11. Translations and Language Preferences

This section provides an overview of:

- Requirements for translations and language preferences
- Translation approaches
- How SNOMED CT represents translations

Why is this important?

The basic objective of any SNOMED CT translation is to provide accurate and unambiguous descriptions of SNOMED CT concepts in the target language.

What is this?

SNOMED CT is a multinational, multilingual terminology. It has a built-in framework to manage different languages and dialects. Today, SNOMED CT is available in several languages, including US English, UK English, Spanish, Danish and Swedish, and more translations are continuously being done by member countries.

The goal of any SNOMED CT translation is to provide accurate representations of SNOMED CT concepts in a way that is understandable, usable, and safe. Translations must be concept-based, as term-to-term translations may yield literal expressions that are often meaningless. Instead, the translator analyses each concept based on the position within the hierarchy, the descriptions, and relationships to other concepts before deciding on the most meaningful translation of a concept. SNOMED International provides guidelines to support countries undertaking translations.

Translation Approaches

SNOMED CT translation is an interdisciplinary collaboration which requires careful attention to content, structure and clinical relevance. These factors are of foremost importance in order to ensure the usability of the terminology in connection with implementation in electronic health record systems. Both linguistic and semantic quality must be assured.

The core SNOMED CT structure and content continue to evolve. These facts call for vigilance on the part of the translation team members who need to review and analyses the relationships of each concept in order to elucidate the meaning of a term within the terminological context. Looking at the preferred term in English is not sufficient to enable accurate concept-based translation.

Close collaboration between specialists in health informatics, linguistics and terminology is essential for the translation process. A translation based solely on linguistic, morphological-syntactical analysis might result in a seemingly correct term which may not adequately represent the concept in question, nor be used by healthcare professionals. On the other hand, compliance with linguistic, systematic, and orthographic principles is necessary in order to avoid confusion and ensure the practical applicability of the terminology.

It is crucial that those involved in the translation, verification, validation, and approval processes are familiar with the terminological principles on which SNOMED CT is based. It is equally important that they comply with SNOMED International Editorial Guide and that they are conscious of issues such as the choice of lexical variant, term requirements, translation techniques, and the importance of ensuring linguistic consistency.

Additionally, it is important that those involved in the translation process are aware that sometimes, their inability to understand a given term or concept may be caused not by their own lack on insight, but actually an ambiguity in the core terminology (international release) that needs to be corrected. SNOMED CT undergoes constant improvement, corrections are made, and ambiguities are addressed. To ensure this constant enhancement of SNOMED CT, any translation team should register questions, comments or suggestions and forward these to SNOMED International in order to avoid spending extra time on unsolvable issues and at the same time contribute to improvement of the terminology. Currently, questions and remarks from the translation teams are dealt with by the SNOMED International request submission process.

How SNOMED CT Represents Translations

From a practical perspective, the deliverables from SNOMED CT translation include:

- **Descriptions** – each of which contains a term in the target language which accurately reflects the meaning of the concept with which it is associated.
- **A Language Reference Set** – containing references to each of the descriptions and an indication of whether it is preferred or acceptable for use in the particular language or dialect.

This approach allows the same descriptions to be used in other local variants of the language. In this case another Language Reference Set is provided indicating which descriptions contain the preferred and acceptable terms. Descriptions not referenced by a Language Reference Set are not used in that language or dialect.