Analyzing Current Problems and Strategies of TCM Terminology Translation

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Abstract. With the accelerating internationalization of TCM, English translation of TCM is crucial for information transmission and cultural exchange. However, due to the influence of language and culture and the great differences between Chinese and Western medicine, there are many difficulties in the translation of TCM. Therefore, this article will discuss the current situation and existing problems of the TCM terminology translation, and make an attempt to seek strategies.

Background Analysis

Traditional Chinese Medicine has a long history, with its unique theories and excellent clinical treatment effect, which has formed a complete system. It is one of the great cultural heritages of the Chinese nation. Currently, with the increasing interest in TCM abroad and at home, its English translation has become more and more concerned. The spreading of TCM to other countries dates back to the ancient times and today it continues to spread all over the world. The English translation of TCM is the bridge of transmission in the world and make cultural exchanges between Chinese and Western medicine to serve people’s health. However, it is difficult for translators to translate TCM into English, and the present situation of the English translation is not satisfactory.

The Problems of TCM Terminology Translation

Despite great effort and significant studies made to unify the English translation of TCM terminology, the current translation of TCM terminology still have some problems, which cause great difficulties in spreading TCM. The prominent problems are as follows:

The Redundant Translation

In TCM terminology translation, translators often use more words than required to express an idea or repeat the same sense in different words, which is called as “redundant translation”. In TCM, a very important treatment method or theory can be fully summarized with only several Chinese words that sounds beautiful and poetic, for example, “xu zhang”, but when terms are translated into English, it is almost impossible to convey the same meaning of TCM terminology with equal English words in terms of character number. For example, xu zhang flatulence due to yang-deficiency of the spleen and kidney.

From above explanation, it can be illustrated that such a long definition-like translated version offends not only the original beauty of the structure but the original meaning. It is urgent to define the general expression in proper character number to promote the normative development of TCM English terms translation.

The Chaotic Translation

It is a common phenomenon that one TCM term has several English versions, which is called “chaotic translation”.

One of the main reasons is that the same one word has several different meanings. Take the English version of “xu” for example, “xu” is a broadly applied concept in TCM, and it has several
quite different corresponding versions in English as deficiency, insufficiency, weakness, debility, dysfunction. Why a word “xu” possesses many different equivalent lies in that when “xu” is used in different situations, it has different English equivalents. For example, when it refers to “xu” in “pi xu”, it should be translated as “insufficiency of the spleen” or “spleen deficiency”, when “xu” in “ti zhi xu ruo”, it has to be translated into “constitutional weakness”. Obviously, the diversified translation versions bring a lot of difficulties to readers.

The other reason for the chaotic translation lies in that several different words share the same meaning, such as disease, symptom, sign, pattern. These different English equivalents have the same meaning “zheng” in Chinese character. Different understandings determine the different English equivalents for the same word in TCM. For instance, Porkert turns “bian zheng” into “differentiation of symptoms and signs”, changes “biao zheng” and “li zheng” into “outer-symptom” and “inner-symptom” in various chapters of his The Diagnostics of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Morse translates “biao zheng” as “superficial disease”. Kaptchuk explains “zheng” as “pattern” and so “ba gang zheng” is translated into “eight principal patterns”. Different translation forms of one TCM term may appear. Thus TCM terminology inevitably finds inconsistent translations.

Translation Strategies of TCM Terminology

The translation problems of TCM terminology are mainly caused by the lack of the consensus translation strategies. To explore the translation strategies is the urgency and also the key for foreigners to accept TCM. Therefore, the English translation of TCM terminology must obey the following strategies.

Faithfulness: faithfulness, a standard emphasized by many translators and scholars, refers to be faithful to the content of the original. It is put in the first place when we deal with translation.

National Strategy: Every culture has its characteristics. The only way to keep the essence of TCM and maintain their Chinese flavor is transliteration, translation with Chinese pinyin. It is the last but not the least choice in translation, because translation causes great challenge for the readers and it can not convey the information sufficiently.

Restrictive Strategy: the restrictive strategy refers to restricting the connotations of the TCM terminology when translating and thus making other explanations unsuitable for them. This strategy is mainly for solving the problems of equivalent connotations of noun terminology between the source and target languages.

Reader’s acceptance: In translating TCM, the readers must be placed in the most important position. We usually use the transliteration followed by detailed explanation to ensure readers’ acceptance.

Acknowledgement


References


