English Rendering of Chinese Medical Terms in a Diachronic Context: a Lexical Typological Perspective

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Abstract. The present study is an attempt to locate the diachronic differences in how traditional Chinese medical terms are rendered into English by comparing and contrasting two English versions of 39 key traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) terms published in 1883 and 2000 respectively. The result shows that the past century has witnessed drastic change in translating traditional Chinese medical terms into the English language, with a number of originally explanatory, domesticated or mismatched terms eventually replaced by contemporary foreignized calques and even transliterations. Such diachronic change in TCM terminological translation strategies can be explained within the colexification model of lexical typology. The analysis also demonstrates that the similarity in colexification patterns across both languages play an important role in the translator’s choice of target lexemes for the source term.

1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM henceforth) was first introduced to Europe by William of Rubruk and Marco Polo in the thirteenth century, marking the beginning of Sino-Western medical communication. The first translated TCM text in a European language, however, did not appear until the publication of Mai Jue (“Secrets of the Pulse”) in French in 1671 [1]. The past three centuries have witnessed much dispute over the central issue of TCM translation, namely the rendering of Chinese medical terms. The two major landmarks in this field are WHO International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Medicine in the Western Pacific Region and World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies (WFCMS)’s International Standard Chinese-English Basic Nomenclature of Chinese Medicine, standardized both in 2007 [2].

Nevertheless, present studies on the translation of TCM terminology, for the most part, still feature discussion of strategies, techniques and standardization of different versions. Such prescriptive translation studies conventionally fix their focus on “how to translate” and the assessment of translated results (texts). Important as such discussion is, it usually ends in disagreement and controversy owing to subjectivity. As a result, approaches other than prescriptivism, such as descriptive translation studies need to be introduced in order to untangle the threads. Thus, this study, based on a contrastive description of diachronic data, attempts to outline the change and development of English translation of Chinese medical terms and to interpret the underlying causes from the perspective of lexical and semantic typology (“lexical typology” henceforth).

2. Text Data Specification

The text data for the contrastive study are two sets of TCM terminologies translated by native English speakers in order to minimize the influence of translator’s different cultural backgrounds. The two versions of translation, with a century gap, are described as follows.

The first term set is culled from A Pronouncing and Defining Dictionary of the Swatow Dialect, published in 1883 [3]. The compiler, Miss Adele M. Fielde (1839-1916), was a well-known member of the American Northern Baptist Missionary Union sent to the south China city of Swatow.
(present-day Shantou). This 617-paged dictionary, mainly written in Peh-ue-ji (Romanization of the Chaozhou vernacular of Min Chinese) with English explanations, is a significant record of various aspects about life in the late Qing Dynasty, including many TCM terms, for Fielde had, amongst her church members in Swatow, a TCM druggist, and she had shown great interest in Chinese philosophy and TCM as well [4]. Therefore, the relevant Peh-ue-ji data in that dictionary, which have been transcribed into Chinese characters with Yuen Ren Chao’s Gwoyeu Romatzyh Romanization, can be taken as a sample of the English rendering of TCM terms in the late nineteenth century. Fielde’s version is referred to as $F$ henceforth.

The second set is a contemporary one, from The Web That Has No Weaver: Understanding Chinese Medicine published in 2000 [5]. The author is Ted J. Kaptchuk (1947-), Associate Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School. A well-known TCM textbook in today’s western world, it contains many Chinese medical terms encoded in English, which can be taken as a representative sample of the modern TCM term translation. Kaptchuk’s version is henceforth referred to as $K$.

3. Diachronic Differences in Rendering TCM Terms: A Contrastive Description

A total of 39 key TCM terms have been collected from the two aforementioned sources [3, 5] as the sample data for the contrastive description (see Table 1).

Table 1 reveals that, out of the 39 medical terms for contrast in total, 18 are identical if the capitalization is ignored, namely 金 $jin$ “metal”, 水 $shoeh$ “water”, 木 $muh$ “wood”, 火 $huoo$ “fire”, 土 $tuu$ “earth”, 血 $shiueh$ “blood”, 心 $shin$ “heart”, 心包 $shinbou$ “pericardium”, 肝 $gan$ “liver”, 肺 $fey$ “lung”, 脾 $pyi$ “spleen”, 肾 $shern$ “kidney”, 胃 $wey$ “stomach”, 小肠 $sheaucharng$ “small intestine”, 大肠 $dahcharng$ “large intestine”, 膀胱 $parrngguang$ “bladder”, 湿 $shy$ “dampness” and 燥 $tzaw$ “dryness”, accounting for 46% of the total data; 2 are roughly similar, namely 胆 $daan$ “gall vs. gall bladder” and 寒 $harn$ “coldness vs. cold”, accounting for 5%; and the rest 19 terms are of significant difference, amounting to 49% of the total data.

