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FUNCTIONING AND TRANSLATION OF MEDICAL TERMINOLOGICAL SYNONYMS IN ENGLISH AND
SPANISH

Research article

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Abstract

Medical terms translation is a crucial factor in expanding knowledge and making new discoveries in the medical field. Translators of medical texts face several challenges, some of which are the subject of this research. This paper offers an overview of the major issues of medical synonyms' translation. It briefly presents the definition of the term, synonym and categories of synonymous terms. It discusses certain general and specific features of Spanish and English medical synonyms. We devote considerable attention to a comprehensive analysis of the synonymous relations of Spanish and English medical terminology. The article contemplates the regularities of medical synonyms' usage in modern English and Spanish and a tendency of using the international (Latin or Greek) and national variants of medical terms in English and Spanish medical texts. The materials and results of the study can be further used in a practical translation of medical texts.

Keywords: medical terminology, medical language, medical translation, Spanish and English medical synonyms, synonymous set.

ФУНКЦИОНИРОВАНИЕ И ПЕРЕВОД МЕДИЦИНСКИХ ТЕРМИНОВ-СИНОНИМОВ В АНГЛИЙСКОМ И
ИСПАНСКОМ ЯЗЫКАХ

Научная статья

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Аннотация

В данной статье представлен обзор основных проблем перевода медицинских синонимов, рассматриваются определения термина, синонима и категории синонимичных терминов. Особое внимание в статье уделяется общим и специфическим особенностям испанских и английских медицинских синонимов и анализу синонимических отношений испанской и английской медицинской терминологии. В работе исследуются закономерности употребления медицинских синонимов в современном английском и испанском языках, а также тенденции к использованию международных (латинских или греческих) и национальных вариантов медицинских терминов в английских и испанских медицинских текстах. Материалы и результаты исследования могут быть использованы в дальнейшем при практическом переводе медицинских текстов.

Ключевые слова: медицинская терминология, медицинский язык, медицинский перевод, испанские и английские медицинские синонимы, синонимический ряд.

Introduction

The medical sector is one of the strictest in terms because it contains many specific lexical units, and its texts must correspond to the meaning to which they refer.

Each branch of human knowledge or science must create its terminology, corresponding to its needs. Medical terminology focuses on accurate expression of complex concepts and ideas in the medical world. It also aims to unify existing concepts. Each term should have a unique meaning accepted by the scientific community, thus facilitating the exchange of information internationally.

Specialized translation in general, and medical translation in particular, requires particular skills and abilities that are specified in a series of specific sub-competencies. Terminology is one of the key factors of representation and transmission of specialized knowledge. The terminological density is a reliable indicator for determining the degree of specialization of a text. "A major part of any translation project is identifying equivalents for specialized terms. Subject fields such as computing, manufacturing, law, and medicine all have significant amounts of field-specific terminology" [1]. Therefore, when translating specialized texts, one has to deal with terminological problems. In the case of specialized medical translation, these problems are not reduced to the search for equivalents, to the confirmation of those already selected, to the need to coin neologisms, or

perhaps resort to borrowing. They are caused because of the polysemy and synonymy typical of real scientific discourse, due to the multiplicity of existing names and nomenclatures, the existence of false friends, communicative variability in all its areas (including eponyms, acronyms, abbreviations), or due to the permeability of the medical discourse, as the transfer of terms typical of some medical specialties to others and the inclusion of terms from other related or auxiliary disciplines (statistics, chemistry, biology, electromagnetics, computing, etc.). Other additional difficulties arise due to the combinativity (phraseology) of such terms or the identification and re-expression of the pragmatic filling of many of them, and, of course, for the differences in the scientific discourse between the two working languages.

In everyday language, there are many examples of synonymy, but none of these relationships usually interfere with everyday communication. They give it a communicative richness of exceptional value. The artistic resources that synonymy offers are precious in the literature of any linguistic community. And in any language, there are many dictionaries of synonyms, which many authors resort to when trying to make the text more expressive.

In theory, synonymy is not ideal for special languages that have to be an effective and unequivocal means of communication. In practice, several names refer to the same concept or disease, for example, "mucoviscidosis" and "fibrocystic disease of the pancreas"; "parathyrin" and "parathormone"; "Mycobacterium tuberculosis" and "Koch's bacillus". Thus, this article focuses on the analysis of synonymous sets of medical terms to determine the most appropriate variants for translating medical texts.

