

Original Paper

A Study on Translation Strategies for TCM Terminology Based on Knowledge Translation Theory

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Abstract

This study explores translation strategies for Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) terminology within a cross-cultural context, focusing on the application of three strategies: literal translation, paraphrase, and domesticated transliteration, in the categories of knowledge congruence and knowledge differentiation. Based on specific terms from the "WHO International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Medicine," this paper employs literature review and case analysis to examine how TCM terminology can effectively convey its medical implications and cultural background in a cross-cultural setting. The research aims to reveal how different translation strategies can achieve the accurate transmission of medical knowledge in the translation of TCM terms, providing theoretical support and practical guidance for the international dissemination of TCM terminology.

Keywords

TCM terminology, knowledge translation, translation strategies, literal translation, paraphrase, domesticated transliteration

1. Current Research on Knowledge Translation Theory

Professor Yang Feng, in his "Manifesto on Knowledge Translation Theory," proposes that translation is not merely a linguistic conversion but also a process of reprocessing and redistributing knowledge. Professor Yang highlights that translation facilitates the global sharing of knowledge and the development of cultural diversity by transforming localized knowledge into universal knowledge. This process involves the reorganization and cultural adaptation of knowledge across different cultural contexts, aiming to convert unique local knowledge into a shared global cultural asset. This perspective is crucial for understanding the translation of TCM terminology, especially when dealing with complex TCM terms, where translators must focus on achieving effective knowledge dissemination through translation (Wu & Zhao, 2022).

Professor Qin Jianghua emphasizes that translation, as a key means of cross-cultural knowledge transfer, not only conveys explicit knowledge but also plays a critical role in uncovering and transmitting implicit knowledge through cultural adaptation and contextual reconstruction (Wang, 2017). In the translation of TCM terminology, the reconstruction of cultural background and the conveyance of implicit knowledge are vital. Translators are required to focus not only on the surface meaning of the terms but also to delve into the underlying cultural connotations and medical theories, thereby ensuring the comprehensive transmission of knowledge.

Professor Zhang Shengxiang posits that translation is not just a conversion of symbols but a process of knowledge recreation. Through translation, the knowledge embedded in TCM terminology is re-encoded and acquires new meanings and interpretations in the target culture. This process not only aids the dissemination of TCM knowledge across different cultures but also promotes cross-cultural communication and integration. Zhang's perspective provides theoretical support for the translation of TCM terminology, particularly in handling terms without direct equivalents in the target language, where the translator's creative adaptation is crucial to achieving the dual transmission of culture and knowledge.

Professor Li Ruilin stresses that translation is more than a conversion of linguistic forms; it is a transfer and recreation of knowledge across different cultures and contexts. The knowledge transfer in translation involves not only the transmission of explicit knowledge but also the capture and expression of implicit knowledge, which is particularly important in the translation of TCM terminology. By deeply understanding implicit knowledge and recreating the cultural background, translators can more accurately convey the complex connotations of TCM terms in the target language, thereby promoting the global dissemination of TCM knowledge (Biot, 2008; Engelbrecht, 2020).

2. Overview of the WHO International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Medicine

The WHO International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Medicine is an authoritative compilation of standardized terms in the field of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), organized and published by the World Health Organization (WHO). This work represents the collective expertise of leading global scholars in TCM. It covers various aspects of TCM, including fundamental theories, diagnostics, therapeutics, formula science, and pharmacology. The book contains a total of 3,415 terms, with detailed explanations provided for 3,387 of them, and categorizes and defines terms across 28 major categories. The WHO International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Medicine not only provides a scientific basis for the international standardization of TCM but also serves as a crucial reference for the global practice and education of TCM.

