

## A Study on Translation of Action Terms in TCM

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**Abstract:** This paper is to analyze the existing problems in the current translation of action terms in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) so as to provide reference for those who are working in relevant fields and those who are interested in TCM. There is at present no unified standard on the translation of action terms in TCM, so one term may have a few translated versions by different translators, but they may ignore the logical relationships within a term or among a group of terms, or choose the improper diction for a Chinese character that is loaded with special cultural connotations. Based on the analysis of those problems, this paper provides some principles and translation strategies concerning action terms in TCM.

**Key words:** action terms, TCM, translation, Chinese medicine

### 1. Introduction

With the wide application of TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) treatment and publication of TCM literature works, the translation of terminologies on TCM becomes increasingly important. At present, there is no unified and well-recognized translations for many terms in TCM, which is detrimental for its authoritative image as a subject in science. In anatomy, English words about human body are ready-made and used in TCM translation, but in areas where special TCM knowledge is to be expressed, there are always multiple choices on one term, such as “三焦 (San Jiao)” which is believed by TCM to be an invisible organ in the middle part of a human body, serving to divide the internal organs in the chest and abdomen and generalize certain functional systems of the body (Wu Changguo, 2002). Of course, there is no counterpart in the western medicine, and this organ has been translated as “triple energizer”, “three warmers”, “three burners” and “three heaters”.

As for Chinese materia medica, it is well-known as magical oriental herbs with good curative effects and less side effects, and this is further strengthened after the global outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020. When western medicine is tardy in finding the cure for the novel coronavirus, many people, both in China and Western world, especially the USA, turn to Chinese medicine, which kindled a spell of craze for TCM. However, this calls for better and more precise translation of prescriptions of Chinese materia medica, among them the translation of action terms presents a big problem. The present translation of action terms has mistakes, such as logical ambiguity, errors due to rhetoric in terms, improper diction (Zhu Siyuan et al., 2016). The problems find their sources in the lingual features of TCM. The understanding about efficacy of Chinese materia medica is developed with long-time accumulation by Chinese

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people, and most action terms are presented in the four-character structure, which look concise, sound beautiful and are easy to remember. However, they are difficult to be translated into equal forms in English, and be easily understood by target readers (usually people from English-speaking countries). Unlike western medicine, of which the medical theory is based on anatomy, biology and science and technology, TCM is mainly based on ancient Chinese philosophy and Taoism, so the medical theory of TCM lacks the support from scientific experiments, and the practice of TCM medical treatment relies much on the practitioners' observation (in TCM, it refers to the four diagnostic methods: inspection, auscultation and olfaction, inquiry as well as pulse-taking and palpation), subjective reasoning and personal experience. As a result, the language in western medicine is precise and objective, but the language of TCM is abstract and ambiguous (it mainly refers to the polysemous terms). For example, the word “滑” (slippery) in TCM is polysemous: it can be used as an adjective to depict the condition of tongue coating, or a kind of pulse manifestation — a slippery pulse indicates indigestion or it can be felt on a robust young man or a pregnant woman.

## **2. Problems with Translation of Action Terms in TCM**

The Chinese parataxis means that TCM language would be concise, so function words, such as conjunctions and prepositions would be omitted, which achieves antithesis in language, but the language meanwhile turns out to be obscure. English underlines hypotaxis, so all the buried logical relations in and among action terms must be presented, which is really a big challenge for translation. The four-character action terms in TCM are seemingly in a coordinative relation, so they do not reveal the logical relationship among action terms or the one with one action term. Ignorance of the logical relationship in question may produce translations hard for target readers to comprehend. There are a couple of problem as illustrated below.