Methodological framework

The *relevance of research* is defined by necessity to give a normative character to medical terms, since the number of synonymous terms is very large. It is very important for best understanding and translation of medical texts to search for synonyms, to define a descriptor among them, i.e. the most important and commonly used term, which is a representative of a number of terms, correlated with the same concept and object.

The *research objective* is to study general and specific features of Spanish and English medical synonyms, to carry out a comprehensive analysis of the synonymous relations of Spanish and English medical terminology, to determine regularities of medical synonyms' usage in modern English and Spanish, to study the features of the translation of medical synonyms.

We use the following *research methods*: componential analysis based on structured sets of semantic features, comparative contextual analysis, and general scientific methods of description and collection of factual material.

A continuous sampling of the studied units of scientific and medical texts made it possible to identify corpus examples. *Material for the study* was taken from scientific medical articles, periodical literature on medicine.

The *practical value* of this study is the possibility to use its materials and results in a practical translation of medical texts.

The major works include works of Radek Vogel, Graeme Hirst, John Lyons, Teresa Cabré Castellví, Isabel Jiménez Gutiérrez, Maja Stanojevic, Smirnova E.V.

Results and discussion

Theoretically, and as Teresa Cabré Castellví affirms, "the terms, unlike the words of the common lexicon, are univocal and monosemantic units". In a certain way, we admit a term performs the same functions as a noun but within a specialized field and theoretically it is characterized and differentiated from those by its high precision, conciseness, clarity and lack of opacity. Terminology was born as a discipline with a clearly denominating object and aims to be as precise as possible, avoiding both ambiguities and synonymy or polysemy, which clearly deviate from the objectives mentioned. However, and according to Cabré Castellví, "theory and reality [...] do not always go hand in hand, and terminology is no exception to this principle" [2].

As stated by Isabel Jiménez Gutiérrez, "synonymy and polysemy are frequent phenomena in specialized fields and in all languages" [7]. Although the phenomena of synonymy and polysemy are more typical of common language than of the so-called specialized languages. We cannot deny their appearance in the latter, as we will try to show below through some revealing examples.

We commonly describe synonymy as sameness of meaning, involving in fact a scale on which lexical units reveal more or less semantic resemblance. For two lexical units to be synonymous, a high degree of semantic overlap must be accompanied by a low or no semantic contrast. Semantically overlapping, but not completely identical words may have a common hypernym, possibly the general word outlay.

Synonymy requires that if one out of two words considered synonymous is denied, the other is also denied: if two or more naming units have the same referent(s), they are synonymous. Synonymy of lexical items then requires that the items are identical in their central semantic features; differences may only be possible in their minor, not essential features [17].

Two or more words are synonyms (with respect to one sense of each) if one may substitute for another in a text without changing the meaning of the text. This test may be construed more or less strictly; words may be synonyms in one context but not another; often, putative synonyms will vary in connotation or linguistic style, and this might or might not be considered significant. More usually, "synonyms" are actually merely near-synonyms [6].

Synonymy can originate for different reasons. On the one hand, it is common that several scientific communities simultaneously investigate a new aspect of a field of knowledge (medicine, pharmacology, etc.). Each of them will use their own terminology to designate their findings, which they will later present to the international scientific community. Until this new knowledge is disseminated, it is not possible to notice the denominative variations. On the other hand, when faced with a new discovery, it is necessary to introduce a term that denotes it, but for this purpose different solutions are chosen. In many cases traditional terms derived from Greco-Latin elements coexist with terms closer to the common language. Finally, in other cases, the existence of different schools encourages the use of different terms to designate identical concepts. However, the prestige of English as the predominant language of communication in the medical field makes many researchers prefer Anglo-Saxon terms to those of their scientific community [7]. Professionals and researchers in a certain area prefer some terms to others, either by tradition or by assignment to a specific school or scientific current.

We can distinguish the following categories of synonymous terms:

1. Absolute synonyms: those terms that designate the same concept and that can be interchanged in all contexts are considered absolute synonyms. Given the standardizing nature of medical terminology, absolute synonyms would be expected to be the most frequent examples in this area. However, this is not the case, since, in most cases, the terms considered as synonyms are not interchangeable in all contexts, e.g.:

- in Spanish: *asfixia* – *ahogo*, *piel* – *cutis*;
- in English: *peloid* – *mud*, *medulla* – *marrow*.