3. Translation Strategies for TCM Terminology

TCM terminology carries not only rich medical knowledge but also reflects the philosophical ideas of Chinese culture. In cross-cultural translation, translators must accurately convey medical information

while preserving the cultural connotations embedded in these terms. Professor Meng Xiangchun's concept of the "dual knowledge domains" (Martin & White, 2005) describes the interaction of cultural knowledge between two linguistic environments, where knowledge may either be shared or exhibit differences and conflicts. The "knowledge congruence zone" refers to the areas where knowledge from both linguistic and cultural backgrounds aligns smoothly. For such cases, there are various translation strategies available, and this paper focuses on the strategy of literal translation.

In the translation of TCM terminology, certain terms lack direct equivalents in Western medicine or are marked by significant cultural differences, making it difficult for literal translation to accurately convey their deeper cultural and medical connotations. In these instances, paraphrasing can more effectively aid the target audience in understanding the complex meanings of the terms. For example, translating "阴虚火旺" as "Qi and Yin Deficiency" preserves the core concept of the term while extending the explanation to fully convey its meaning.

Professor Meng Xiangchun further introduces the concepts of "knowledge avoidance" and "dual knowledge avoidance," describing potential knowledge conflicts encountered in translation. "Knowledge avoidance" refers to instances where certain knowledge, due to its distinct local characteristics, resists direct correspondence in cross-cultural translation; "dual knowledge avoidance" involves conflicting knowledge information in two cultures, which may lead to comprehension barriers in a cross-cultural context. In such cases, domesticated transliteration can effectively address these challenges by retaining the phonetic characteristics of the term while incorporating relevant cultural contexts into the target language. This approach allows readers to appreciate the cultural essence of the original term while understanding its medical significance.

This paper uses the WHO International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Medicine as a case study to examine translation strategies for TCM terminology, particularly focusing on the scenarios of knowledge congruence and knowledge differentiation. The selection of terms in this study is based on the 28 categories defined by the WHO International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Medicine, considering the importance and complexity of each category in TCM. The key categories selected include disease nomenclature, pathological mechanisms, and syndromes. Approximately 10-15 representative terms were chosen from each category (as shown in the tables within the text) to ensure that these terms adequately reflect the diversity of TCM core concepts and the translation challenges between TCM and Western medicine.

Disease nomenclature terms are relatively straightforward to translate due to their clear correspondence with Western medical terminology, resulting in a smaller selection. However, terms related to pathological mechanisms and syndromes, which involve unique TCM theories and complex diagnostic standards, pose greater translation challenges and thus were selected in larger numbers. Through this classification and selection, the study aims to reveal the cross-cultural translation challenges of TCM terminology and provide broad reference value and theoretical support for translation practice.

3.1 Translation Strategies for Knowledge Congruence

The concept of knowledge congruence implies that in the translation of TCM terminology, certain terms carry cultural knowledge that aligns with the knowledge present in the target language's cultural background. These terms can be translated using expressions in the target language that are formally and conceptually equivalent, thus allowing for a literal translation strategy. In this case, the source language term, as the donor of knowledge, can be accurately mapped to a corresponding knowledge receptor in the target language, ensuring that the translation process preserves both the medical significance and the cultural connotations of the term.

Terminology List 1

Source Language (Knowledge Donor)	Target Language (Knowledge Receptor)	Category
冠心病	Coronary Heart Disease	Disease Nomenclature
心肌梗死	Myocardial Infarction	Disease Nomenclature
心力衰竭	Heart Failure	Disease Nomenclature
脑卒中	Stroke	Disease Nomenclature
肝硬化	Liver Cirrhosis	Disease Nomenclature
高脂血症	Hyperlipidemia	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
骨质疏松症	Osteoporosis	Disease Nomenclature
慢性肾功能衰竭	Chronic Renal Failure	Disease Nomenclature
慢性支气管炎	Chronic Bronchitis	Disease Nomenclature
甲状腺功能亢进	Hyperthyroidism	Disease Nomenclature
神经衰弱	Neurasthenia	Syndrome Terminology

In the translation of these terms, the literal translation strategy is widely applied due to the clear correspondence between terms in TCM and Western medicine. This correspondence allows literal translation to accurately reproduce the form and content of the original terms, ensuring that the expressions in the target language align with those in the source text, thereby effectively conveying medical information. For example, terms like "冠心病" (Coronary Heart Disease) and "心肌梗死" (Myocardial Infarction) are widely used disease nomenclature terms in both TCM and Western medicine, and literal translation fully reflects their commonality across different medical systems.

