

Qualifications for a Successful Translator of Traditional Chinese Medicine

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Abstract. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), a treasure for the Chinese people, has demonstrated its favorable therapeutic effect on treating diseases. Although regarded as an alternative medicine, TCM has witnessed its increasing popularity worldwide. In order to make TCM better known to the world, it is imperative to train more qualified translators so that they can play a better role in bridging TCM and the world. This paper, therefore, by means of summarizing the common mistakes in TCM translation, centers on analyzing the qualifications that determine a qualified translator of TCM.

Keywords: traditional Chinese medicine, qualifications, translator.

1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which adopts a holistic approach to medicine, is a style of traditional medicine built on a foundation of more than 2,500 years of Chinese medical practice that includes various forms of herbal medicine, acupuncture, massage (tui na), exercise (qigong), and dietary therapy. [1] It has a set of diagnostic methods for collecting patients' condition, including inspection, auscultation and olfaction, inquiry, palpitation and pulse-taking, and emphasizes treatment based on syndrome differentiation. It is an accumulation of human being's daily experiences in combating both physical and psychological ailments. The underlying principles of TCM are found to be quite different from the current popular western medical approaches. The underpinning philosophies like theory of Yin-Yang and Five Elements subscribe to a holistic approach that pays attention to interrelations between different parts of the body. It is different to the reductionist approach in Western Medicine (WM) in the way that TCM treatments are personalized rather than standardized. [2]

Since it provides personalized treatment and is free of artificial chemicals, TCM has yielded favorable results in the treatment of many types of complicated diseases. Consequently, following the 20th century, TCM witnessed a far-reaching influence globally. According to Wang Shangyong and Kong Danmei, there are over 50 thousand of TCM clinics in more than 130 countries in the world, with a number of 100 thousand registered practitioners of acupuncture and moxibustion. [3]

Unfortunately, TCM is only regarded as an alternative medicine in the world, and is still not well understood by the public. In some cases, it has even been regarded as a pseudoscience or fake medicine. [4] Such misled understanding can be traced to insufficient promotion of TCM to the world, including a lack of translation of TCM literature and clinic evidences.

For years, many medical experts and translators from both home and broad have been working on the translation and spread of TCM. However, judging from the frequent mistakes made in the texts, translation of TCM literature still has a long way to go, and designing a comprehensive training program for the translators should be listed on top of the agenda.

2. Common Problems in TCM Translation

Translating traditional Chinese medical literature and clinical evidences is no easy a job. This is constantly emphasized by the common problems in the translated materials. The following is a list of different types of problems, including grammatical mistakes, improper use of words, and a lack of cross-cultural awareness.

2.1 Grammatical Mistakes

Grammar is the backbone of a language, which manifests itself as a major element in “expressiveness”, one of the three translation principles proposed by Yan Fu, the other two being “faithfulness” and “elegance”. Without correct grammar in the text, translation can never hold water. It is, however, embarrassing to see that grammatical mistakes pop out of the translation texts frequently. The following lists three examples.

(1) “It was emphasized that it is important to remember that medicine is the art of humaneness and doctors should patients, regardless of fame and fortune.” [5]

In this sentence, the subject “doctor” in the object clause is only followed by “should”, a modal verb that does not mean any detailed action. Therefore, the object “patients” in the clause cannot be put directly after “should”. Based on the overall meaning and the context, the translator probably wants to mean “doctors should take good care of the patients”.

(2) “These needle-like, triangle-edged-needle-like, sword or cone shape stone materials became the earliest primitive surgical tools in China. After which, spicules, bamboo needles, and metal needles were created” [5].

In this sentence, the complementizer “which” in the non-restrictive attributive clause stands for the previous whole sentence. However, when used in such cases, “which” should not be separated from the previous sentence and appear as an independent one. Therefore, the whole sentence should be adjusted as “...became the earliest primitive surgical tools in China, after which...”.

(3) “Many translators have devoted themselves for decades to do the translation.” [6]

In this sentence, “devote” is incorrectly used. According to Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary, “If you devote yourself, your time, or your energy to something, you spend all or most of your time or energy on it.”, which explains that “to” here is a preposition and should be followed by a noun. Therefore, the sentence should be changed into “Many translators have devoted themselves for decades to TCM translation.”

Appearance of the above mistakes is always due to poor language proficiency, as the translators are incompetent language users. Sometimes, it can be attributed to their carelessness during translation.

2.2 Semantic Problems

Semantic problems refer to wrong or improper use of words or phrases in translation, which may result in ambiguity or incorrect convey of meanings. This type of problem takes up a major part of the problems in translation, heavily impeding the spread of TCM to the world.

(1) Take the translation of the phrase “han yin han yong” in TCM for example.

According to WHO International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Medicine in the Western Pacific Region (WHO IST), the phrase has been translated into “treating cold with cold”. [7] In fact, “han” here refers to different meanings. While the first “han” means “false cold conditions” in TCM, which is characterized by general fever, thirst, profuse sweating, forceful pulse and cold limbs, the second “han” refers to “herbs of cold nature” which relieves the false cold condition. Therefore, the phrase should be translated into “treating false cold conditions with cold-natured herbs”.

(2) Take the translation of “re du” in TCM for another example.

WHO IST provided the equivalent as “heat toxin”, in which “heat” stands for “re” and “toxin” for “du”. [7] Without a good knowledge of traditional Chinese medicine, target readers may naturally interpret this as a kind of heated chemical toxin in the body, as Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary defines “toxin” as “A toxin is any poisonous substance produced by bacteria, animals, or plants.” However, in TCM, “re du” refers to a type of seasonal pathogenic factor which is a result of heat accumulation in the body. Therefore, it can’t be translated into “heat toxin”.