With these 19 terms as the sample for this contrastive study, the diachronic difference in the English translation of TCM terms can be classified into 4 types, described as follows.

**Type A.** The original explanatory rendering is replaced by transliteration, such as 阴 in, 阳 yang and 气 $chih$. 阴 in and 阳 yang in $F$ did not have fixed counterparts, e.g. 阴阳 $inyang$ as a whole was rendered as “the dual powers” while 孤阴不生 $guin buhsheng$ was translated as “vacancy produces nothing”, and 阴虚发热 $inshiu fareh$ as “exhaustion produces fever” [3]. These renditions reveal that in the nineteenth century, the English world was still hesitating over the comprehension and rendering of 阴 in and 阳 yang, and thus could only resort to inaccurate explanations dependent on certain contexts. That also explains why 气 $chih$ was translated as “vital force” in $F$. These three terms in the twenty-first century, as demonstrated by the $K$ version, are all rendered with direct pinyin transliteration as loanwords for TCM.

**Type B.** The original explanatory rendering is replaced by a fixed semantic translation (calque), such as 精 $jing$ (F. “animal vigor” vs. K. “Essence”), 神 $shern$ and 脔穴 $shushyue$. 精 $jing$ and 神 $shern$ in $F$ were only explanations and could hardly be seen as terms, not to mention the translation of 脔穴 $shushyue$ as “a vital part”, a fairly vague phrase. All of them indicate that there were still no counterparts of those terms widely accepted by the English-speaking community at that time. Today, the capitalized “Spirit”, “Essence” and the fixed translation “acupuncture point” are all terms readily known to the international English community.

**Type C.** The original translation was based on the literal meaning of the term, while today’s version embraces more implications of the term in TCM’s own context. Altogether 5 items, namely 相生 $shiangsheng$, 相克 $shiangkeh$, 风 $feng$, 暑 $shuu$ and 七情 $chichyng$ belong to this category. For instance, 生 $sheng$ and 克 $keh$ in $F$ were rendered as “reproduction” and “extinction” of different elements according to their literal meanings, but judging from the distinctive theoretical framework of
TCM, 生 sheng actually refers to the transmutation of different phases and 克 keh the mutual control, as are much better represented in K, showing profounder understanding of the terminologies within the TCM. The profuse employment of capitalization in K also reflects the translator’s close attention to the systematic uniqueness of TCM theories.

Table 1. The Diachronic Differences in the Two English Versions of TCM Terms.

| Terms | Fielde (1883) | Kaptchuk (2000) |
|-------|---------------|-----------------|
| 阴 | the inferior of the dual powers in Chinese philosophy | Yin |
| 阳 | the superior or male principle in nature | Yang |
| 五行 | five elements | Five Phases |
| 金 | metal | Metal |
| 水 | water | Water |
| 木 | wood | Wood |
| 火 | fire | Fire |
| 土 | earth | Earth |
| 相生 | mutual reproduction among the elements | mutual production of the Five Phases |
| 神 | the human spirit, the directing power of the body | Spirit |
| 津液 | saliva | Fluids |
| 脏 | the (parenchymatous) viscera | Yin Organs |
| 腑 | the membranous viscera | Yang Organs |
| 心 | the heart | Heart |
| 心包 | the heart-case; the pericardium | Pericardium |
| 肝 | the liver | Liver |
| 肺 | the lungs | Lung |
| 脾 | the spleen | Spleen |
| 肾 | the kidneys | Kidneys |
| 胆 | the gall | Gall Bladder |
| 胃 | the stomach | Stomach |
| 小肠 | the small intestine | Small Intestine |
| 大肠 | the large intestine | Large Intestine |
| 膀胱 | the bladder | Bladder |
| 经络 | blood vessels; vascular system | Meridians; Channels |
| 六淫 | six climatic agencies | six Pernicious Influences or six Evils |
| 湿 | Dampness | Dampness |
| 风 | climate; air | Wind |
| 寒 | coldness | Cold |
| 燥 | dryness | Dryness |
| 热 | caloric | Heat or Fire |
| 暑 | heat | Summer Heat |
| 七情 | seven passions | seven emotions |
| 腧穴 | a vital part | an acupuncture point |
| 针灸 | the use of lancet and of cautery | acupuncture & moxibustion |