While literal translation is highly applicable for handling terms with knowledge congruence, translators must still consider cultural differences. For instance, although the term "Neurasthenia" has a direct equivalent in Western medicine, its interpretation may vary across different cultural contexts. Therefore, when employing literal translation, translators should ensure that the term's understanding in the target

language culture is consistent with the source text, avoiding misunderstandings due to cultural differences.

Additionally, although the literal translation strategy is effective, it may have limitations in certain situations. Some terms, while formally corresponding, may be understood differently in various cultural contexts. In such cases, the literal translation strategy may need to be supplemented with annotations or background information to ensure that the target audience accurately comprehends the medical significance of the terms.

3.2 Translation Strategies for Knowledge Differentiation

3.2.1 Free Translation

The paraphrase strategy plays a uniquely important role when dealing with TCM terms that have no direct equivalent in Western medicine and are characterized by complex meanings. Such terms often involve core pathological mechanisms of TCM, intricate diagnostic standards, and multi-layered treatment principles that cannot be accurately conveyed through simple literal translation. Traditional Chinese Medicine emphasizes a holistic approach and dynamic balance, describing pathological changes in the human body through abstract concepts such as "Yin-Yang," "Qi-Blood," and "Zang-Fu" (organs). The richness and complexity of these concepts make it difficult for a literal translation to capture their deeper meanings. Therefore, the paraphrase strategy is required to expand and explain these terms, ensuring their correct understanding in the target language.

Terminology List 2

Source Language (Knowledge Donor)	Target Language (Knowledge Receptor)	Category
活血行气	Invigorate blood circulation and promote the flow of qi	Treatment Principle Terminology
扶正祛邪	Support the healthy qi and expel the pathogenic factors	Treatment Principle Terminology
肝火上炎	Liver fire flaming upwards	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
肾气不固	Kidney qi insecurity	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
脾胃湿热	Damp-Heat in the Spleen and Stomach	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
胃火炽盛	Exuberant Stomach Fire	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
肝气犯胃	Liver Qi Attacking the Stomach	Syndrome Terminology
肺气郁闭	Lung Qi Obstruction	Syndrome Terminology
寒湿困脾	Cold-Dampness Encumbering the Spleen	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
气血两虚	Qi and Blood Deficiency	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
心阳虚	Heart Yang Deficiency	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
风热咽痛	Wind-Heat Sore Throat	Syndrome Terminology

痰湿困脾	Phlegm-Dampness Encumbering the Spleen	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
肝郁气滞	Liver Qi Stagnation (with emotional stress)	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
脾虚气滞	Spleen Deficiency with Qi Stagnation	Syndrome Terminology

In TCM theory, many terms are not merely simple descriptions of physiological states but are imbued with specific cultural contexts and philosophical ideas. For instance, "扶正祛邪" (Support the healthy qi and expel the pathogenic factors) is not just a description of enhancing the body's vital energy and expelling external pathogens; it also reflects TCM's holistic understanding of disease etiology and pathogenesis, as well as its systematic approach to treatment strategies. By using paraphrase, translating it as "Support the healthy qi and expel the pathogenic factors," and further explaining how "扶正" (supporting the healthy qi) enhances the body's immunity and "祛邪" (expelling pathogenic factors) removes pathogens, readers of the target language can gain a deeper understanding of TCM's therapeutic thinking. This not only preserves the medical functionality of the term but also conveys TCM's unique theoretical framework and cultural background.