(3) A third example is the translation of “qing she du”.

This phrase has been rendered as “green-blue snake toxin sore” by WHO IST. [7] Judging from the translation version, target readers may believe for sure that this “sore” is caused by “toxin of a green-blue snake”. According to TCM, “qing she du” refers to inflammatory thrombotic disease of

the veins on body surface, which takes a shape of the snake with the color of blue and green. It roughly refers to “superficial thrombophlebitis” in modern medicine.

From the above problems, it can be concluded that translators are lacking of knowledge about traditional Chinese medicine, and have adopted a “word-for-word” translation policy during translation.

2.3 Absence of Cross-cultural Awareness

Since TCM takes China as its developing soil, it is different from modern medicine in many aspects. This means that translation of TCM is, to some extent, a cross-cultural communication. If the translator fails in taking cultural differences into consideration during translation, then problems would ensue. Such a case is exemplified by the follows.

(1) Take the translation of “chun wen” in TCM for example.

This phrase has been put into “spring warmth” by WHO IST. [7] Confusion may arise when readers see the English version, as they may wonder what this phrase is for, because it is our common sense that the weather turns warm in spring. In fact, the phrase “chun wen” has little to do with warm weather. It refers to a febrile disease caused by latent pathogenic cold and manifests itself as warm disease in spring. During translation, the translator neglected the cultural characteristics of such phrases in TCM.

(2) Take the translation of “ming tang” for another example.

The phrase has been translated into “bright hall” by WHO IST. [7] In traditional Chinese culture, “ming tang” usually refers to an architectural site where the emperor meets his subjects, issues political orders, or worships the ancestors. In such a case, it can be translated as “bright hall”. However, in TCM, the phrase refers to “nose, which locates in the center of the face”. Therefore, the translation version should be changed into “nose”.

(3) The third example is the translation of “shang han” in TCM.

“Shang han” in Chinese language bears two meanings, with the meaning in TCM context completely different from that of modern medicine context. In modern medicine, “shang han” refers to “a bacterial infection due to *Salmonella typhi* that causes symptoms. Symptoms may vary from mild to severe and usually begin six to thirty days after exposure” [8] While in TCM, the same phrase “shang han” refers to exogenous febrile diseases or cold damage.

From the above problems, it is infallibly to say that absence of cross-cultural awareness during translation may lead to various types of misunderstanding and confusion.

3. Qualifications for a Successful Translator of TCM

It is rather a difficult job to translate traditional Chinese medicine. Just as Nigel Wiseman puts it, “Chinese medicine is difficult to translate, and there are few people able - and even fewer willing - to do it.” [9] One has to meet at least the following qualifications to become a successful translator of TCM, including a good mastery of the target language, a profound knowledge of ancient Chinese language and TCM, an acute awareness of cross-cultural communication, keeping abreast of the current development of TCM standardization, and skilled translation techniques.

3.1 Language Proficiency

Language proficiency always ranks the first when it comes to translation. It involves the accurate understanding of source language and skilled use of the target language. For a TCM translator, the first step for him to do is to fully understand the meaning contained in TCM texts. According to Zou Defang, TCM language is abstract and abstruse. [10] Only when the translator has a good mastery of the ancient Chinese language, can he understand the text.

Competent use of target language is also equally important. This can be justified by the above mistakes made by translators. A solid foundation of grammar and a comprehensive grasp of expressions are prerequisites for good translation. How can we expect a nodding acceptance of TCM from foreigners if the translation version is crammed with language mistakes?

3.2 Cultural Awareness

Traditional Chinese medicine is closely related to natural science and social philosophy. It contains a sea of culture-loaded words and phrases. The intricate elements of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism make translation of TCM all the more complicated. If the translator does not put his translation under the cultural context, misunderstanding may occur.

Take the translation of “tian gui” for example. There are a lot of translation versions for this word, including “heavenly tenth”, “sex-stimulating essence”, “reproduction-stimulating essence” and so on. In TCM, it refers to a matter upon which development of the reproductive organs and maintenance of reproductive function depends and which is derived from the kidney essence when it is abundant. [11] Therefore, it is advisable to apply transliteration version “tian gui” to mark this culture-loaded word, and literal translation version “reproduction-stimulating essence” to explain the core meaning.

3.3 Knowledge of Terminology Standardization

Standardization of TCM terminologies keeps changing. Up to now, there are two sets of standards for the translation of TCM terminologies, including WHO International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Medicine in the Western Pacific Region and International Standard Chinese-English Basic Nomenclature of Chinese Medicine. Translators should always keep themselves informed of the changes in the latest edition.

3.4 Translation Techniques

A qualified translator is always adept at the utilization of translation techniques. This is enabled by means of frequent practice. One point should be stressed that transliteration should be applied with care, since it sometimes equals to zero translation.

4. Summary

Translating TCM is a job full of thorns, as translators should embrace a lot of qualities including language proficiency, cultural awareness, a knowledge of TCM, skilled translation techniques, etc. It is advised that translators try their utmost to improve themselves in such aspects in order to produce more equivalent translation works. However, as for how to train a qualified translator of TCM, a systemic and comprehensive training program is still absent. It is also hoped that an independent discipline be established to conduct an in-depth research on the program for training successful translators of TCM.

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