

Letter From the JCTS Editor

Translating the Novel of Basic Science

As members of ACTS and leaders in promoting translational research, you likely have had to explain to a number of stakeholders what it is that you actually do. You have also, no doubt, had to address the question: what is translation? Although we are familiar with both the etymological origins of the term (to “carry over”) and some of the recent definitions from Dr. Chris Austin, Director of NCATS, I have found that the linguistic use of the word translation is a helpful metaphor that everyone can understand. Imagine, for example, a novel that is written in another language. In a way, the meaning residing within that novel is trapped in that single language, which limits its ultimate impact. Translation helps to liberate that trapped meaning by carrying it over to a new language that can be accessed and interpreted by a new audience. Typically, the better and more meaningful the novel, the more languages it will be translated into and the wider impact it will have.



I have found this metaphor to be especially helpful when arguing against the false dichotomy of basic vs. translational science. The tension that can arise regarding these terms is likely a historical vestige originating in what was perceived to be a zero-sum game of NIH funding: translational science was considered a threat to basic science because it was (and, unfortunately, sometimes still is) deemed to erode the resources required for foundational investigation. This attitude toward translational science represents a “teachable moment” in which we take a step back to help colleagues understand that translation is an inclusive spectrum focused on, to borrow a term from physics, phase transitions rather than any single phase, per se. Returning to the linguistic use of translation, I often like to remind colleagues that basic science is the text or novel to be translated: translational science does not antagonize but rather liberates the meaning trapped within and creates accessibility in the form of new languages and wider impact. Thus, one key to outstanding translational science is outstanding basic science: the better the original novel is, the more languages to which it will likely be translated.

JCTS is committed to publishing the best in basic science as well as approaches that position basic science to be more translatable. This has, in the short history of the journal, been relatively under-developed but we are seeing increasing interest and submissions in this area. For example, [Holthaus and colleagues](#) from Harvard Medical School have very recently published a JCTS article on facilitating collaborative animal research through a reciprocal regulatory agreement that parallels recent progress in single-site IRB for human research. Contributions such as this will be critical for advancing infrastructure and ensuring that the conduct of basic science remains intimately connected to the rest of the translational spectrum. JCTS welcomes more such contributions as we help translate the language of foundational science into improved health for all.

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Translational Science Today



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