In the translation of TCM terminology, the paraphrase strategy is particularly crucial, especially when dealing with terms that lack direct equivalents in Western medicine. These terms often carry TCM's unique pathological mechanisms, treatment principles, and deep cultural backgrounds, which cannot be fully conveyed through simple literal translation. The paraphrase strategy, by expanding and explaining the terms, effectively communicates these complex TCM concepts to the target language readers.

For example, the term "肝气郁结" (Liver Qi Stagnation) reflects the impact of emotional imbalance on liver function, a concept not directly mirrored in Western medicine. The paraphrase strategy allows for its translation as "Liver Qi Stagnation," with further explanation of the pathological mechanism and its effects on the digestive system. This approach helps readers understand TCM's emphasis on the interrelationship between emotional regulation and internal organ function. Similarly, the term "寒湿困脾" (Cold-Dampness Encumbering the Spleen) describes a pathological state where cold-damp pathogens obstruct the spleen and stomach's functions. In paraphrasing, the translator can render it as "Cold-Dampness Encumbering the Spleen," with additional explanation of how cold-dampness affects spleen and stomach function and its importance in TCM diagnosis. This expanded explanation not only conveys the specific pathological mechanism but also highlights TCM's holistic concept of organ function coordination.

Additionally, syndrome terms like "痰湿困脾" (Phlegm-Dampness Encumbering the Spleen) are comprehensively presented through the paraphrase strategy. This term not only describes a specific pathological state but also involves TCM's overall understanding of organ dysfunction and systematic analysis of disease etiology. By translating it as "Phlegm-Dampness Encumbering the Spleen" and providing further explanation, readers can grasp how phlegm-dampness affects spleen function and the widespread impact of spleen dysfunction in TCM theory.

Through these examples, it is evident that the paraphrase strategy, when handling TCM terminology, is not merely a tool for linguistic conversion but a bridge for cultural and medical knowledge. It allows the complex theoretical system of TCM to be integrated with the cognitive framework of the target language readers, ensuring the effective transmission and reception of the terms in a cross-cultural context. The successful application of this strategy not only enhances the academic and medical functionality of the terms but also provides readers with a deeper understanding of TCM's holistic treatment philosophy.

3.2.2 Domesticated Transliteration

The domesticated transliteration strategy is widely used in the translation of TCM terminology, particularly when TCM concepts lack direct equivalents in Western medicine. By preserving the phonetic form of the term while making semantic adjustments, domesticated transliteration effectively conveys the core concepts and cultural connotations of these terms. TCM terminology not only describes pathological states but also embodies complex cultural and philosophical ideas. Therefore, transliteration is not merely a retention of form but also a transmission of cultural significance.

Terminology List 3

Source Language (Knowledge Donor)	Target Language (Knowledge Receptor)	Category
痰湿阻肺	Phlegm-dampness obstructing the lung	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
风寒湿痹	Wind-cold-dampness impediment	Syndrome Terminology
脾虚湿困	Spleen deficiency with dampness retention	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
心肾不交	Heart and Kidney Disharmony	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
气阴两虚	Qi and Yin Deficiency	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
阳虚水泛	Yang Deficiency with Water Overflowing	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
血瘀气滞	Blood Stasis and Qi Stagnation	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
肝郁脾虚	Liver Qi Stagnation with Spleen Deficiency	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
肝阳上亢	Liver Yang Rising	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
肺气虚	Lung Qi Deficiency	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
肾阴虚	Kidney Yin Deficiency	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
心血不足	Heart Blood Deficiency	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
热邪	Heat Pathogen	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
湿邪	Damp Pathogen	Pathological Mechanism Terminology
燥邪	Dryness Pathogen	Pathological Mechanism Terminology

In TCM theory, many terms like "肝郁气滞" (Liver Qi Stagnation) not only describe pathological states but also reflect TCM's profound understanding of the body's overall balance and regulation. For

example, by using domesticated transliteration to translate "肝郁气滞" as "Gan Yu Qi Stagnation," the phonetic form of the term is preserved while "Qi Stagnation" accurately conveys the core pathological concept. This translation method respects the cultural background of TCM terminology while ensuring its comprehensibility in the target language, highlighting the complex relationship between emotional states and organ function dysregulation in TCM theory.