Type D. The original translation was done by (mis-)applying the western frame of reference, while the contemporary rendition respectfully recognizes the TCM cognitive patterning. Altogether 9 items, 五行 wuushyng, 精 jing, 津液 jinyeh, 脏 tzanq, 腑 fiu, 经络 jingleuo, 六淫 liowyin, 热 rehl/火 huoo,
and 针灸 jenjeou, belong to this group. The earlier translation of 五行 wuashyng as the “Five Elements” is a well-known example, for it has mistaken the oriental 行 shyng, any of the five dynamic, transmutable phases, for “elements”, a concept rooted in the Indo-European culture, such as Greek philosophy as well as traditional Greek medicine. Similarly, in F, the “quintessence” (aka. ether) adopted to translate TCM 精 jing actually comes from ancient and medieval western philosophy, where it was believed to be the fifth and highest essence after the four classical elements of earth, air, fire and water. Quintessence is the substance of the heavenly bodies, hence a totally different term from TCM 精 jing, the essence supporting basic human life activities. 津液 jinyeh was reduced to “saliva”, while it refers to all kinds of body fluids other than blood in TCM; 脏腑 tzanqfuu was anatomically regarded the same as “viscera”, and 脏 tzanq became “parenchymatous viscera” while 腑 fuu turned into “membraneous viscera”, all of which are direct borrowings from western anatomy at that time. However, in terms of the denotation and connotation, they are not able to match what 脏 tzanq and 腑 fuu indicates, since anatomy and TCM theory on 脏腑 tzanqfuu could never be taken as identical. Besides, the treatment of 经络 jingluoh as blood vessels can also be attributed to the misleading framework of anatomy. The misapplied western frame of reference is disclosed if the other F translations are carefully examined. 六气 liowchih (aka. 六淫 liowyin) was understood as the “climatic agencies” and 热 reh as “caloric”, both in relation to physics; the needle in acupuncture was translated as “lancet”, while the burning of moxa as “cautery”, both of which were direct borrowings from traditional western medical terms. By contrast, the contemporary version as reflected in K shows a better harmony with TCM proper, such as the translation of 脏 tzanq as Yin Organs and 腑 fuu as Yang Organs.

4. A Lexical Typological Approach to TCM Term Translation and Its Diachronic Change

Above described is the diachronic differences between two sets of translated TCM terms with a time gap as vast as 117 years wide. In order to interpret such drastic change in the past century, we need to understand primarily the mechanism underlying the term translation process.

Fielle’s and Kaptchuk’s TCM terms, despite their stark contrast, apparently observe the basic rules of human cognition. Translation of terms is, in a deeper sense, the pursuit of matched polysemous lexeme(s) in the target language that can secure or re-create in the target reader’s conceptual world the similar or even identical colexification patterns of senses found in the original terminology. This is an interpretation model based on a lexical typological approach proposed by François [6].

Lexical typology has risen as a new paradigm to approach, in Koptjevskaja-Tamm’s wording, the “crosslinguistic variation in words and vocabularies, i.e. the crosslinguistic and typological branch of lexicology” [7]. N. Evans terms this typological branch as “semantic typology” and defines it as “the systematic cross-linguistic study of how languages express meaning by way of signs” [8]. A variety of methodologies, such as NSM (Natural Semantic Metalanguage) and lexical semantic maps, have been proposed by different scholars. Among others, François’s colexification model based on lexical semantic maps proves a suitable framework to approach the TCM term translation mechanisms [6].

François’s model focuses on the polysemous networks across languages, and that is essentially what term translation has to consider primarily. For instance, in the 39 sampled terms, we can see many of them are general words, like 金 jin “metal”, 水 shoei “water”, 木 muh “wood”, 火 huoo “fire”, 土 tuu “earth”, 風 feng “wind” and 氣 chih “breath, air”. Obviously, they used to be words to denote physical entities, rather than medical terms. Their medical terminological use is a semantic shift realized metaphorically, and the translator’s task is to locate a lexeme in the target language with similar semantic shift path (synchronically reflected in the colexification pattern, see below). If that sort of lexeme is inexistent, the translator may need to create such polysemous link in a candidate lexeme by adding to it the new intended sense. If that new addition of senses is in accordance with the lexical and semantic typological universals, the coined term is more likely to survive and succeed. An
interesting discovery of typologists is that “a great deal of lexical polysemy are in fact widespread across the world’s languages”, which has essentially paved the way for term translation [6].

