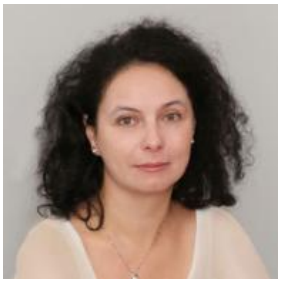
THE METAMORPHOSIS OF MEDICAL LATIN: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF TERMINOLOGICAL CHALLENGES IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION



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Abstract

This study examines the challenges of translating medical Latin terminology into modern English, focusing on semantic shifts that create "false friends" between the languages. Through analysis of terms like "remedium," "therapia," and phrases such as "crisis morbi," the research reveals how seemingly straightforward translations can lead to functional misinterpretations in medical discourse. The paper argues that effective translation requires understanding not only etymological connections but also the current functional use of terminology in contemporary medical contexts. Analysis of historical medical texts and contemporary academic materials demonstrates that appropriate translation is predicated on functional equivalence rather than literal interpretation for the preservation of intended medical significance across linguistic boundaries.

Keywords: *medical terms, Latin, translation, English, idioms, false friends, crisis, therapia, disease, Greek*

The present text studies medical and pharmaceutical Latin terminology, based on the so-called language for specific purposes. This is language content tailored with specific goals and created for practical use from specialists of the medical fields. It has also been developed through the centuries with didactic aims. Even without significant training, the medical specialists are familiar to concepts, idioms and lexical combinations which are constantly in use over the subjects in the medical areas. For teaching purposes, the medical and pharmaceutical academic courses on terminology are structured along with grammatical tutorials in Latin language called specifically *Medical Latin* and *Latin for Pharmacists*. This content has direct correspondence to professional needs and it gathers linguistic entities in use, current within the medical communication.

One interesting point of concept dissemination among languages is the Latin-English translation or interpretation of terms and idioms which are not direct loanwords as long as they have concrete correspondences in the modern linguistic medium. Apparently, they are mainly expressions which are borrowings of Latin terms, that have been approved as official in English. For example: *vena cava* – a term used in anatomy or *postpartum* – concept used for the period after delivery. Similar terms or expressions of Latin origin appear in other languages also, e.g. *ossa*[10] for *bones* in modern Italian through the roman influence. The center of this paper is to examine some idioms and terms and their open interpretation into modern English. Some essential observations have been done over medical Latin manuals and the attempts for translation of terms and idioms. The specific use of medical idioms and lexemes is discussed figuring out the professional orientation of medical discourses, the frequency of uses in ancient texts and the paradigms of translaguaging set in famous pieces like *Honni soit qui mal y pence by HanrietteWalter* (Walter, 2003). Also, the work of Umberto Eco *To say almost the same thing, experiments on the translation* (Ecco, 2003). The transition of medical terms from Latin to modern languages is widely discussed in works of contemporary scholars like David R. Langslow (2000), Brigitte Maire (2002), Giuseppe Penso (1984), Robin L. Fox (2020) whose analysies and translations contributed for understanding the medical experience, concepts and ideas survived through the centuries and served as a base of contemporary language of medicine.

The cases of interpretation observed in the following pages show the possibilities for adequate translation of medical phrases summarised here mainly from didactic materials. The textbooks and manuals used as sources are pedagogic materials in academic institutions. They serve as good examples

[10]The regular formation of plural number in Italian is libr*o*-libr*i* = book-books but for the plural of oss*o* (bone) the form is oss*a* instead of oss*i*, because the Latin for bones is oss*a* which is a remain of the lost neuter gender in modern Italian.

for the way in which Latin and English might turn to be "faux amis" or "false friends" (Walter, 2002, p. 7) being misled by some apparent similarities. Also, we need to consider how far Latin words once penetrated into English, have altered their meaning and this last point with particular attention to medical terms in English derived from Latin.

One impressive inscription met often in medieval Latin manuscripts says: *graeca sunt non leguntur* and that became an allegoric proverb for lack of sense or impossibility for understanding. The phrase meaning *It is Greek, therefore not readable* was used in the texts when the medieval copyists met Greek letters in the Latin works, so they skipped the unreadable passages, leaving this message. The situation with translation of certain medical idioms remains the same destiny as far as the primary misunderstanding of common sense is absent. This could be easily observed in our direction when getting acquainted with manuals for teaching medical Latin through English, published for academic purposes, mainly in eastern medical universities where Latin is still a mandatory discipline.