J. Lyons distinguishes between several main types of synonymy. Lexemes can be said to be completely synonymous (in certain contexts) if and only if they have the same descriptive, expressive and social meaning (in those contexts). Lexemes are absolutely synonymous if and only if they have the same distribution and are completely synonymous in all their meanings and contexts in which they occur. The condition cannot be fulfilled, as all possible contexts cannot be checked. Complete synonymy seems to be infrequent and absolute synonymy almost impossible. Absolute synonymy may best be found in specialised terminologies with a descriptive character, unaffected by associated and expressive meaning. Natural languages avoid having two items with identical meaning, as well as with identical associations and distribution. This would be simply uneconomical, redundant [8]. Although disambiguity is vital for terminologies of sciences, absolute synonyms still appear, for various reasons. Unlike everyday language, which is very dynamic and flexible, terminologies tend to be fixed and conservative. Due to this, absolute synonyms are capable of surviving.

The following examples were taken from the medical scientific articles written in Spanish and translated into English. Spanish lexical unit *médula* was conveyed in the first example as *medulla* and in the second one as *marrow* which confirms the existence of absolute synonyms. The units are interchangeable in contexts.

Table 1 - Examples of Absolute Synonyms

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Spanish	English
También se demuestra la gran utilidad de la biopsia-aspiración de la <i>médula</i> ósea para establecer la presencia de afectación ósea en el carcinoma indiferenciado de células pequeñas y que en nuestra serie alcanza un 40%.	The authors also demonstrate the great utility of biopsy aspiration of the osseous <i>medulla</i> for establishing the presence of osseous affection undifferentiated carcinoma of small cells, that reached 40% in the author series [4].
Análisis de las posibles correlaciones entre las alteraciones moleculares en los genes JAK2, MPL y CALR, el patrón morfológico de la <i>médula</i> ósea y el perfil clínico-hematológico de los pacientes.	To analyse the possible correlation between molecular changes in the JAK2, MPL and CALR genes, the morphological pattern of bone <i>marrow</i> and the clinical-haematologic profile of patients [9].

Complete synonymy seems to be infrequent and absolute synonymy almost impossible. Absolute synonymy may best be found in specialised terminologies with a descriptive character, unaffected by associated and expressive meaning. Natural languages avoid having two items with identical meaning, as well as with identical associations and distribution. This would be simply uneconomical, redundant [17].

2. Near-synonyms or partial synonyms: near-synonyms are lexemes whose meaning is relatively close or more or less similar. However, the definition of near-synonymy is vague, because there isn't a precise correlation between synonymy and semantic similarity. Near-synonymy is associated with overlapping of meaning and senses. The senses of near-synonyms overlap to a great degree, but not completely [16].

In Spanish medical terminology there are a lot of partial synonyms: *gestión* – *control* – *examen* – *observación* – *seguimiento* – *supervisión*; *examen físico* – *exploración física* – *examen clínico*; *activación* – *estimulación*;

In English terminology we can see the following examples: *to close* – *to cover* – *to occlude*; *measuring hopper* – *batcher* – *meter*; *chest* – *breast* – *thoracic cage*; *occlusion* – *block* – *obstruction* – *congestion* – *clotting*.

Synonymy can reveal itself on several levels. Along with the international Greek/Latin term, its synonym comes from foreign (Greek/Latin) elements, e.g., in English, *antihaemophylic factor A* – *coagulation factor*; *erythrocyte* – *normocyte*; *siderotic anemia* – *sideropenic anemia*; *neutrophil* – *polymorphonuclear leucocyte*; *haematopoiesis* – *sanguification*; in Spanish – *neutrófilo* – *leucocito polimorfonuclear*, *hematopoyesis* – *sanguificación*, *eritrocito* – *hematíe*, etc. Such synonyms arise due to different motivations for the formation of terms. E.g., the term *erythrocyte* emphasizes red. Its synonym, *normocyte*, emphasizes the normal development of cells. Similarly, in the term *neutrophil*, a neutral dye used to stain leucocytes in laboratories became the main motivating element in the development of this term, while in its synonym *polymorphonuclear leucocyte*, the main role was played by the number of nuclei of various shapes that the white cell contains.