The essence of domesticated transliteration lies in its role as a bridge for cross-cultural transmission of complex TCM pathological concepts, not just individual terms. Take the term "风寒湿痹" (Wind-Cold-Damp Impediment) as an example. Translating it this way retains the term's cultural background and pathological concept, helping the target language readers to better understand TCM's etiology. This transliteration strategy, by combining with expressions familiar in Western medicine, ensures that the term is effectively communicated and accepted across different cultural contexts, while also conveying TCM's understanding of the dynamic balance between the human body and the natural environment.

Moreover, the concept of the "Five Pathogens" in TCM—wind, cold, dampness, dryness, and heat—goes beyond a simple description of disease causation, embodying deeper philosophical reflections on the relationship between nature and the human body. For instance, when "风邪" is transliterated as "Wind Pathogen", it not only retains "wind" as a natural element but also conveys its role as a disease-causing factor through the word "Pathogen". This translation method reflects TCM's "unity of heaven and man" philosophy, emphasizing the dynamic balance between the human body and the natural world, and how external environmental changes, like "wind pathogen," impact human health.

Crucially, domesticated transliteration not only preserves the phonetic elegance of TCM terms but also, through semantic adaptation, ensures their comprehensibility and accuracy in the target language. This strategy is particularly suitable for terms that need to maintain cultural specificity in a cross-cultural context. It allows the target language readers to appreciate both the uniqueness and the depth of thought inherent in the original culture, thus avoiding potential misunderstandings that might arise from direct translation. This dual function ensures that TCM terminology retains its distinctiveness while finding corresponding channels of understanding within the target culture.

The case analyses demonstrate that domesticated transliteration effectively handles TCM terminology by preserving the original term's phonetic beauty and cultural connotations while also making necessary semantic adjustments to ensure accurate transmission in different linguistic and cultural contexts. This strategy enables TCM terms to be accurately conveyed, widely accepted, and effectively disseminated in the target language culture.

4. Conclusion

This study delved into the translation strategies for various categories of terms in the WHO International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Medicine, focusing on how to select appropriate

strategies based on different knowledge backgrounds. The findings indicate that literal translation is highly effective for terms where knowledge between TCM and Western medicine aligns, ensuring that the medical connotations of the terms are accurately conveyed in the target language. However, for terms with significant cultural and theoretical differences, paraphrase and domesticated transliteration strategies proved to be more advantageous. These strategies not only help bridge cultural gaps but also ensure that TCM terminology is correctly understood and accepted in cross-cultural contexts.

Through a detailed analysis of disease nomenclature, pathological mechanism terminology, and syndrome terminology, this paper identified the challenges that different categories of terms might face during translation and proposed corresponding strategies. For instance, disease nomenclature terms, given their clear correspondence between TCM and Western medicine, are relatively straightforward to translate. In contrast, pathological mechanism terms, which often involve unique cultural contexts and complex theories inherent to TCM, benefit more from paraphrase and transliteration approaches. Syndrome terms usually require a combination of strategies to accurately convey their complex medical concepts in the target language. This strategic analysis provides not only operational guidance for translation practice but also lays a theoretical foundation for the international standardization of TCM terminology.

In conclusion, this paper has enriched the theoretical framework of TCM terminology translation through a comprehensive analysis of translation strategies across different categories, offering valuable practical guidelines. As TCM continues to spread globally, the translation of its terminology will face increasingly complex cross-cultural challenges. This necessitates ongoing exploration and innovation in translation methods to ensure that TCM knowledge is effectively communicated and applied on the international stage.

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