The story of English language is a long series of episodes that withdraw its formation. Without going into details, we can outline some initial facts that are worldwide popular. So many French words had penetrated English so well that they still make English the most Latin of the Germanic languages today (Walter, 2001, p. 76). This exposure of English to Romance languages makes it open to various medical Latin terms that have been acquired as loans. The formation of medical terms is not only based on Latin, but also many linguistic prototypes come from Ancient Greek. This synchronization of languages and influences reveals the medical language as a system or a body structure that has been constructed with many bricks by different origin complementing each other. This kaleidoscopic nature of the medical terminology allows it to be interpreted through various linguistic paradigms for transfer between languages. Not only by showing etymological derivation to clarify meanings in medical terms but also to give interpretation of concepts, word pairings and lexical combinations considering their historic and cultural context.

The language system and the text are different, because the transmission of sense is *a process* that leads to a formation of text (Eco, 2023). All these reflections are relevant to the way we introduce medical Latin idioms and phrases to English. The question here refers not only to translation but mostly to interpretation and relevant analysis because in this process of translation we recreate a true analogue from the *source* language to the language of translation. As far as the counterpart of medical Latin, chosen here as a subject, is the English for medical purposes, we need to examine several Latin word combinations and to identify their exact collocation in the *target* language. The translation requires mainly a true understanding for the internal

system of the text (Eco, 2023) and to make a valid reconstruction at semantic and syntactic level. The biblical story of the Babylon tower is a good metaphor to depict the structure of one medical terminology as its construction consists of multiple diverse parts that have not been created ad hoc. The influence of medical Latin to the language of medicine is undoubted. Many examples could exemplify the parallel use of Latin and English roots for the same objects like "kidney – renal", "liver – hepatic", "eye – ophthalmic"[11] and so on. To give the exact correspondence to a medical term means to make an equation or to synchronize meanings where the translation is a test of human communication (Krasteva, 2017, p. 52) and it arises from the reflexive potential of language. Therefore to separate roughly the medical terms into Latin and Greek by origin and to make the general negotiation that the first are mainly for the use of anatomy and the others belong strictly to the clinical language and pathology is a statement that amputates the multiple interrelations that have been established in the field of medical terminology between Latin and Greek. In linguistic order both languages have been in interaction while as they produce meanings. The process of term formation is also a process of creation of meaning that follows its path of interpretation and transmission. In this context, the attempt of finding similarities and contradictions between Latin and English in the realm of medical discourses intends to illustrate technical challenges in translation. The examples are selected based on their frequency of use and their shared base with Latin. Additionally, it demonstrates that a cultural absorption in a modern language is trying to eliminate the obsolete forms and to replace the etymons with new words less sophisticated and complicated. Despite this, on the field of interpretation the linguistic interference is always present, so nevertheless English terminology is a unique body, its Latin derivations might serve as sources of explanation and understanding. Obvious similarities in Latin-English semantic nuclei might provoke to misleading aspects of intercomprehension[12].

Greek and Latin words in medical expressions, some possible translations into English

The central topic in Latin and Greek medical texts coming from antiquity is the *illness* as a condition of the body, sources of treatment and observation of symptoms. This scientific approach to the human body left a corpus of no-

[11] Renal comes from the Latin noun for kidney – ren, -is, m./ hepatic comes from hepar,-is,n.-/ ophthalmic is formed by the Greek root of the noun *ophthalmos* – "an eye".

[12] This term is rather popular in the French speaking world while its creator is the linguist Jules Ronjat in 1913. However, it is used in English mainly in the context of multilingualism.

tions and ideas that nowadays are in scholarly circulation. One common word for "disease" in Latin is *morbus*, a term left in modern medical terminology. Though we can give other examples with the same meaning like for instance the noun *passio*[13], that was also used for the same thing. This is evident in the medical work of Cassius Felix[14] where the titles "ad passiones oculorum" means "for the diseases of the eyes". We are unable to say with certainty why one Latin term was preferred and survived in modern language of medicine, but the answer for sure would not be engaged with linguistic reasons. We also know that the works of Hippocrates that survived to present days were mainly texts for lecturing[15] (Fox, 2020). An important point in the ancient Greek context following Hippocrates is that his work gave birth to a new generation of medics. One basic feature of being pioneers is that they have stuttered a new language "that marked them off as professionals" (ibidem). The French philosopher Michel Foucault makes a similar observation that after "the birth of the clinic" we face a fundamental transformation of medical discourse and practice, because the classical medicine, focused on classification of diseases ignored the human body as the subject of disease.