International Greek/Latin terms are translated into English, e.g. *haematopoiesis* – *blood cell production*; *erythrocyte* – *red blood cell (RBC)*; *monocyte* – *mononuclear cell*; *coagulation* – *blood clotting*; *thrombocyte* – *blood platelet*; *haemolysis* – *blood destruction*; *leucocyte* – *white blood cell (WBC)*; *haemostasis* – *arrest of bleeding*. However, a significant drawback of national terms is that these words have a certain lexical compatibility and various connections with other words of the national language.

Such terms are also translated into Spanish, e.g., *trombocito* – *plaqueta*, *leucocito* – *glóbulo blanco*, *eritrocito* – *glóbulo rojo*, but instead of English in Spanish we can see a tendency to use international Greek/Latin terms (*monocito*, *coagulación*, *hemólisis*, *hemostasia*). This can be due to what the Spanish terminologist Maria Teresa Cabré Castellví testified in the article

“La terminología del español: organización, normalización y perspectivas”, when creating dictionaries, the members of the Spanish Royal Academy tried to adhere to the principles set out in the article “Sobre el lenguaje científico y técnico”, included in Memoria del X Congreso de Academias de la Lengua Española: “los científicos decidieron, desde un principio, basarse en la gran cantera de voces latinas y griegas para, formando voces compuestas, crear verdaderos neologismos y bautizar así los nuevos conceptos, instrumentos, etc., que iban surgiendo a lo largo del desarrollo científico” – “scientists decided, in principle, to take as a basis all the wealth of Greek and Latin words in order to build complex words on their basis, creating true neologisms to denote new concepts, tools, etc., that were emerging throughout scientific development” [3].

The following examples are taken from the one scientific article. Here we can see that in English the translation of the international term (*red blood cell*) is more common and in Spanish both variants are possible (*eritrocito* – *glóbulo rojo*).

Table 2 - Use of International and National Variants

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Spanish	English
Durante la evaluación sistémica los estudios de neuroimágenes, paneles autoinmunes y hematológicos fueron negativos, por lo que se atribuyó dicha complicación a la transfusión de <i>glóbulos rojos</i> .	During the systemic evaluation, the neuroimaging, autoimmune and haematology studies were negative, thus this complication was attributed to the <i>red blood cell</i> transfusion.
Mujer de 32 años con antecedente de miomatosis uterina y metrorragias a repetición durante seis meses que condicionan una concentración de hemoglobina de 6,5 g/dL con requerimiento de transfusión de <i>eritrocitos</i> .	A 32-year-old woman presented with a history of uterine myomatosis and repeated bleeding for 6 months. This produced a haemoglobin concentration of 6.5 g/dL, with a requirement for a <i>red blood cell</i> transfusion [12].

Sometimes, together with a borrowed term in English there are several translation variants, and they all fall into a synonymous relationship and form synset (for “synonym set”), e.g., *haematostasia* – *control of haemorrhage* – *control of bleeding* – *prevention of blood loss*; *erythrocyte* – *red (blood) cell* – *red (blood) corpuscle*; *phagocyte* – *phagocytic cell* – *defensive cell*. And again, it is not so common for Spanish: *fagocito* – *célula fagocítica* – *células defensivas*; *eritrocito* – *glóbulos rojo* – *hematíe*. A similar synonymous relationship exists between the following terms, English: *myeloproliferative syndrome* – *myeloproliferative disease and myeloproliferative disorder*; *Hodgkin's disease* – *Hodgkin's lymphoma* – *Hodgkin's sarcoma*; Spanish: *enfermedad de Hodgkin* – *linfoma de Hodgkin* – *morbo de Hodgkin*.

