

A Preliminary Study on China English in Translation of Traditional Chinese Medicine Terms

Xue Li and Yan Wang

Abstract—China English, standard English with Chinese characteristics, exists largely in English translation of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) terms with unique Chinese philosophy and culture. This study conducts a translation criticism on English Translation of TCM terms selected from Classified Dictionary of Traditional Chinese Medicine from the perspective of China English under the guidance of Coordination Theory of Translation, that is, translators are required to coordinate all aspects and relationships in translation to the greatest extent. The key issues to be resolved in this study are as follows: 1) What are the word-formation methods of China English in the translation of TCM terms? 2) How should English translations of TCM terms in Classified Dictionary of Traditional Chinese Medicine be evaluated? 3) What strategies, methods, and techniques should be adopted in English translation of TCM terms? Through the translation criticism of typical cases, conclusions are made as follows: firstly, domestication and foreignization strategies should be used together in a coordinated way on translation of TCM terms; secondly, as for terms whose corresponding expressions cannot be found in Western medicine, the translator should coordinate the use of various translation methods and techniques, such as literal translation plus free translation, transliteration with annotation, and literal translation with annotation. The findings of this study are expected to promote the normalization and standardization of English translation of TCM terms as well as provide some implications for future studies on TCM translation.

Index Terms—China English, coordination theory of translation, English translation of TCM terms.

I. INTRODUCTION

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), with its profound philosophy, has played a significant and unique role in the traditional Chinese culture for thousands of years, and has contributed a lot to the better care of patients in its integration with Western medicine. However, a big challenge met by TCM in its international acceptance and promotion lies in the difference between Chinese and Western cultures, resulting in the difficult English translation of TCM, especially the normalization and standardization of TCM terms [1]. Although a large number of scholars both at home and abroad have conducted researches on English translation of TCM terms, and

English dictionaries of TCM terms have been published successively, the normalization and standardization of English Translation of TCM terms remain to be improved, as is shown in varied English versions of one TCM term.

Notably, many English versions of TCM terms possess Chinese characteristics, so called China English. China English was first proposed by Professor Ge Chuangui of Fudan University in 1980 in a paper titled On Problems of Translating from Chinese to English published in *Chinese Translators Journal*. Professor Ge pointed out in the paper, “as English is the language of the English nation, anyone including native English speakers who uses English should follow the idiomatic usage of the English nation. However, different countries have different situations. As far as China is concerned, no matter what period it is, there are some things unique to our country that need to be expressed when speaking or writing English” [2]. Different from Chinese English, China English, which mainly exists in Chinese-English translation, refers to the standard English with Chinese characteristics [3] and should meet the following two requirements: first, it must express things unique to the Chinese nation and have Chinese characteristics; second, it should be normative English that can be accepted by native English speakers [3]-[8].

TCM possesses a system that is completely different from the system of Western medicine, leading to expression vacuum phenomena in the international communication of TCM. These expressions are unique to TCM, and no equivalents can be found in Western medicine, so new vocabularies, that is, vocabularies with Chinese characteristics, will inevitably be used [9]. Therefore, the uniqueness of TCM culture determines that China English is of great value for English translation of TCM, especially for English translation of TCM terms.

II. COORDINATION THEORY OF TRANSLATION

Coordination Theory of Translation was proposed by Gao Jian in his collected essays *Translation and Appreciation*. Coordination goes through the whole process of translation and the range of coordination objects is extremely wide. Translation methods need to be coordinated. For example, literal translation and free translation often need to be used in harmony. Translation strategies need to be coordinated. The translation can neither be too close to the original language nor the target language, thus various strategies should be adopted in a coordinated way in translation. Translation styles need to be coordinated. The pure style of the original text does not exist unless it is not translated. The translation of words needs to be coordinated, especially the nouns and abstract nouns; and the translation of sentences

Manuscript received July 17, 2022; revised October 9, 2022. This work was supported in part by the College of Foreign Languages of Chongqing Medical University under the fund project “2019 School-level Special Research Project for Philosophy and Social Sciences of Chongqing Medical University (No. ZX190304)”.

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also needs to be coordinated. In short, everything that needs to be coordinated in translation must be coordinated, and the translation itself is a process of coordination.