In contemporary practice *morbi oculorum* is the recognized expression to say *eye diseases* or *diseases of the eyes* particularly when emphasizing the exact translation of the Latin Genitive case. One expression that involves still the same term in combination with a word Greek by origin, is "crisis morbi" given in its variant in English as "crisis of disease". This translation serves as a good example to show how Latin and English can become *false friends*, because while the Latin idiom is regular, the English version for translation is unsuitable as in the target language such an expression is not used at all, neither in professional medical speech, nor in the spoken English. The Greek word *krisis (*κρίσις*)* that conveys the idea of critical moment or turning point is never used in a relation to a medical state in English. We can speak about *social crisis* but not a "crisis of disease" in reference to an individual's illness. This raises the question about the sense and interpretation to one ordinary expression that can be easily automatically transform in the target language as it is in Latin, but if we say "crisis of disease" it does not make sense. At first an English speaker might think about an epidemic crisis (like an outbreak of disease) which is a reasonable association, because the epidemic and pandemic circumstances lead to social crisis as we have seen quite re-

[13] Passio is notably passion but in medical context, presumably influenced by the Greek pathos (feeling, affection, passion), used also for illness hence the meaning for "pathology".

[14] De medicina.

[15] "Travelling thinkers were to be found speaking before audience in lecturing context", Robin Lane Fox The invention of Medicine, pp. 100-101.

cently in Europe. The meaning of this phrase in medical terminology is to mark the progression of disease reaching its critical stage. It is usually followed by exacerbation of symptoms and turning point. To improve translation accuracy and ensure clarity, we can suggest more suitable alternatives for translation of the Latin idiom "crisis morbi":

- *critical stage of the illness*;
- *turning point of the disease*;
- *critical phase of the disease*;
- *acute phase of the disease*;
- *sudden onset of the disease.*

In historical medical texts "crisis morbi" is associated with Hippocratic and Galenic tradition and the word pair *krisis nosou* (κρίσις νόσου), is the original phrase and we have to outline that the Greek term *krisis* means "turning point" or "decision". Obviously in ancient texts the sense is related to observation when the disease reaches its critical moment and the body will either overcome it or not. This concept of a serious turning point can be interpreted as a kind of *decision*, in the sense that what follows is determined by the outcome of that moment.

Later medical works witness that the phrase *crisis morbi* is still current with special obseration of possible prevention to avoid this turning point. In 1765 a doctoral thesis carried the title *An plurimi inter acutos morbi crises eludant?*[16] (Is it possible to avoid the acute turning points of the disease?). This suggests that the idiom became a constant part of medical terminology, especially in the modern centuries when Latin was still the language of academic communication and writing. When this practice dropped off, the modern languages created relevant terminology that was based on Latin but however the linguistic context made changes and transformations. Thus, the phrase *crisis morbi* could not exist in English, especially in the language of medicine as *crisis of disease*, because it does not give an adequate meaning corresponding to the source language. To make the circle of terms wider, we could list more phrases using the noun crisis in medical aspect. For example, the phrase: *crisis gastrica* and *crisis renalis* – both Latin used in the medical terminology as well. To illustrate their meaning, we need to find out again the most meaningful word that gives the exact idea for crisis in medical sense in English. *Crisis gastrica* could be translated as:

- *acute gastric episode*;
- *severe gastric distress*;
- *acute stomach upset*;

[16] An plurimi inter acutos morbi crises eludant ? *Thèse de médecine quodlibétaire, 1765.* Élie de la Poterie, Jean-Antoine - candidat / Dejean, Claude-Charles - président. https://numerabilis.u-paris.fr/medica/bibliotheque-numerique/resultats/index.php?do=page&cote=ms0 2322_ms02337ax14x0087&p=1.

- *gastric emergency*.

For the phrase *crisis renalis* the possible translations are:

- acute renal failure;
- renal emergency;
- acute kidney injury (AKI).