In determining the polysemous networks across languages, we need to observe how senses are expresses by lexemes in given languages, and “colexification” is the most relevant phenomenon. According to François, “a given language is said to colexify two functionally distinct senses if, and only if, it can associate them with the same lexical form” [6]. For example, in TCM, the term 气 chih colexifies the senses <air, gases surrounding the earth and that we breathe> and <a vital force forming part of any living entity>. However, in the English language, the lexeme “air” originally can only colexify such following senses: <air, gases surrounding the earth and that we breathe>, <the space above the ground>, <the space around things>, <the particular feeling or impression>, <the way someone does something>, <a tune> and the like. Apparently, the sense <a vital force forming part of any living entity> is not included. This explains why Fielde in the nineteenth century chose to render 气 chih into an explanatory phrase “the vital force or fluid” instead of “air”, because “air” is not able to colexify the sense <vital energy> in English.

However, in translating 風 feng “wind” of 六淫 liowyin, “air” is Fielde’s secondary choice. This interesting case might be attributed to an analogy to the western traditional medical model, where four classical elements, “earth”, “fire”, “water” and “air” are atomic substances to explain the nature and complexity of all matter in the universe, as has been mentioned in Section 3. The lexical forms in Chinese 風 feng and English “air” are semantically relevant, and they both can colexify the senses <quickly moving air> / <air> and some traditional medical pathogen. Another such case is the translation of 五行 wushyng as “five elements”. This also reflects an analogy to the colexification found in Indo-European culture, where the world, at the atomic level, is composed of four or five elements, namely earth, fire, water, air (if “four” in total) and ether or quintessence (if “five” in total). Lexemes with such roughly “matched” colexification patterns are often the most popular candidates among translators, because they can readily remind the target readers of similar concepts in their own culture. Yet, they are more or less misleading in nature. After all, the senses colexified in the target language (herein English) lexeme(s) are often essentially different from the senses colexified in the source language (herein Chinese) term(s), and the use of a target language lexeme with roughly similar colexification in translation can simply facilitate the readers who are at the very preliminary stage of contact with another culture. Such lexemes serve as a bridge to the real destination, rather than the destination themselves, but readers tend to take the original colexification in the target language lexeme for granted, and consequently mistake the bridge for the destination. Such deficiencies can only be remedied when the contact and interaction between these two cultures in question becomes increasingly frequent, and the two parallel colexification maps come to merge with each other.

Apart from utilizing the already existing lexemes with similar colexification patterns, translators can also select a lexeme in the target language that can potentially develop a comparable colexification pattern. Examples such as 精 jing and 神 shern are in this vein. These are the so-called semantic loans or calques. However, not all lexemes selected by translators have the same potential to colexify the intended senses, and such “candidate” lexemes will compete during a certain timespan before a few terms are finally established as the norm, which indicates that a new colexification network has been installed into that very term in the target language.

Transliteration can also be interpreted within the same framework. If a translator fails to locate in the target language a lexeme with similar colexification as in the source language term, and, at the mean time, he or she does not believe that any of the target language lexemes has the potential to develop a parallel colexification pattern, then the translator will turn to transliteration. Transliteration means, in nature, the introduction of a new lexical form packaged with certain intended sense(s). In that case, “colexification comparability” often becomes unimportant, and it is merely the intended sense that is valued. For instance, the famous concept 氣 chih, in Kaptchuk’s contemporary version, is rendered via transliteration as Qi. However, Qi is merely taken by native English users as an
element-like concept indicating the vital energy in Chinese philosophy, and the original colexification of <vital energy> with <air> is mostly inaccessible to the readers. Transliteration is often the last resort in term translation, and we can see that out of the 39 terms in the sample, only 3 are changed to transliteration. Nevertheless, in the process of increasingly penetrating contact and interaction, it is likely that even transliteration-based new lexical items will embark on their sense-enriching journey, and the original non-metaphorical senses like <air> will eventually be incorporated in its colexification network as some secondary semantic components.

5. Conclusion

This article compares and contrasts Fielde’s (1883) and Kaptchuk’s (2000) versions of 39 TCM terms, discovering that a significant number of terms have changed, from vague circumlocutions or domesticated terms readily borrowed from existing English concepts, into semantic loans/calques and even transliterations. Such drastic changes can be interpreted using the colexification model of lexical typology, and it also reveals that colexification patterns across languages can be integrated and enriched if the two languages and cultures are in constant and in-depth contact and interaction during a long period. Such crosslinguistic colexification merger in turn facilitates the creation of calqued terms, hence the observed diachronic shifts in the English rendering of traditional Chinese medical terminologies.

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