The guiding role of Coordination Theory of Translation in English translation of TCM terms is determined by the uniqueness of TCM terms and the wide applicability of the theory. Firstly, the uniqueness of TCM culture determines that it is difficult to find the corresponding expressions in Western medicine for some TCM terms, such as “气功” “五行” and “六淫”. When translating such terms that are unique to TCM, translators are required to seek common ground while reducing differences between the two different languages to promote the understanding of the target readers. However, the nationality of language should not be neglected while seeking the naturalness of language. To strike a balance between the naturalness and nationality of language, translators should coordinate the use of multiple translation methods, techniques, and strategies when translating. Therefore, this paper introduces Coordination Theory of Translation to criticize the English translation of some typical TCM terms. Secondly, as mentioned above, the range of coordination objects is extremely wide, which has covered all aspects and relationships of translation; hence the theory is applicable for guiding most translation practices, including the translation of TCM terms. To sum up, Coordination Theory of Translation is applicable for guiding the translation practice of TCM terms.

Against such background, the paper conducts a translation criticism on current English Translations of TCM terms selected from *Classified Dictionary of Traditional Chinese Medicine* from the perspective of China English under the guidance of Coordination Theory of Translation. The key issues to be resolved in this study are as follows: 1) How should current English translations of TCM terms in *Classified Dictionary of Traditional Chinese Medicine* be evaluated? 2) What strategies, methods, and techniques should be adopted in English translation of TCM terms?

III. CASE COLLECTION AND CLASSIFICATION

A. Case Collection

This paper takes *Classified Dictionary of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Second New Edition)* edited by Xie Zhufan and Xie Fang as the study sample. *Classified Dictionary of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Second New Edition)* was published by Foreign Languages Press in August 2019. A total of 8,330 entries are included in the dictionary, including 7,880 terminologies and 450 citation maxims. The addition of the appendix of “Commonly Used Chinese Characters in TCM Terminologies” is of great importance because it convincingly rationalizes the translation of TCM terminologies from etymological origins. Besides, the terminologies, citations, and maxims are classified in accordance with a TCM textbook, so the advantageous style of the monograph of being both a tool book and a mini-encyclopedia is inherited. Four indexes are set up at the end of the dictionary to facilitate query search [10]. Therefore, it is a dictionary of the reference value and research significance with a considerable number of entries, a relatively recent publication time, as well as

authoritativeness in the field of TCM translation.

Based on the definition and criteria of China English, we screened out the cases one by one in the order of classification of entries in the dictionary. Finally, a total of about 1,800 cases of China English (English with Chinese characteristics) were collected from the 8,330 entries.

B. Case Classification

Based on previous studies on the word-formation ways of China English vocabulary, the paper creatively classified all the cases into four categories by their word-formation methods: transliteration words, meaning borrowing words, transliteration words plus English words, and free translation words [11]-[14]. The proportion of each category is shown in the Fig. 1 below:

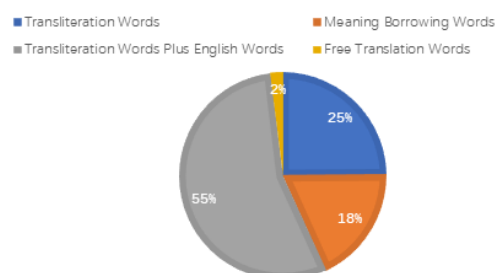


Fig. 1. The proportion of four categories for collected China English.

1) Transliteration words: The transliteration words discussed in the study are generated by means of Chinese Pinyin, which is a process of transferring a word from the pronunciation of one language to another. About 25% of the China English cases included in the study are directly translated from Pinyin, such as 气功 (Qigong), 中府 (Zhongfu), 丹田 (Dantian), 寸口 (Cunkou), and 天癸 (Tianguai).

2) Meaning borrowing words: Meaning borrowing is a method used in translation that borrows English expressions word for word into Chinese without looking at how the words are used together in a phrase or sentence. About 18% of the China English cases included in the study are translated by this method, such as 心火 (Heart fire), 木生火 (Wood generating fire), and 虎口 (Tiger's mouth).

3) Transliteration words plus English words: Transliteration words plus English words mean that the original term is formed by two parts, for example, 客气 (Guest qi), 太极步 (Taiji walking), 脏 (Zang organ), and 胃气 (Stomach qi).