It is preferred to avoid using the noun *crisis* in English medical context as it does not convey the intended meaning. Though the noun crisis is valid in English, in the sake of accurate translation we have to admit that common sense should prevail. The linguistic relationship between Latin and English is evident as the ancient language enriched its scientific vocabulary and also the big family of Indo-European languages is all touched by Latin from different sides. But all that is applicable in general language. When talking about specific and contextual use we must take into consideration multiple linguistic factors, that do not concern only grammatical and lexical features. The operational and functional translation, the corpus linguistics, general etymology and after all frequent use are the points of deliberation that compose the true meaning of each phrase. And finally, all resembling among languages is useful for the general linguistics but words taken alone and their combinations in context are subject of different studies.

General medical terms with deceptive meaning in translation.

Two medical terms are strongly engaged with modern medicine, because they are among the most popular notions in medical Latin. The ones in question are "remedium" and "therapia". The chosen terms, though uncontradictable at first sight and too ordinary for being discussed, have nuanced meanings in specific use. The noun *remedium* comes from the verb *remedari* (a deponent verb), meaning *to cure*. As a medical term its precise translation in English must be *drug, medicine*, *medication* or *agent*. However, the noun *remedy* still used in English though obsoleted sounds close to the Latin term and stays as a very attractive[17] way for translation. The term *remedy* in English is one of the Latin words that changed its meaning and it is quite far from its original idea. It could not be used as a synonym of *drug* or *medication*, but it can be applied to *cure* or *treatment*. If we are about to create a lexical chain for the Latin synonyms to *drug*, we can propose the following group of words:

1) *remedium* - something that heals, derived from *remedari*;
2) *pharmacum* - derives from the Greek "φάρμακον" (*pharmakon*), healing substance" with dual meaning of drug or poison;
3) *medicamentum* - a drug, medico (to heal), "the result of healing";
4) *medicamen* - medicine, drug;

[17] Quite often students in Latin classes, where the language is thought true the medium of English, decide to translate *remedium* as *remedy*.

5) *medicina* - the science or practice of healing and substances used for treatment.

Let's begin by analyzing the first term, *remedium,* as drug or source of treatment. It always suggests the idea about a substance, for a curing element that is given expecting a certain effect. The word *pharmacum* is not popular in the medical latin but is essential for the drug industry as it contains the root *pharm-* and strongly suggests for the drug industry. *Medicamen* and *medicamentum* share the same meaning for *medication*, as means with chemical substances that are expected to have beneficial effect on the body. Yet finally, the noun *medicina* is functionally equal to the noun *medicine* in English. In both languages, in addition to designating the science of healing, it is also used to refer to a *drug* or *therapeutic agent*. In English we can say "to give good or bad medicine", so this is a therapeutic agent. The Latin text *Medicinae ex holeribus et pomis* (Drugs from fruits and vegetables) by Gargilius Martialis, shows that the noun *medicina* was used with the meaning of drug substance. What conclusions can we draw regarding the proper use and accurate translation of these Latin terms into English? The question about the lexical mutations of Latin words that transferred into different languages is not new topic. It is a subject of interest and has been discussed by a big number of scholars (Walter, 2014). The linguistic clearness of mutating meanings is mostly valid for the essential Latin terms that gradually altered their meaning in the linguistic environment of the modern discourse.

One thing is crucial, when we talk about correct translation it usually refers to the functional equivalence between two languages. For this reason, the noun *remedium* does not correspond to *remedy* as some manuals suggest. In other words, the content of medical terms in Latin demands an adequate translation that is relevant to functional translation. The functional approach offers its own solution to the problems of equivalence and its own understanding of adequate translation. Without overthinking the essence of terms and to put them under interpretation, we risk to slide into seeming accuracy of translations. Communicative functionality (Krasteva, 2017, p. 101) addresses the specific situation of use and the information it transfers. The term functional equivalence (Krasteva, 2017, p. 107) offers the idea that translation is not about transferring individual words, but about reproducing their function. This equivalence is achieved by carefully considering all linguistic and contextual details that contribute to faithful correspondence.. The function in the source language is supposed to be recreated identically in the target language. And this happens when considering all details that contribute to identical correspondence. The given examples are to show that relying on Latin roots in the target language might be misleading, because similarities are only ostensible but the meanings can diverge significantly.

To repeat all the points discussed above, we can give another example with the noun *therapia* that is obviously Greek by origin but widely used in

medical Latin. Its meaning in English is given most often with two words *therapy* and *treatment* but for native speakers the use of both depends on context. In Latin medical textbooks there are a lot of sentences like:

Therapia fracturae pedis.
Therapia morbi acuti.
Therapia paralysis nervi facialis.

