

English Translation Strategies for Four-character Terminologies in Traditional Chinese Medicine

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Abstract. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), as the essence of Chinese culture, has rich connotations and distinct Chinese characteristics. Thanks to its splendid therapeutic effects in the treatment and prevention of diseases, TCM has won its increasing popularity both home and abroad. However, TCM is more than a type of medicine; it also reflects the culture of Chinese nation, which necessitates the cultural exchanges between China and other countries for better understanding. During cultural exchanges, it's not unusual to find that TCM classics are full of four-character terminologies, and the translation of which has posed difficulties as these terminologies are more often than not structurally different and semantically diversified. If not properly translated, these terminologies can bring about many problems which impede communication. Therefore, the paper deals with the translation strategies for these four-character terminologies based on the analysis of their grammatical structures and logical relations. Some translation strategies, such as, metaphrase, paraphrase, and some other comprehensive translation strategies have been proposed to provide some reference for the translation of TCM four-character terminologies.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese Medicine; four-character terminologies; translation; cultural communication.

1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is a treasure in Chinese culture. With a history of five thousand years, it distinguishes itself in its effective treatment and few side effects. Meanwhile, with the close communication between China and other countries, TCM, a type of medicine rich in philosophical features becomes more and more popular both home and abroad. Accordingly, translation of TCM becomes one of the most important bridges connecting foreigners and Chinese culture. The notion of "four-character terminology" had been proposed by Lu Weizhi in 1956.[1] It refers to these phrases which comprise four Chinese characters that are closely connected grammatically. TCM terminologies, an indispensable part of TCM classics, convey rich and profound meaning in TCM, and four-character terminologies take up a large part in these terminologies. Under this circumstance, translation of TCM four-character terminologies should be given due attention. [2]

TCM translation is critical for making TCM known to the world. However, the research about TCM translation started late and is still in the preliminary step of development. Although a lot of scholars have put forward some translation strategies, the translation is still not in conformity. That is to say, there is no fixed and one-for-all standard for the translation of TCM. On the one hand, it has been a consensus that TCM is a unique theoretical system in which some terminologies are profound in meaning and quite difficult to understand. On the other hand, there is no established and ready standard to follow. So, quality of TCM translation is, to some extent, not satisfactory. In some cases, translation of terminologies may be far away from their original equivalent meanings, or even diametrically opposite. Therefore, the translation of TCM terminologies is a burning question to resolve. Among those terminologies, four-character terminologies take a large part and have more profound cultural meaning. So it's of great significance to initiate a discussion on the structure and translation strategies of four-character terminologies.

2. Four-character Terminologies in TCM and Their Characteristics

2.1 Four-character Terminologies in TCM

Four-character terminologies occupy a large part in TCM classics. For example, in the first 30 passages of *Su Wen*, there are 2,904 four-character terminologies, occupying 39% of the whole content.[3] Four-character terminologies almost take up 21.44%, [4] the second place of all TCM terminologies and phrases in WHO International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Medicine in the Western Pacific Region.

Four-character terminologies are common terminologies constituted by four Chinese characters. They are common in Chinese language, and are frequently applied in oral or written communication.

In a broad sense, four-character terminologies include idiom and none idiom, or fixed phrases and free phrases. [5] Fixed four-character terminologies are different from free four-character terminologies which are randomly grouped. In Chinese language, there are many names for four-character terminologies, such as, “idiom”, “proverb”, “phrase”, “Chinese four-character structure”, etc.

2.2 Characteristics of Four-character Terminologies in TCM

Four-character terminologies have different forms and structures. According to Zhang Bin,[5] four-character terminologies can be divided into two kinds, inter-related structure and non-related structure which can further be divided into structure of predication, V-O structure, predicate-complement structure, structure of modification, and structure of coordination.

Four-character terminologies in TCM convey profound cultural information. As a part of Chinese culture, TCM also has undergone a long history. A TCM text, even a word or a phrase in TCM, not only carries medical information, but also carries Chinese culture and philosophy. Four-character terminologies in TCM are concise in form but rich in meaning, which reflect social conditions, religious beliefs and so on.

3. Features of Four-character Terminologies and Their Translation

3.1 Grammatical Features of Four-character Terminologies and Translation

Structurally speaking, four-character terminologies can be divided into two kinds, including inter-related structure and non-related structure. [6] Therefore, the paper explored the grammatical features of four-character terminologies and their translation.