4) Free translation words: Free translation is a translation method that reproduces the general meaning of the original text, for instance, 六淫 (Six excesses), 五运 (Five circuits), 水气 (Pathogenic water), and 阿是穴 (“Yes-no” point).

As shown in the chart above, among all the China English cases collected, the category of transliteration words plus English words accounts for the largest proportion, followed by transliteration words, then meaning borrowing words, and finally free translation words. Interestingly, the transliteration method is shown in the two categories (compound words composed of transliteration words and English words, and single transliteration words), which

demonstrates that it is the most common method used when translating TCM terms, with the widest range of usage and the largest number of introduced English loanwords [12]. Moreover, this finding reflects the strong word-formation ability as well as the high level of activity of transliteration words in English translation of TCM terms unique to Chinese society and culture.

IV. CASE ANALYSES

Although the study sample is authoritative, the English translation of some terms in the sample remains to be improved given the current situation of TCM terms translation, that is, varied English versions of one TCM term. Therefore, we conducted a translation criticism of typical China English cases in each category, recommending our version of translation for some cases from the perspective of Coordination Theory of Translation. In this part, we clarified one example under each category.

A. Transliteration Words

Example 1: 阳溪 (Yangxi)

“阳溪” is an acupuncture point at the radial end of the crease of the wrist, and in the depression between the tendons of the short extensor and long extensor muscles of the thumb when titled upward. The back of the hand represents “阳”, and the depression between the tendons of the short extensor and long extensor muscles of the thumb resembles a mountain stream, hence the name “阳溪” is given.

The naming method of acupoints reflects the wisdom of the ancient Chinese for thousands of years and contains profound traditional Chinese culture. Although the transliteration version “Yangxi” of “阳溪” given by Mr. Xie retains the original language characteristics, the cultural connotation contained in its name is lost. According to Professor Li Zhaoguo, “in terms of translation methods, acupoint names should be translated by literal translation in general, which is the consensus reached by both Chinese and foreign translators on the translation of acupoint names in recent years” [15]. Therefore, “溪” in the term should be literally translated as “Stream”. However, due to the complex and diverse ways of naming acupoints as well as different connotations of acupoint names, the usage of a single translation method cannot express the original meaning of acupoint names, causing it difficult for readers to understand [16]. Besides, “阳” is a basic TCM concept, and its transliteration “Yang” is widely accepted by the international society.

Therefore, guided by Coordination Theory of Translation, we combine transliteration and literal translation to promote the harmony and unity between the source language and the target language. To sum up, the translation of “阳溪” after coordination should be “Yang Stream”.

B. Meaning Borrowing Words

Example 2: 命门 (Life Gate)

“命” is the root of life and “门” represents the door of entry and exit. “命门” is a vital component of the human body, containing the following three meanings: in the theory

of five Zang-organs, it refers to the kidney; in the theory of meridians, it refers to the acupoint on the lower back and the posterior midline, in the depression below the spinous process of the second lumbar vertebra; in *Huang Di Nei Jing (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon)*, it refers to the eyes.

Mr. Xie translated “命门” into “Life Gate” by literal translation, without reflecting the “vital and the most crucial” role of the term. Take “生命体征” in Western medicine as an example. “生命体征” is a group of the four to six most crucial medical signs that indicate the status of the body's vital (life-sustaining) functions. “生命” in “生命体征” is translated as “vital”, which has the same meaning as “命” in “命门”. Given this, we recommend that “命” in “命门” should be freely translated as “Vital” instead of “Life”, meaning “necessary or essential”.

As Coordination Theory of Translation suggests, multiple translation methods should be adopted when a single translation method does not work. Therefore, we suggest to translate “命” as “Vital” by free translation method and “门” as “gate” by literal translation method to promote readers' understanding of the term while retaining its Chinese characteristics. Hence, the translation after coordinating is “Vital Gate”.

