discussion should be made regarding the situation of over-the-counter medicines which are available without a medical prescription. At first glance, even without

reading the text, we can notice that in terms of their *layout*, the English-based patient information leaflets are more suggestive and easier to follow than the Romanian versions. They are typically accompanied by graphic and image elements, that in addition to verbal means convey the message clearly. For instance, if we examine the English package leaflet of *Panadol Extra Advance 500mg /65mg Tablets* we remark a series of suprasegmental features such as: headings written in white capital letters highlighted in red, words in bold font to emphasize various aspects, big exclamation signs to draw the patient’s attention to the potential risks of the medicine. All these are proper to the norms and conventions of the source culture. On the other hand, the target version is adjusted to the textual conventions specific to Romanian PILs. The headings of each section are highlighted in bold font, without allowing the graphic representation of information, as seen in the English text. We have attached two excerpts from the English and Romanian package leaflets of *Panadol Extra Advance 500mg /65mg Tablets* for exemplification:



ST: Panadol Extra Advance 500mg /65mg Tablets [1]



TT: Panadol Extra 500mg/65mg comprimate filmate
(Patient information leaflet found in the medicine's box)

We consider it important to underline the fact that the translator has adapted the *layout* of the Romanian target text to conform to the conventions imposed by the nature of genre, subordinating the textual organization to the intended text function. The layout transformations in the Romanian version are obviously convention-related and functional, as the translation aligns with a distinct structure required by the regulations that apply to Romanian patient information leaflets.

Another cultural particularity we have identified, which is not a translation problem, but rather a *cultural norm* that needs to be respected, involves the translation of the second-person pronoun 'you' by the polite pronoun 'dumneavoastră' in the target language. As is known, the pronoun 'dumneavoastră' is used for both singular and plural second - person

pronouns, indicating a respectful attitude toward the addressee. In Romanian, the use of the polite pronoun requires the use of the second - person plural form of the verb, regardless of the actual number of people being addressed, which can create a sense of formality or distance. Translating the pronoun 'you' as 'tu' in Romanian represents an option that enforces directness, but it might be interpreted as disrespectful or even aggressive because the Romanian target readers are used to a certain linguistic device that conveys politeness.

The following examples selected from *Rosuvastatin /Astrium* package leaflets illustrate the translation of the second - person pronoun 'you' in Romanian:

ST1: This medicine has been prescribed for *you* only [1, our italics].

TT1: Acest medicament a fost prescris numai pentru *dumneavoastră* [1, our italics].

ST2: However, *you* should stop if *your* doctor tells *you* to do so, or *you* have become pregnant [1, our italics].

TT2: Cu toate acestea, dacă medicul *dumneavoastră* *vă* sfătuiește astfel sau dacă *rămâneți* gravidă, trebuie *să întrerupeți* utilizarea [1, our italics].

ST3: *You* have been prescribed Rosuvastatin tablets because: (...) [1, our italics].

TT3: *Vi* s-a prescris Astrium deoarece (...) [1, our italics].

ST4: Don't worry; just take *your* next scheduled dose at the correct time [1, our italics].

TT4: *Nu vă îngrijorați, luați* doza următoare la momentul corespunzător [1, our italics].

ST5: (...) if any of the above applies to *you* (or *you* are in doubt), *please* go back and see *your* doctor [1, our italics].

TT5: (...) dacă oricare dintre cele de mai sus sunt valabile în cazul *dumneavoastră* (sau dacă nu *sunteți* sigur), *vă rugăm* să *vă adresați* din nou medicului *dumneavoastră* [1, our italics].

In the first example (1), the second-person pronoun 'you' is rendered in Romanian by the polite pronoun '*dumneavoastră*'. As previously mentioned, the preference for using this formula carries a respectful connotation, conveying the text a higher degree of formality which is characteristic to this textual genre. The second example (2) illustrates how the personal pronoun 'you', and the possessive adjective 'your' are translated into Romanian to align with the cultural norms of the target audience. In the italicized structures above, even when the polite pronoun '*dumneavoastră*' is not used, it is substituted by the reflexive pronoun '*vă*' (*vă sfătuiește*), to maintain a formal tone. In the same way, using the second person plural forms of the verb '*rămâneți (gravidă)*', '*să întrerupeți*', even when addressing a generic person, also represents a form of implied politeness. Last, the possessive adjective from the structure '*your doctor*' is also rendered in Romanian by '*dumneavoastră*' (*medicul dumneavoastră*). In our opinion, the repetitive use of this element, either in its complete form or as a substitute in verbal constructions, creates a formal and polite environment. In the third (3) example, the pronoun 'you' from the passive construction '*you have been prescribed*' is translated using the dative pronoun '*vi*' (*vi s-a prescris*), second person plural, which also indicates a reverential attitude toward the target reader. In the fourth (4) example, the personal pronoun 'you' does not appear in the structure from the source text ('*don't worry*'), which is an imperative construction expressing request. Instead, it is expressed in Romanian by the second person plural of the verb and the reflexive pronoun '*vă*' ('*nu vă îngrijorați*') which also indicates plurality regardless of the number of the audience. The translation of the verb '*take*' follows the same pattern in the target language ('*luați*') conveying the same implied politeness, specific to Romanian cultural

norms. The last example provided, reiterates a series of structures that come to reinforce the way in which the personal pronoun 'you' ('if any of the above applies to you'/ 'dacă oricare dintre cazurile de mai sus sunt valabile în cazul dumneavoastră'), the possessive adjective 'your' (your doctor, translated medicul dumneavoastră) and the imperative 'please go back and see' (vă rugăm să vă adresați) have been translated in order to create a formal distance which is perceived as a sign of respect in the target culture. Aside from the aspect of cultural politeness, which is present to a high extent in all the texts we have investigated, we remark that the analysis has not identified a significant number of cultural references in the translation of *Patient Information Leaflets*. This is no doubt related to the fact that the PIL, being a highly standardized genre, submitted to strict regulations and norms, has to comply with an imposed terminology and a specific structural format in order to avoid ambiguity and the possibility of interpretation.

The boundary between pragmatic and cultural problems in translation can indeed be diffuse, making it challenging for translators to make a clear distinction between the two. Some issues have a well-defined pragmatic nature, others are socio-cultural, yet there are situations in which pragmatic problems have cultural traces, or vice versa, cultural issues relate to pragmatic factors. By shifting the focus from linguistic form to communicative function, translators can produce texts that are not only accurate but also accessible, culturally appropriate, and pragmatically effective.

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