Table 3 - Spanish and English Terms: Differences in Preferred Variants

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60797/IRJ.2025.151.43.3>

Spanish	English
Presentamos un caso excepcional de un varón de 35 años diagnosticado de enfermedad de Crohn con 17 años y en tratamiento con azatioprina, que presentó años después, un <i>linfoma de Hodgkin</i> intestinal.	We present an unusual case of a 35-year-old man who had been diagnosed with Crohn's disease at age 17 and treated with azathioprine, presenting years later with an intestinal <i>Hodgkin's lymphoma</i> [5].
Hay un riesgo excepcionalmente elevado de cáncer de mama, como segundo tumor, en mujeres que siguen tratamiento para la <i>enfermedad de Hodgkin</i> .	Women treated for <i>Hodgkin's disease</i> have an exceptionally high risk of breast cancer as a second malignancy.
Hemos revisado de forma retrospectiva 2 casos de pacientes en remisión completa de su <i>linfoma de Hodgkin</i> , que desarrollaron un cáncer de mama.	We retrospectively reviewed 2 patients in complete remission from <i>Hodgkin's disease</i> who developed breast cancer [11].

Analysing the above examples, we can say that for Spanish *linfoma de Hodgkin* is more used, and in English two variants (*Hodgkin's disease* – *Hodgkin's lymphoma*) are possible. In the following example for one Spanish term two English terms are used.

Table 4 - Examples of Synonyms in Microsystems

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Spanish	English
La mutación V617F en el gen de la tirosinasa <i>JAK2</i> está implicada en la génesis de algunos <i>síndromes mieloproliferativos</i> crónicos (SMP)	<i>Polycythemia vera (PV)</i> and essential <i>thrombocytemia (ET)</i> are chronic <i>myeloproliferative diseases (MPD)</i> characterized

Spanish	English
como la policitemia vera (PV), la trombocitemia esencial (TE) y la mielofibrosis (MF) idiopática.	by overactive hemopoiesis. A single point mutation of <i>JAK2</i> (Val617Phe) has been detected in PV, ET and myelofibrosis (MF).
Valoración de la mutación V617F del gen <i>JAK2</i> en síndromes mieloproliferativos crónicos con cromosoma Filadelfia negativo.	Evaluation of V617F mutation of <i>JAK2</i> in negative chromosome Philadelphia chronic <i>myeloproliferative disorders</i> [14].

Synonymous terms are usually understood as doublets (e.g., ophthalmologist – oculist, etc.). Doublets do not organize relations like synonyms, there are no emotionally expressive or stylistic oppositions, therefore they are identical to each other. The absence of stylistic signs is due to the nature of the term and the criteria applied to it, the term should be stylistically neutral.

Among doublet terms, linguists distinguish several groups:

The first group includes international doublet terms, that is, words or phrases of multilingual origin, the root or derived elements of which have the same meaning. The most typical pairs of doublets, are those consisting of an international word of Greek-Latin origin and its national equivalent, e.g., English medical terminology: *distention* (from Latin “distentus” - to stretch) – bloating, *hemopoiesis* (from Latin “haemopoiesis” – bleeding) – bleeding, *anamnesis* (from Greek “anamnesis” – memory) – medical history, *cyst* (from Greek “kystis” – bladder) – sac, *hysterometer* (from Greek “hysteria” – uterus; “metron” – measure) – uterine probing, *rhinitis* (from Greek “rhin” – nasal; from Latin “itis” – inflammation) – nasal catharrh, etc. There are not many such terms in Spanish: *anamnesis* (from Greek “anamnesis” – memory) – antecedentes, *rinitis* (from Greek “rhin” – nasal; from Latin “itis” – inflammation) – resfriado, etc.

As the examples above show, in English and Spanish, borrowing a foreign word occurs in two ways: transliteration and loan translation. Transliteration refers to the process of borrowing an entire foreign word through its literal translation into the first language and preserving the sound shell of the word. The second way of borrowing is the creation of a new lexical unit by means of its morphemes on a foreign pattern by accurately translating their significant parts [15].

Borrowed Greek-Latin terms, falling into English and Spanish, begin to obey their grammatical laws. The adaptation of borrowed terms to the grammar of the receiving language is more clearly manifested in the categories of gender and number. Borrowed words can attach to themselves the corresponding morphemes (affixes and endings), e.g., in Spanish medical terminology, in the following examples *insuflación*, *disfunción* the ending “-ción” indicates the grammatical gender of the word/ In English words *recurrence*, *immunity* suffixes “-ence” and “-ity” denote a part of speech.

At the next stage, the borrowed terms interact with the entire system of the receiving language, forming synonyms and antonyms.

