

# Translators and Globalization in the Pharmaceutical Industry

By Nur Reinhart

The pharmaceutical industry has experienced dramatic changes within the last several years. The biggest trend shaping the industry has been global consolidation. Grippled with merger and acquisition mania, large numbers of pharmaceutical companies have sought new corporate marriage partners. Sandoz and Ciba entered into such a marriage a few years ago and became Novartis. In 1995, British Glaxo bought a smaller rival, Wellcome, thus becoming Glaxo Wellcome. Astra, a Swedish company, merged with Britain's Zeneca in 1998.

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1999 saw the marriage between France's Rhone Poulenc and Hoechst Marion Roussel, which was later named Aventis. In February 2000, Pfizer succeeded in its hostile acquisition of Warner Lambert, a deal which made the drug company number one in the industry by market value, which, according to the British weekly *The Economist*, was \$28 billion in combined drug sales at the time of the merger. Again in 2000, Glaxo Wellcome announced its merger with Smith Kline Beecham, thus becoming Glaxo-SmithKline. In addition to these well-publicized examples, there are many other global partnerships, joint ventures, and alliances that bring companies together, with more being expected in the future.

A good example of such alliances is the \$2.2 billion Turkish pharmaceutical industry. One of the key players in the industry is Eczacıbaşı, which was established in 1942 by Dr. Nejat

Eczacıbaşı when he started producing vitamin D capsules in his laboratory. Today, Eczacıbaşı has partnerships with no less than 16 international companies, ranging from Boehringer Ingelheim and Fujisawa Pharmaceuticals to Pharmacia & Upjohn and Procter & Gamble. Eczacıbaşı-Rhone Poulenc, another such partnership, concentrates its clinical studies on oncology, cardiology-thrombosis, and asthma-related allergies and infections, sponsoring Phase II and III Trials as well as presentations at scientific conferences.

Globalization in the pharmaceutical industry bears watching by translators specializing in medical and pharmaceutical translations because it provides abundant opportunities, as well as new challenges, for translators. To be able to understand its effects on translators, however, one must first understand the market dynamics driving global consolidation. Obviously, mergers are a quick way to acquire new technologies, lucrative products, and patents a competitor might have. More importantly, there is tremendous pressure on pharmaceutical companies to continue lucrative returns by developing "blockbuster drugs" which can earn one billion dollars or more. Pfizer boasts of eight such products. Only the biggest companies have the funds, research and development (R&D), and the economies of scale to achieve such results. According to ClinTrials Research Inc., the 1999 R&D expenditures of major pharmaceutical companies in the world rose approximately 14 percent in comparison to the preceding year. Of the estimated \$50 billion spent by pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies on R&D, approximately \$22 billion went to pre-clinical and clinical trials.

Today, pharmaceutical companies are under financial pressure to develop new drugs as quickly as possible in order to benefit from the 20 years of patent life in the United States. Since the development process takes about 8 to 12 years due to several phases of clinical trials and Food and Drug Administration filings, drug companies are increasingly seeking simultaneous regulatory approvals in other countries to enlarge the markets for their drugs and to compress the time needed to do so.

This means more volume and variety of work for translators. These include translating a foreign country's regulations on clinical trials and the introduction of pharmaceuticals into the market, clinical trial protocols and consent forms, health and well-being assessment surveys for research participants, phone prompts for reporting clinical data, as well as the usual drug inserts and labels. One such phone prompt system in which I have been involved was translated into 30 languages from Estonian to Turkish. As global pharmaceutical companies become more aware of foreign research and compile data to aid in their regulatory and marketing efforts, there is also more demand for translating medical research studies conducted in

other countries. Most of these translations are for widely used high-profile drugs, such as new generation antibiotics.

Along with opportunities for more work, there are also challenges for translators. It goes without saying that in an age of rapid medical and pharmaceutical discoveries, it is hard to keep abreast of new terminology (think genomics, for instance). Most print resources quickly become outdated due to the speed of advances. Moreover, most countries have different brand names for drugs, further confusing the translator. A simple example of this is good old Tylenol, which becomes Setamol and Parasedol in Turkey. Luckily, the Internet can help if deadlines allow for the luxury of research.