For all these examples, determining whether *therapy* or *treatment* is the more appropriate English equivalent requires contextual sensitivity:

Therapy/treatment of the fracture if the foot.
Therapy/treatment of acute disease.
Therapy/treatment of paralysis of the facial nerve.

All along with this in Latin the noun for *therapy* or *treatment* has synonyms:

1) *therapia* - from the Greek word θεραπεία (*therapeía*), meaning "healing," "curing," or "medical treatment". The Greek verb θεραπεύω (*therapeuo*) means "to attend to," "to treat," or "to care for".
2) *curatio* - derived from the verb *curare*, meaning "to take care of," "to heal," or "to cure". Literally means "the act of caring for" or "the process of healing".
3) *medicatio* - the word comes from the verb *medicari*, meaning "to heal," "to medicate," or "to apply medicine". It refers to the act of applying medicine or the process of medical treatment.
4) *sanatio* - the word is derived from the verb *sanare*, meaning "to heal," "to cure," or "to make healthy". It signifies the process of healing or the restoration of health.

We see in all these examples that the Latin and English terms are semantically very close. But if it is needed to fix the correct terms, we have to identify which Latin term corresponds to the functional use in English. Generally, in English it is possible to distinguish:

1) I was prescribed antibiotic *treatment*.
   or
2) His cancer *treatment* involves chemo*therapy* and radiation *therapy*.

A comparison of these two sentences reveals that the noun *treatment* is rather general and it could involve more than medications, but also surgery, kinds of therapy (physical, occupational, etc.), lifestyle changes (diet, exercises, stress management), procedures (radiation, dialysis, etc.). *Therapy* is a specific type of treatment that usually does not suppose surgical or pharmacological methods. And also, it carries a connotation of more prolonged process. Summarizing all written above it is advisible to translate into English the Latin sentence: "*therapia cum remediis antitussivis*" as "*treatment with antitussive drugs*".

Therefore, versions for translation like "*therapy with antitussive remedies*" is not acceptable, especially in the context of a medical Latin textbook and the nuances are very important when the central point is the correctness in terminology. In modern English usage the word *treatment* is more direct when discussing the intake of medications and especially when addressing a certain symptom. As for the term *remedy*, it is still an understandable term but rather archaic and in modern language it has lost the specific meaning and became a noun with an obsolete and rather broad meaning. It might refer to medical recommendations or advices that concern generally the patient's behavior or an approach to the illness. What is obvious in the given examples is the fact that even though English is a German language and dominant in international communication (Walter, 2017) its medical lexicon is fundamentally rooted in Latin.

And here comes the tricky moment in "intercomprehension" or the "mutual intelligibility" between medical Latin and medical English. Contemporary linguistic theories emphasize that **interpreting semantic similarities** is crucial for achieving accurate cross-linguistic comprehension. Latin medical terms have undergone metamorphoses in English, so the crucial truth is that medical Latin textbooks written in English should evaluate and clarify terms whose meanings have evolved over time. Linguistic borrowings from Latin in the medical English terminology are vast. Looking back historically we can indeed notice that among the languages of the large Indo-European family, Latin was perhaps the one that experienced the most unpredictable destiny (Walter, 2020); nothing predicted that this language would become over the years the recognized linguistic vehicle (Walter, 2020) of Western culture and sciences. Some Latin terms have retained their original meaning, others have experienced transformations. This is one of the challenges in working with terms and concepts across languages. The understanding of languages like substances (Eco:2021) requires to penetrate in the inner structure of each of them and to gather the functional correspondence.

Conclusions

We have observed that in the process of interpretation, seemingly ordinary words and terms can carry deeper, more subtle meanings that can easily be missed or ignored. This overlooked meaning represents a crucial point where misunderstandings can begin and incorrect terminology can proliferate.

When these underlying layers of meaning are not predicted or recognized, they are simply passed over, by this the basis for accurate comprehension weakens. This failure to pay sufficient attention to the inherent complexity of language can lead to significant deviations from the intended result.

Consequently, what may seem, can have widespread consequences, fostering miscommunication and ultimately impeding true understanding of

the subject matter. Therefore, careful and thorough consideration of the potential for deeper meaning within even common language is essential for achieving accurate interpretation.

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