The second type of terminological doublets are synonymous pairs in which one of the equivalents is represented by a phrase, e.g.:

– Spanish: *megalodactilia* – gigantismo localizado/macrodistrofia lipomatosa, *arquenteron* – intestino primitivo, *neonato* – recién nacido, *coiloniquia* – uñas cuchara, *aeroembolismo* – embolia gaseosa;

– English: *hemotransfusion* – blood transfusion, *splanchnoptosis* – downward displacement of an organ, *aeroembolism* – air embolism, *hypohapatia* – liver failure, *archenteron* – primitive gut, *neurorrhaphy* – nerve suture.

The above terminological synonyms of this type in both languages are formed using loan translation. Most often, in such doublets, the equivalent of a loan translation is expressed by the combination "noun + adjective" in Spanish and "adjective + noun" in English. This indicates the presence of universal characteristics in the building of terminological units based on the Greek-Latin loanwords in both languages.

The third group includes terminological doublets that differ only in initial elements, as a rule, in a word of Greco-Latin origin. Often such terminological synonyms are formed using the Greek-Latin word-formative elements. E.g., the following terminological doublets are found in English medical terminology:

- *galactotherapy* (from Greek “gala” – milk; from Greek “therapeia” – treatment) and *lactotherapy* (from Latin “lac” – milk) – treatment of disease by means of an exclusive or nearly exclusive milk diet;

- *hysteroigraphy* (from Greek “hysteria” – uterus, from Greek “graphia” – recording) and *metrography* (from Latin “metra” – uterus) – examination of the uterine cavity by radiography after the injection of a contrast agent;

- *angiography* (from Greek “angion” – vessel; from Greek “graphia” – recording) and *vasography* (from Latin “vas” – vessel) – is an imaging test that uses X-rays to view your body's blood vessels after administration of a contrast agent.

Spanish medical terminology presents the same examples of synonymous terms, which, as illustrated above, were created as per the same pattern and based on the same derivational elements as in English. E.g., *galactoterapia* and *lactoterapia*, *angiografía* and *vasografía*, *histerografía* and *metrografía*, etc. The presence of such terminological synonyms is explained by a common linguistic origin, therefore, both in Spanish and in English.

A separate group includes terminological doublets represented by different roots or formed by means of various derivational elements [15].

E.g., the following terms are reflected in Spanish medical terminology: *gigantismo localizado* – *macrodistrofia lipomatosa*, *labio leporino* – *fisura palatina*, *riñón discoide* – *riñón en torta*, *eritrocitos degenerados* – *células fantasmas*, *paciente sano* – *paciente en espera*, etc.

In English medical terminology there are such terminological synonyms as: *sound pressure* – *sonic pressure*, *link* – *section*, *bile duct* – *gall duct*, *mental retardation* – *mental deficiency*, *ghost ophthalmoscope* – *mirror ophthalmoscope*, *cleft lip* – *hare lip*, etc.

The fifth group includes terminological doublets expressing popular and common names:

- Spanish: *paperas – parotiditis epidémica, edema de hambre – marasmo nutricional, etc.*;
- English: *mumps – epidemic parotiditis, perleche – angular stomatitis, hunger dropsy – alimentary edema, etc.*

Common literary synonyms are usually used by physicians in “physician-patient” medical discourse. One of the equivalents of this synset is formed through a metaphorical transfer, which makes the term understandable to non-specialists.

Conclusion

Thus, there is an abundance of synonymous terms in the medical term system. The presence in the language of an international (Latin or Greek) and national variant of medical terms or terms formed with the help of various derivational elements is primarily due to the desire to explain this phenomenon by means of a native and more accessible language. International terminological units are more used in Spanish medical language, while in English medical terminology we can see both national and international terms. This can be due to the fact that English medical language is more terminologically developed. Overall, such synonymous pairs do not cut out each other, but continue to coexist in various microsystems. When translating synonymous terms, only one term from the synonymous series is often used. When choosing a suitable equivalent, translators are guided by contextual analysis, extralinguistic knowledge, and materials obtained during information retrieval.

Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

Рецензия

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

Review

All articles are peer-reviewed. But the reviewer or the author of the article chose not to publish a review of this article in the public domain. The review can be provided to the competent authorities upon request.

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