3.1.1 Four-character Terminologies with Non-related Structure

(1) Four-character terminologies with predication structure and their translation

When translating structure of predication, the form of noun phrases can be used, namely, translating the predicate in Chinese into the form of V-ing or the corresponding verb. Take “肝气郁结” as an example. The corresponding translation of “郁结” in English is “stagnate”. According to the characteristics of English that noun forms are frequently used in most conditions, the verb “stagnate” can be changed into its noun form “stagnation”, and is combined by “of” with the subject “肝气”. “气” is a concept with very complicated meanings in TCM, and “energy” cannot convey all of its connotations, so Chinese pinyin “qi” is used, which is also widely accepted. Therefore, “肝气郁结” is finally translated into “stagnation of liver qi”.

In addition, some predicates that often are used to modify the subject in structure of predication are translated into the form of adjective ahead of the subject. Take “大肠液亏” for example. The subject is “大肠液”, and the predicate is “亏”, which can be regarded as structure of predication, and also as S-V-P. The predicate “亏” can be translated into its adjective form “insufficient” to modify “fluid in large intestine”.

Moreover, S-V-O structure can be translated into the form of “S+V-ing+O”. For example, “表邪入里” can be translated into “exterior pathogen entering the interior”; “肝气犯胃” can be translated into “liver qi invading stomach”.

(2) Four-character terminologies with structure of V-O and their translation

When translating the structure of V-O, the form of “V-ing with object” can be used. For example, “补益心气” can be translated into “benefiting heart qi”; “调和气血” can be rendered into “harmonizing qi and blood”. In these two examples, “补益” and “调和” are expressed as “benefiting” and “harmonizing” which are followed by their corresponding objects.

(3) Four-character terminologies with structure of modification and their translation

This refers to the phrase that the former morpheme modifies and limits the later morpheme, such as, “小肠实热” etc. In most cases, structure of modification is used to describe some organs with some diseases, so diseases should be translated first and is followed by the location of diseases by the preposition “of”. Therefore, “小肠实热” can be translated into “excessive heat of small intestine”; “下焦湿热” into “damp-heat of lower energizer”. In such cases, pathogenic factors, “实热” and “湿热”, are translated first, and the location of diseases, “小肠” and “下焦”, are translated later and are connected by the preposition “of”.

(4) Four-character terminologies with structure of coordination and their translation

In the structure of coordination, every component coordinate with each other. Therefore, they can be translated word for word and are connected with “and”. For example, “气血津液” can be put into “qi-blood and body-fluid”.

3.1.2 Four-character Terminologies with Inter-related Structure

(1) Four-character terminologies of S-V with inter-related structure and their translation

Four-character terminologies of S-V with inter-related structure can be expressed by the form of “n +prep +n” or “n + linking words +n”. For example, “气短声低” can be translated into “short breath with faint voice”; “肝郁脾虚” into “liver depression and spleen deficiency”. In the first example, “气短” and “声低” are translated into nouns and are connected by the preposition “with”, which means that the symptom of “声低” appears in the company of the symptom of “气短”. In the second example, “肝郁” and “脾虚” are connected with the preposition “and”, which means that these two symptoms appear together.

(2) Four-character terminologies of V-O with inter-related structure and their translation

Four-character terminologies of “V-O” with inter-related structure can be expressed by the form of “V-ing +n +and + V-ing +n”. For example, “补火壮阳” can be translated into “reinforcing fire and strengthening yang”; “补脾健胃” into “supplementing the spleen and fortifying the stomach”; “扶正祛邪” can be put into “reinforcing the healthy qi and eliminating the pathogenic factors”. In these three cases, “V-O” structures are translated respectively and are connected by the linking word “and”.

In some cases, two verbs in “V-O” structure have the same meaning, and can be translated into one verb. For example, “补肺固胃” can be translated as “invigorating the lung and the stomach”.

According to English expression, two “V-O” structures also can be translated into one expression. For example, “安神益气” can be translated into “making one feel at ease and energetic”; “怡神醒脑” can be translated into “refreshing oneself”.

3.2 Logical Features of Four-character Terminologies and Their Translation.

English expression can present clear and logical relations of every component, while Chinese expressions are heavily dependent on context. Therefore, logical relations of four-character terminologies should be analyzed carefully so that clear translation can be produced. [7]

(1) Relation of purpose: For example, “护肝明目” can be translated as “reinforcing the liver’s function to improve the eyesight”; “活血调经” can be translated into “promoting blood circulation for regulating menstruation”. In the first example, “to” guides adverbial of purpose, namely, the

purpose of “护肝” is “明目”. In the second example, the form of “for +V-ing” also shows the relation of purpose.

(2) Causal relation: For example, “肾虚水泛” can be translated as “water diffusion due to kidney deficiency”; “胞寒不孕” can be translated as “sterility due to uterine cold”. In these two examples, “due to” both shows the causal relation.

(3) Relation of coordination: for example, “清肺养阴” can be translated as “clearing the lung and preserving its yin”, in which “and” shows the relation of coordination.

