Strategies on Chinese-English Translation of Abstracts of Medical Papers

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Abstract: In order to facilitate the international sharing of medical information and research findings, medical papers and some other scientific research papers are required to have English abstracts and key words. The author analyzed the English translation of 248 articles in Chinese Medical Series Journals and found that there were some problems. This paper enumerated the common defects in Chinese-English translation of abstracts of medical papers, and summarized the strategies on translating abstracts of medical papers according to the present situation of Chinese-English translation of abstracts of medical papers.

1. Introduction

Papers published on medical academic journals are usually attached with abstract and key words in English. In this way, extensive medical professionals are required to translate the abstract and key words from Chinese to English when issuing scientific research papers. The medical professionals are not English majors after all, and they may more or less encounter various problems when translating from Chinese into English. The format of abstracts in medical papers is fixed, and generally comprised of objective, methodology, results and conclusion. It is not easy to translate the abstract with only about 250 Chinese characters into normal English text.

2. Current situation of Chinese-English translation of abstracts of medical papers

The Chinese-English translation of abstracts of medical papers is necessary for cross-culture communication of scientific and technical information regarding medicine, and aims to share domestic advanced medical information and experience to other countries all over the world so as to allow different countries and nations to exchange medical technology and culture. The standards for translation of texts about technology, trade, social science and literature are different in the translation circle. In China, different people have different views in the translation circle. Yan Fu claimed the “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” principle for translation [1]; Liu Chongde advocates the principles of “Faithfulness, Expressiveness and Closeness” [2]; Qian Zhongshu stood for the “Sublimation Theory” [3], etc. Ideas in foreign translation circles are inconsistent. The Translator Alexander F·Tytler believed that “the target text shall completely express the ideas of the source text; the style and tone of the target text shall keep consistent with the source text; the target text shall be as smooth as the source text” [4]; Eugene A· Nida believed “two languages shall be equivalent dynamically and in functions for inter-translation” [4]. The British Translator Peter Newmark created a separate school of Semantic/Communicative Translation.

The Chinese-English translation of abstracts of medical papers belongs to the category of technology English translation. The medical English is featured in standard terminology, accurate expression, rigorous logic and simple text. The objects of language carriers are medical works,
medical files, medical meeting and communication as well as instructions to medical apparatus and drugs for the purpose of medical scientific research and communication. Therefore, the standard for Chinese-English translation of abstracts of medical papers has been a controversial problem in the translation circle. Vermeer believed the translation of medical English shall be the same as that of other texts, and the target text must conform to the source text and accurately express the information in the source text [5]. Yan Qingjia claims to take “definiteness”, “smoothness” and “conciseness” as features and standards of medical technology translation [6]. Most translators believe “faithfulness” and “smoothness” are necessary standards for translation. The Chinese-English translation of abstracts of medical papers as one branch of technological translation, “faithfulness” and “smoothness” are still followed by extensive translators. The requirements of “faithfulness” and “smoothness” are that the target text must provide clear concept, correct data and accurate expression of information in the source text. In the meantime, the target text must be easily understood, standard and smooth, and comply with culture and habits of target language nations.

The equivalent translation is a kind of translation principle pursued by the Western translation cycle, and it emphasizes the equivalence between influence of source text on receivers, and influence of target text on receivers. The equivalent translation focuses on history, culture, language habits and tendency of sentiments behind two languages rather than different personalities. [7] It includes translation into the category of verbal communication, and studies various problems during translation from angles of information source point, information, information receiver, information feedback and information transmission means. In actual translation, the similarity in form and spirit between the target text and source text may be reached better when insisting on the principle of equivalent translation.

The Author inquired literatures regarding research on Chinese-English translation of abstracts of medical papers through several major retrieval systems including CNKI and VIP, and found most researchers discuss and analyze principles, methodology and skills for Chinese-English translation of abstracts of medical papers in aspects of stylistics, rhetoric, morphology, syntax and grammar. The Author believes those researches only concern writing style, application of tense and voice, syntax and grammar of Chinese-English translation of abstracts of medical papers, particularly translation of long and complex sentences. In the Author’s opinion, it is noteworthy for Chinese-English translation of abstracts of medical papers. In surface, it belongs to the category of Linguistics, and actually it requires extremely high accomplishment of translators for inter-discipline of Linguistics and Medicine. The quality of translation directly concerns development of medical science. Thus, the Author sets up Corpus for Chinese-English translation of abstracts of medical papers to summarize the details of translation.

3. Common defects in Chinese-English translation of abstracts of medical papers

In the 248 papers in Chinese Medical Series Journals, the Chinese-English translation of abstracts suffers the following problems:

3.1 Irregular tense application

The tense is the problem that bothers authors the most when translating the abstract from Chinese into English. Certainly, tense problems are the most serious problems found by the Author in researches. Only one kind of tense is applied to the abstract of some papers, or multiple tenses are used alternatively which may confuse the readers. The Author found based on teaching experience in medical English and comparison of the Corpus for abstracts of medical papers he established that tenses adopted in abstracts of medical papers are usually simple present tense and simple past tense. Many authors also used the perfect tense.