### **2.1 Translations Failing to Unravel the Logical Relations among Action Terms of a Medical Herb**

In other words, a herb may usually have more than one efficacy. Take liquorice for example, its efficacy is depicted as “tonify the spleen and benefit Qi, dispel sputum and relieve cough, relieve acute pain, clear away heat and detoxicate”, so different action terms are segregated by comma and connected by the conjunction “and”. However, the various actions and efficacies of liquorice are not equal, some are dominant and some are subordinate. To be precise, the effects of “relieving cough and cute pain, clearing away heat and detoxicating” are realized based on the action of “tonifying the spleen and benefiting Qi”, so a better translation of the function of liquorice is “dispelling sputum and relieving cough, relieving acute pain and clearing away heat and detoxicating by tonifying the spleen and benefiting Qi”. Another example is mint which can “expel wind-heat, refresh the head and eyes, ease the throat and promote eruption”. However, based on pharmacology, “expelling wind-heat” is the action mechanism which leads to effects of “refreshing the head and eyes, easing throat and promoting eruption”, so the better translation of the function of mint is “to expel wind-heat to refresh the head and eyes, to ease the throat and promote eruption” or “refresh the head and eyes, ease the throat and promote eruption by expels wind-heat”.

### **2.2 Translations Failing to Unravel the Inner Relations With One Action Term**

The four-character action terms in TCM is usually composed of two parts: 功 (GONG, action) and 效 (XIAO, efficacy or effect). Action refers to the function or power of medical herbs themselves, while efficacy or effect refers to the results after medical herbs are applied to a human body. There are complicated possible combinations between the two parts: the actions can be coordinate, such as “清热燥湿” (QING RE ZHAO SHI,

clear away heat and eliminate dampness ) which is the function of *Scutellaria*, in which both “清热” (QING RE) and “燥湿” (ZAO SHI) are actions, and they are equal to each other ; the second situation is the coordination of efficacies. For example, the effect of mint is “利咽透疹” (LI YAN TOU ZHEN, ease the throat and promote eruption); the third is the cause-and-effect relation between action and efficacy with an action term. For example, one of the functions of *bupleurum* is “疏肝解郁” (SHU GAN JIE YU, disperse the stagnated liver qi to relieve depression), in which “解郁” is the result of “疏肝”; finally, there is intertextuality between the two components of an action term where the two parts describe the same thing, and they explain and supplement each other. For example, hawthorn bears the action of “消食化积” (XIAO SHI HUA JI) and this term is usually translated as “improve digestion and resolves food stagnation”, but the two components — “消食” (improve digestion) and “化积” (resolve food stagnation) share the same connotation. As a result, “improve digestion” is the better transmission of the term.

### 2.3 Wrong Diction

Action terms in TCM are concise and short, so the misunderstanding of them may easily lead to the wrong choice of words. For example, in the term of “疏肝解郁” (SHU GAN JIE YU), the “肝” ( the liver) is often believed to be the organ of liver itself, but it actually refers to “liver Qi”, so the precise translation of the term is “to soothe liver Qi to relieve depression”. Another problem is that one Chinese character may have several counterparts in English, but they are slightly different in meaning, so translation of different action terms containing the same Chinese character should be careful. For example, the Chinese character “补” (BU) can be translated as “nourish, enrich, tonify, reinforce, strengthen, replenish, invigorate”. However, “补血” (BU XUE) should be translated as “nourishing the blood”, and as for organs like kidney, spleen, brain and liver, “tonify” is suggested. Likewise, the actions terms of “利水消肿” (LI SHUI XIAO ZHONG, inducing diuresis and alleviating edema) and “消肿止痛” (XIAO ZHONG ZHI TONG, alleviating swelling and relieving pain). In the two terms, “消肿” (XIAO ZHONG, alleviating swelling/edema) is translated differently, which is based on the analysis of the causes of diseases.

### 2.4 A Difficulty With Translation of Action Terms in TCM

It is the fact that one action usually have different ways of expression, which stems from the diversity of TCM schools in ancient China. Different schools of medicine were independent of other schools, and they invented their own ways of expression for the same action. For example, the action of “发散风寒” (FA SAN FENG HAN, dispersing wind-cold) has other expressions like “解表散寒” (JIE BIAO SAN AHN) or “辛温解表” (XIN WEN JIE BIAO). Nearly 80% of the actions in TCM have more than one way of expression, which poses serious trouble for translation.