C. Transliteration Words Plus English Words

Example 3: 客气 (Guest Qi)

“客气”, opposite to “Dominant Qi”, means the Qi that controls the seasonal changes of the climate in a particular year. Since its continuous movement is like the interaction of guests, the name “客气” is given. “客” in Chinese means “guest”, so Xie translated “客” into “Guest” by literal translation, which may make English readers confused. As recorded in *Classified Dictionary of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Second New Edition)*, “客” possesses different meanings for its different parts of speech. As a noun, it represents guest; as a verb, it means intruding from the outside; and as an adjective, it means varying from normal and coming from time to time. According to the specific meaning of the term (that is, abnormal changes of the climate in a particular year, the paper concludes that the “客” in the term should mean “invading from the outside”.

In the field of medicine, “气” in its physiological sense is referred to as the basic element or energy which makes up the human body and supports its vital activities. “气” has a broad meaning, including not only abstract philosophical concepts, but also specific scientific concepts. In TCM classics, it is more frequently used in the sense of philosophy [17]. Therefore, the “气” in the context should be transliterated into “Qi”.

According to Coordination Theory of Translation, the paper coordinates the use of literal translation and free translation, and domestication and foreignization to translate as harmoniously as possible. Therefore, the paper combines free translation and transliteration to translate the term as “Exogenous Pathogenic Qi”, which not only retains the characteristics of China English, but also makes sense for English readers.

D. Free Translation Words

Example 4: 六淫 (Six Excesses)

“六淫” refers to the six excessive or untimely climatic influences as external pathogenic factors: wind, cold, summer heat, dampness, dryness, and fire. The six climatic phenomena “wind, cold, summer heat, dampness, dryness” are called “六气” when they alternate with the seasons normally in the natural world. However, when the six climatic phenomena change abnormally (too much or not enough) or the human body's ability to resist disease declines, “六气” is transformed into “六淫” or “六邪”. Therefore, “六淫” means six exogenous pathogens that cause human diseases due to climate change.

Mr. Xie translated “六淫” as “Six Excesses” by means of free translation, which needs to be improved. The “Excess” is defined in the dictionary as “an amount that is more than acceptable, expected, or reasonable”, so called “too much”. While the essential meaning of “六淫” is that people get sick due to changes in the climate, and this change in the climate means not only “too much”, but also “insufficiency, inappropriate seasons, and sudden changes” of the climate that make people sick. Given this, the word “Excess” cannot cover the full meaning of “六淫” [18].

Currently, a widely accepted translation of the six pathogenic factors of “六淫” is “Pathogenic Wind, Pathogenic Cold, Pathogenic Summer-heat, Pathogenic Dampness, Pathogenic Dryness, Pathogenic Fire” by methods of amplification and literal translation [19]. According to Coordination Theory of Translation, the translator should seek a balance between the nationality and the naturalness between the source language and the target language as much as possible. Considering the specific medical connotation of “六淫” analyzed above, we consider that the term can be translated into “Six Climatic Exopathogens” by means of amplification and free translation. “Exopathogen” adopted in the translation is a compound word of “Exogenous” and “Pathogen”, which can not only effectively convey the exogenous nature of “六淫”, but also show its pathogenic characteristics [18]. Meanwhile, the word “Climatic” is added to determine “Exopathogens”, indicating the six factors of “六淫” are exogenous pathogens related to climate, which promotes readers’ understanding of the term while retaining the full meaning of TCM concepts.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper introduces “China English” into the study of English translation of TCM terms. By exploring the word-formation ways of China English cases collected, the paper creatively classifies all China cases into four categories by their word-formation methods. Then, through translation criticism of typical China English cases under the guidance of Coordination Theory of Translation, methods and strategies for English translation of TCM terms are further proposed. The paper suggests that the two translation strategies of domestication and foreignization should be adopted in a coordinated way in English translation of TCM terms. Only by accepting the differences between TCM and

Western medicine, can TCM culture be better developed and inherited. Besides, since a large number of TCM terms are unique to Chinese society and culture and no corresponding expressions can be found in Western medicine, it is difficult to achieve its full meaning only using one translation method or technique. Given this, with “coordination” as the means and “harmony” as the goal, various translation methods and techniques should be combined, such as “combination of literal translation and free translation”, “transliteration with annotation”, and “literal translation with annotation”. The findings of this study are expected to promote the normalization and standardization of the English translation of TCM terms as well as provide some implications for future studies on TCM translation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The first author, Xue Li, conducted the research and wrote the paper; the corresponding author, Yan Wang, contributed many ideas and revised the paper; both authors had approved the final version.

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