As far as the medical research is concerned, the Author believes it would be the best to apply the simple present tense to objective and conclusion in the abstract. The research objective is fixed, and surely the simple present tense is favorable. The research conclusion largely states the fact, and
shall be made in simple present tense. Research shows the objective in many abstracts is comprised of infinitive phrases rather than complete sentences, and usually begins with “To explore, To present, To establish, To determine, To investigate, To study, etc.”.

Sometimes, the expression with present perfect tense in conclusion is acceptable, while methodology and results in the abstract are made in the simple past tense usually by most translators, which is feasible. Minority authorizes adopt past perfect tense in results, which is not wrong with support of linguistic text.

Example 1: To establish an assessment system for comprehensive clinical competency of general practice residents.

This is the part of “objective” in the abstract of certain paper. The Chinese text is a standard sentence, while a simple infinitive structure is used in English text.

Example 2: The clinical data of 321 gastric cancer patients received laparoscopic-assisted radical gastrectomy from March 2004 to August 2007 were analyzed retrospectively.

This sentence is for the methodology in the abstract of certain paper. This sentence adopts the simple past tense, showing the research took place in the past.

Example 3: ISIU provides high-resolution image of the structure at all levels of the normal small intestine, and can clearly observe lesion source and internal echo, and thus help to improve the rate of diagnosis of diseases of the small intestine.

This sentence is for conclusion in the abstract of certain paper. It adopts the simple present tense, which is standard because the conclusion is drawn based on research and exists as a fact. Therefore, the simple present tense shall be used.

3.2 Random application of voice

In common English text, the application of passive voice is not as extensive as that of active voice. The Medical English belongs to English for science and technology. The passive voice is advocated to be applied to composition of technological papers, particularly of scientific facts. On one hand, the passive voice attaches importance to the matter under research other than people; on the other hand, it strengthens to avoid manmade emotional factors. In other words, the medical research pursues objectiveness. The description of medical science with passive voice may make the research process more rigorous and scientific.

Example 4: Molybdenum is mainly distributed in the skeleton, absorbed in the digestive tract, and excreted by the kidney, bile, sweat, and hair. Molybdenum is involved in metabolism mainly through two ways: inorganic salts, and molybdenum-containing enzyme cofactor.

This sentence is from the abstract of certain paper published on Issue 4, Vol. 21 of Chinese Journal of Clinical Nutrition in August, 2013. The passive voice is applied to two places of the sentence, and modifiers are adopted to add information amount and highlight objective facts with rigorous logic.

3.3 Chaotic use of grammatical persons

It is universally known that in most cases the first personal pronouns and the second personal pronouns in English are applied to scenarios of live session, while the third person pronouns are most applied to the context referring to the third party when paragraphing. Among the abstracts of 248 medical papers, the first, second or third personal pronouns are used in 15 papers. According to several SCI medical literatures, the three person pronouns are not used. Compared to the Chinese text of the English abstract, even if “we”, “it” and “they” are used in several papers, the frequency is low. Thus, the grammatical persons shall not be used when writing the abstract of medical papers.

3.4 Word choice problems

The word choice is mainly based on some terminologies of medicine. As the medical science develops rapidly, the medical terminology is changing quickly. With addition of new terms, many outdated terms may be eliminated with advancement of time. In general when translating the abstract of medical paper into English, the single word rather than phrase shall be used. In one
paragraph, when a pronoun may be used to replace words which have been described above, the
words shall be replaced. The standard of medical terminologies shall adopt those marked in
textbooks published by authorized institutions, or those in professional dictionary of medicine. For
instance, the phrase “pulmonary inflammation” is used in many literatures, but “pneumonia” and
“pulmonitis” are the two terminologies actually.

3.5 Case and punctuation problems

The case and punctuation problems are always easy to be neglected by authors because it is not
possible to cause ambiguities. Thus, such errors are common in abstracts of medical papers.
Common problems are that the initial of terminologies does not use uppercase; an entire sentence is
not ended with full stop but comma. That is because Chinese sentence may have several predicative
verbs while one or several parallel predicative verbs are allowed in English sentences.

3.6 Long sentence translation problem

There are many ways to convert long sentences in Chinese into English, and sentence structures
available are flexible. Chinese values parataxis while English values hypotaxis. In English, a long
sentence even looks like a paragraph with only one predicate. Other information or clauses shall be
connected with conjunctions, or pre-modifier and post-modifier, or even apposition, complements
and adverbials may be adopted. For the translation of long sentences, the author shall be familiar
with the Chinese text and sufficiently know modification relationship between each part to translate
with accurate and reasonable patterns in combination with differences between sentence patterns in
Chinese and English. The missing translation is the common problem in long sentence translation.
The translation of an abstract on P714-716 in Issue 9, Vol. 12 of Chinese Journal of General
Practitioners in September 2013 is analyzed below.