(4) Adversative relation: for example, “补而不滞” can be translated as “supplement without causing stagnation”, in which “without” shows the effect of no stagnation.

(5) Continuous relation: for example, “咳而上气” can be translated as “cough with dyspnea”, in which “with” shows the continuous syndrome, “dyspnea”.

4. Metaphrase, Paraphrase and Comprehensive Approaches of Translation

4.1 Metaphrase

In translation, the two basic methods, metaphrase and paraphrase, are often used. Metaphrase means literal translation, which is often used to keep the content and style of the original. If the terminologies in TCM and western medicine bear the equivalent meaning, metaphrase can be used. During the translation of terminology of TCM, metaphrase is often used in the translation of anatomic organs, various specific diseases, and therapeutic treatments, etc. For example, “肝肾同源” can be translated into “the liver and the kidney having a common source”; “藏而不泄” can be translated as “storing without discharging”. In these examples, the original structure kept unchanged.

However, metaphrase means literal translation rather than a word-for-word translation. In practice, grammatical and lexical structures can be changed to ensure natural and smooth translation. For example, “经行发热” can be translated into “fever during menstruation”; “饱食伤胃” can be translated into “impairing stomach due to over eating”. Both the grammatical and lexical structures have been changed in the above examples, yet the translation strategy still falls into metaphrase.

4.2 Paraphrase

Paraphrase means translation based on the semantic meaning. Common cases are that there is no equivalent for the terminologies in terms of structure and content in English. So metaphrase cannot be adopted to the translation of terminologies of such type. In such cases, paraphrase is needed, and it is a kind of strategy that we translate the information based on the specific material or concept, instead of sticking to the original or the literal meaning. And the method is more often than not applied in the following cases: (1) phrases related to “five elements”; (2) terminologies with profound meanings; (3) complicated theoretical materials of TCM.

For example, “木火刑金” can be translated into “liver fire impairing lung”. According to its literal meaning, the terminology is quite difficult to understand as one may be puzzled by the question of what the “wood” and “metal” refer to in “wood fire damaging metal”. “火不生土” can be translated into “kidney yang failing to warm the spleen”. According to its literal meaning, the terminology is quite difficult to understand if it is translated into “fire fails to generate earth”, since readers know little of “fire” and “earth” in traditional Chinese medicine, which in fact refer to “kidney yang” and “spleen” respectively. The method of explanation or paraphrase in the second example is used which can express the target language accurately.

4.3 Comprehensive Approaches of Translation

It is a comprehensive way to combine different strategies in translation, such as, metaphrase with paraphrase, paraphrase with transliteration, metaphrase with transliteration, metaphrase plus annotation, etc. In some cases, only when comprehensive methods are used, can the accurate meaning be conveyed.

Metaphrase and paraphrase both aim at expressing the content and form of original text accurately. The application of metaphrase and paraphrase is both limited by some conditions, such as culture differences. There is another translation method, namely, metaphrase with paraphrase.

Metaphrase, paraphrase and transliteration are comprehensively used in the following cases, “中气微寒” can be translated into “slight cold in middle energizer”. In this example, “中气” is translated into “middle energizer” by paraphrase, and “微寒” is translated into “slight cold” by metaphrase.

Metaphrase plus annotation is used in the following examples. “逆流挽舟” is translated into “boating up the river” plus the explanation “stop diarrhea by diaphoresis: the methods of treating dysentery at its initial stage with the exterior complications by using the pungent and cool diaphoretics and drugs to dissipate the damp pathogens, analogous to rowing about up the stream”. By this method, we can not only maintain the original meaning, but also express its deep meaning by explanation.

All in all, the process of translation is the process of communication. Without good understanding of the terminologies and the basic linguistic differences between languages, accurate translation is almost impossible. Therefore, translators should have a good understanding of the original language, culture, and the target language, culture. Accordingly, the translation strategies should be used comprehensively to express the accurate meaning.

5. Summary

As an indispensable part of TCM, TCM terminologies play an important role in exporting of Chinese culture, which makes significant contributions to the intercultural communications between Chinese and western cultures. Meanwhile, the translation of TCM terminologies seems to be so important. Therefore, it's urgent to find some proper ways to break through the obstacles of cultural barrier and express the accurate information of the original texts.

Translating TCM four-character terminologies is a tough task which involves a lot of factors. Therefore, this paper has made an analysis on the structure of the four-character terminologies and explored some translation strategies, such as, metaphrase, paraphrase, and combined use of both and others, in the hope that it will be of some help to the translation of TCM four-character terminologies. However, this paper is just a preliminary study on the translation of TCM terminologies. It is hoped that more proper translation strategies of TCM can be put forward.

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