But there are other, more specific, challenges as well. Recorded phone prompts for reporting clinical trial data are a main source of aggravation. These are fairly similar to the phone systems one encounters more and more these days when calling a business. Typically, a female voice announces the name of the business and then offers a menu of options to be connected to a department or person (Press 1 for billing, press 2 for scheduling, etc.). Phone systems for clinical trials are formatted similarly in English, and all the other languages are expected to conform to the English formatting so the automated system will operate the same way for all of the languages.

This is easy for languages whose syntax may be similar to English, but for my native Turkish as well as for German, this becomes a hair-pulling exercise. Regular Turkish syntax, like German, tends to place the verb at the end of the sentence. Thus, a string of prompts that begins with the recording of "Press..." and continues with several separate recordings such as "1 to enroll a patient," "2 to exclude a patient," etc., becomes a headache in Turkish (a verb placed at the very beginning of a sentence sounds very awkward and unnatural). At this point, the translator realizes that global pharmaceutical companies are not yet truly global in their thinking because they do not anticipate and understand such language problems. Furthermore, the uniform formatting needed for the smooth operation of the automated phone system does not allow for special accommodations for different languages—only for truly creative solutions by the translator.

Health assessment surveys also pose unique challenges. These usually consist of simple statements about different aspects of the patient's life, such as activity levels, ability to perform daily tasks, discomfort and pain, etc. The patient then chooses to what extent he/she may agree with the statement. Such surveys are typically geared for older patients and must be simple and clear so any older adult, even those with very little education or impaired mental capacity, can understand them.

For Turkish, this may not be as simple as it sounds. Turkish vocabulary has undergone a tremendous transformation within the last two or three decades. The Arabic and Farsi root words

which were widely used by my parents' and grandparents' generations are used less and less by the younger generations, who prefer coined or borrowed foreign words with phoneticized spellings and standard Turkish suffixes. Thus, "global" has become a common word in Turkey, as has "*globalleşme*" (globalization) with its Turkish suffix. The same goes for *ritüel* (ritual), *agresif* (aggressive), *prosedür* (procedure), *misyon* (mission), *vizyon* (vision), etc. This creates a generational communication gap for many elderly people, except for the very educated. Therefore, the translator must be painstaking in his/her choice of vocabulary and use basic Turkish words which can be understood by anybody.

Special care must also be exercised in translating statements regarding sexual function so as not to offend Turkish patients who may be more modest and reserved than their western counterparts. The older generation in particular, which was raised with more conservative values and attitudes towards sex, tends to shy away from discussing such topics and may be easily embarrassed. Fortunately, there is growing awareness on this and other culturally sensitive issues. Evanston Northwestern Health Care's Center on Outcomes, Research, and Education (CORE) utilizes an elaborate process in the preparation of its health assessment surveys. This process involves two forward translations, one reconciliation by a native speaker, a back translation by a separate translator, three to four reviews by qualified native translators, and an overall review by the CORE staff. The staff is well aware of cultural sensitivities and actively invites comments from the reviewers every step of the way. Many clients may not be able to afford the time or money to conduct such a painstaking

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process, but this ensures that the survey will not be offensive or problematic in any way.

Global consolidation in the pharmaceutical industry is far from over. *Business Week* reported in its January 31, 2000 issue that once the dust settles, only four U.S. drug giants may survive along with a German entity. This will no doubt generate more work for translators, as newly merged companies scramble to prepare new brochures, press kits, Websites, and other materials for the countries in which they operate or have alliances. Their combined R&D budgets may also allow for more overseas clinical trials, research, and translations. Advances in genomics

are also expected to spur massive R&D efforts by pharmaceutical companies to find new treatments and cures for diseases. There are also ongoing efforts by hospitals to create global alliances. Many Turkish hospitals have such partnerships for bone marrow transplants and other specialized cancer treatments with highly acclaimed U.S. hospitals. These alliances facilitate the registration and transportation of Turkish patients to seek advanced care that may not be available at their particular hospital. Needless to say, these patients need interpretation services, translation of their medical records, etc., once in the United States.

It's clear that globalization will mean more volume and variety of work for translators. One can only hope that there will also be out-of-the-box thinking on how to establish comprehensive and speedy multilingual online dictionaries and resource sites to cope with the growing demand and rapid advances.

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