Example 5: **Objective** To evaluate the efficacy of short-term training of direct observation
procedural skills (DOPS) for community general practitioner(GP) trainers. **Methods** Thirty six GP
trainers participated in one-day workshop of DOPS. The participants were interviewed with
questionnaire before and after the training program and the training video was scored.

Many contents are missed in the translation of this paragraph, particularly in the objective and
methods. For instance, “to know demand and feasibility of DOPS in teaching in communities, and
explore and promote application of DOPS to clinical teaching”, “in September 2012”, “DOPS
cognition situations and training requirements”, “through observation” and “analyze scores and
evaluate training effect” are omitted.

Of course, the translation of abstracts in medical papers into English suffers other problems than
those mentioned above, such as mistranslation, wrong sentence pattern, wrong grammar and
missing translation, which are not stated in details in this paper.

4. Strategies for Chinese-English translation of abstracts of medical papers

The abstract of medical papers follows the principle of conciseness, objectiveness and
standardization. In terms of conciseness, the translation shall be simple, accurate and clear, and
valuing the source text; in terms of objectiveness, the translation text shall be faithful to the source
text; in terms of standardization, the translation shall value medical knowledge, language habits and
industrial terms and norms issued by medical organs. In order to reach aforesaid principles, the
following suggestions are offered by the Author:

4.1 Strengthening cultivation of essential skills in English

“Practice makes perfect”. Language skills could not be improved without practices. In order to
carry out scientific research in medical fields, no matter front-line medical practitioners or students
of medical school shall take time out. How should they improve their accomplishment in English.
The Author believes it is necessary to firstly prepare a dictionary of medical terminology to know
composition of medical terms, look up and collect unclear terms; secondly frequently read English
literatures with regard to medicine, and accumulate common sentence patterns and some fixed expressions; thirdly, read a book about theory and skills of technological English translation, and truly know translation techniques such as amplification, omission, literal translation, paraphrase, back translation and reverse translation.

4.2 Learning necessary fundamental medical knowledge

The major of doctors is clinical medicine, while the specialty of translators is usually the Linguistics. For doctors knowing medicine well, English is not their strength; for translators learning Linguistics, many are unfamiliar with medicine. In order to truly translate medical English better, the translators must know necessary medical knowledge. Otherwise, the target text may confuse readers if the translator does not know the source text well, and even wrong translation may be generated.

4.3 Looking up or mastering normalized terminology translation

The answer to the question why it is necessary to look up normal use of medical terminology during translation can be known as long as the concept of medical terminology is clear. The so-called medical terminology refers to special professional terms in the aspect of medical technology. Since the professional terms are in the medical field, users shall look up from medical dictionary or medical terminology norms issued by relevant organs such as the WHO. The special terms generated by combining general terms usually have multiple meanings, and may cause fuzzy instructions. Therefore, translators shall adopt medical terminologies in reference book or versions officially approved when translating the abstract of medical papers into English.

4.4 Mastering and accumulating necessary translation skills

The problem how to faithfully or accurately express the source text is the problem pursuing equivalence between the target text and source text. While emphasizing “faithful to source language” or “equivalent translation”, it is unworkable for translators to take “equivalence” and “faithfulness” only as equivalence in grammatical structure or meaning of words. The faithfulness to the source text is on no account the “literal translation” verbatim. Since this paper discusses Chinese-English translation of medical literatures, the understanding of information receivers is unnecessary to take account into Chinese-English translation in the aspect of information. Speaking of skills of medical literature translation, everyone knows the English translation of long sentences. Sentences in medical literatures in English and Chinese are often long and with complex structure. In many case, an English paragraph only contains one sentence. Professor Chen Hongwei once said “the Chinese sentence is created based on thought-pivot while English sentence is established based on form-pivot or subject-predict- pivot”.[8] The largest difference between sentences in Chinese and English is that the former emphasizes on significance rather than structure. In many circumstances, Chinese sentence has no subject, but the significance is clear. The English sentence emphasizes on complete sentence structure and usually has subject and predicate. Thus, translators shall pay special attention to analysis on sentence structures of two languages when translating from Chinese to English, sufficiently master the semantics, focus on the central words (mostly nouns) and flexibly apply conjunctions to modifier connection.

Other matters to be noticed when translating literatures into English are voice, tense, grammatical person, case and punctuations, which have been stated in previous paragraphs and will not be repeated.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, in order to reach “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance”, or “smoothness” and “equivalence”, or “faithfulness, conciseness and unity” in Chinese-English translation of medical literatures, except necessary medical knowledge and favorable language skills, translators shall keep exploring cultural diversity between Chinese and English, and improving own translation.
skills. The course of Medical English set in Medical Colleges shall not only stay at explanation of terminology composition, but also spend two thirds and even more time in practices and theory of medical literature, as well as imparting Chinese-English translation skills for medical papers.

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