### 2.5 Some Translations of Actions Terms Go to Two Extremes

Either redundant or inadequately translated. For example, “健脾开胃 (JIAN PI KAI WEI), 消食化积 (XIAO SHI HUA JI), 补血益气 (BU XUE YI QI)” are translated as “reinforcing spleen to promote digestion, promoting digestion and removing food stagnation, invigorating the blood and replenishing Qi”. Obviously, the translation is much longer than the original text, because the translation overlooks the intertextuality in the group of action terms. Worse still, the translation simply focuses on the word-on-word equilibrium, but it ignores the response of target readers who may possibly have no idea about the close relationship between the spleen and the stomach as depicted in TCM. In this case, translators should convey the main meaning of the action terms rather than highlighting the balance of form. A recommended translation is “reinforcing appetite, improving digestion and nourishing blood and Qi”. The other extreme is that some translators choose to ignore the cultural information in action terms in order to achieve conciseness, which may easily lead to puzzlement among target readers.

### 3. Strategies on Translation of Action Terms in TCM

Zhang Yi (2012:111) put forward 3 principles on translation of action terms: Principle No. 1: Being precise and concise; principle No. 2: readability; principle No.3: coherent and cohesive. Better translations of action terms are to convey the precise information in a way that is both simple and concise and easy for readers to comprehend. Jiang Lin (2002) suggested 3 methods to translate action terms in TCM. The first one is to convert the term into two coordinative verbal phrases. The following are some examples.

清热解毒 (QING RE JIE DU): clearing heat and detoxifying

生津化痰 (SHENG JIN HUA TAN): promoting the production of body fluid and resolving phlegm.

The second method is to translate action term with adverbials of purpose. For example,

活血通络 (HUO XUE TONG LUO): promoting blood circulation to remove obstruction in the channels.

润肠通便 (RUN CHANG TONG BIAN): loosening the bowel to relieve constipation

The third method is to translate action terms with adverbials of manners. For example,

养心安神 (YANG XIN AN SHEN): tranquilizing the mind by nourishing the mind

健脾止泻 (JIAN PI ZHI XIE): stopping diarrhea by invigorating the spleen

Scholars like Nigel Wiseman advocates literal translation which could reflect the authentic meanings and forms of the original action terms in Chinese medicine, so “风火眼” (FENG HUO YAN) is translated literally as “Wind-fire eyes”. However, a small group of Chinese translators advocate the combination of transliteration plus literal translation in order to retain the language and cultural features of Chinese medicine, meanwhile offering the chance for target readers to learn more about Chinese medicine. Most Chinese translators favor free translation or paraphrasing by getting rid of the lingual forms of action terms and borrowing the corresponding equivalent words in western medicine. For example, “肠痈” (CHANG YONG) in TCM is actually the same as “appendicitis” in western medicine, and “风火眼” (FENG HUO YAN) is “acute conjunctivitis”, “下利” (XIA LI) is “diarrhea”.

Undoubtedly, the principles and translation strategies proposed by scholars are valuable, but not comprehensive. The translation work of action terms in Chinese medicine should consider details like the precise meaning of every character in the term, and the logical relationship within one term and a group of terms. Thus I propose the following suggestions.

Firstly, considering the language differences between English and Chinese, translators should turn the covert logical relation in the term into a overt one. Zhang Yi (2012) said that “Translation is not just a process of conversion of symbols, but also that of logic and even logical reconstruction.” This requires translators first to think about the logical relations of action terms before starting the translation work, using prepositions like “by”, “to”, “due to” and so on to reveal the hidden logic relations in an action term.

Secondly, for the instructions of a certain prescription, there are always a group of action terms which should be reorganized when doing translation rather than translating them exactly as what is described in Chinese. For example, the action of a prescription called “黄连解毒汤” (HUANG LIAN JIE DU TANG, Decoction of Coptis for Detoxification) is presented as “This recipe is indicated for excess of fire, toxin and heat in the triple energizer, marked by high fever, restlessness, thirst for drink, delirium, insomnia, or dysentery with fever...” However, this “cause-to-symptom” expressive form is against the thinking mode of western people. Instead, the “symptom-to-cause” way is more favorable.

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