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A Skopos Theory-based Study of Translation Principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine Decoctions*

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English translations of Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) terms and prescriptions need standardizing to minimize ambiguity as the popularity of TCM spreads globally. Herein an evaluation guide for translation of TCM decoctions in English into diverse social, cultural and medical systems, is proffered which integrates Skopos theory and Li Zhaoguo's principles of English translation (conciseness of lexical composition, information accuracy, and similarity in lexical composition). Based on a case study of the traditional herbal medicine *Mahuang Xingren Gancao Shigao Tang*, direct translation methods with concise lexical composition are determined to most clearly convey the sophisticated and verbose original TCM prescription.

Keywords: skopos theory, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), prescription, translation principles, translation methods

1. Introduction

The popularity of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has increased internationally, and its concepts of diagnosis and treatment are now accepted in many countries, some of which now even consider incorporating TCM into their medical care system (Ye & Zhang, 2017). While many translations of TCM exist, especially from Chinese to English (China National Committee For Terms in Sciences And Technologies, 2004; Li, He, & Wang, 2008; World Health Organization. Regional Office for the Western, 2007), a lack of standardized terminology has resulted in single TCM terms having multiple interpretations in different translations. This lack of standardization could potentially confuse those seeking to apply TCM in non-Chinese-speaking countries.

To appraise the most appropriate methods to apply for translating TCM terms, three versions of 麻黄杏仁甘草石膏汤 *Mahuang Xingren Gancao Shigao Tang* in English by three different translators (Huang, 2005; Luo, 2007; Mitchell, Feng, & Wiseman, 1999) are examined. Huang Hai is a professor at Fujian University of Traditional Chinese Medicine ("Hai Huang," 2016); Wisemen is from a non-native Chinese-speaking country and works as a researcher in the field of TCM translation (Li, 1998); and Luo Xiwen is a researcher working at

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the Institute of Philosophy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences ("Introduction to Xiwen Luo," 2013). Each translator has a different background and their target texts have different purposes.

Of the three rules proposed by Vermeer (1978) for Skopos theory, the Skopos rule—that an action of translation is determined by its purpose—is the most important. In the translation process a translator generally communicates the purpose of the target text in the target environment, to guide the reader. The coherence rule requires a translation to be coherent and acceptable to the reader, while the fidelity rule requires coherence between the source and target texts, so the target text must be as faithful as possible to the source text (Nord, 2014).

Many authors have examined the principles and methods of translation of TCM terminology and decoctions (Li, 1993, 2008; Shen, 2011; Wiseman & Zmiewski, 1989; Ye & Wang, 2015; Zhang, Chen, Zhao, & Wang, 2021). Of these, Zhaoguo Li (1997) proposed the three principles of "briefness," "information," and "back translatability" to guide the translation of TCM prescriptions. Because TCM terminology and prescriptions are typically brief and concise, using few words with deep meaning, their English translation should be similarly brief and concise. Moreover, because a TCM prescription's name includes information about its composition or efficacy, either directly or indirectly, its translation should also convey this information. Back translatability simply means that the English translation of a prescription must be as close as possible to the Chinese original in lexical structure and form, so that the information can be transmitted in both directions between languages. Integrating Vermeer's three rules and Li's three principles of translation for TCM prescriptions produces the schema in Figure 1.

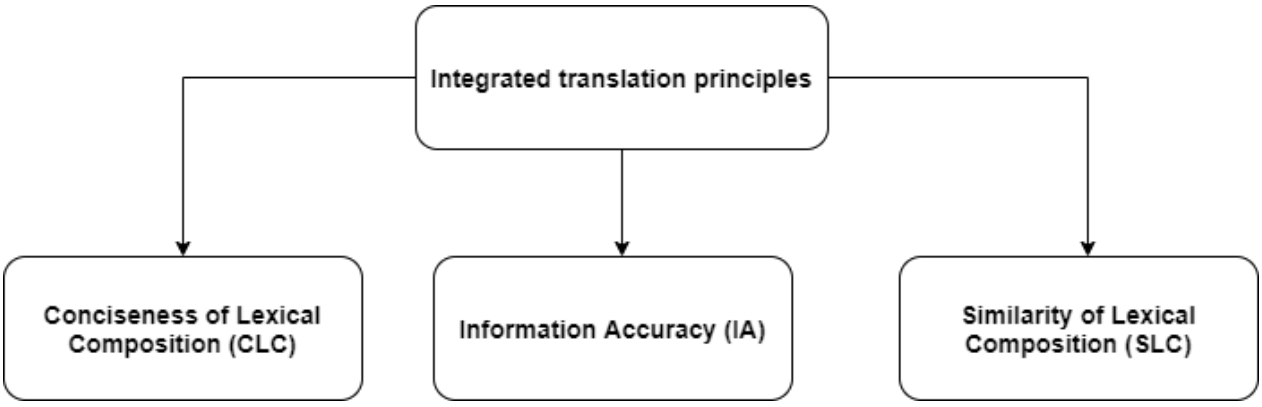

Figure 1. Integrated translation principles for evaluating TCM prescriptions.

2. Analytical Methods

The Shanghan Lun, widely regarded as the ancestor of medical textbooks, contains 113 prescriptions. This treatise established the characteristics of syndrome differentiation and treatment in traditional Chinese medicine (Chen, Yang, Li, Li, & Xu, 2015). For case study purposes, *Mahuang Xingren Gancao Shigao Tang* is chosen because its Chinese name uses the entire formula of the Chinese herbal medicine, rendering its lexical composition more complex, and its lexical structure longer than decoctions named using other methods (e.g., 茯苓甘草汤 *fu ling gan cao tang*, which is named after the main Chinese herbs; 甘草附子汤 *gan cao fu zi tang*, which is named after the first two herbs in the prescription; and 桂枝加葛根汤 *gui zhi jia ge gen tang*,

which is basically named after the base formula). Translations of *Mahuang Xingren Gancao Shigao Tang* of Huang Hai, Nigel Wiseman and Luo Xiwen—each incorporating the names of the herbs used in the treatment in the title—are evaluated using the integrated principles in Figure 1.

3. Discussion and Analysis of *Mahuang Xingren Gancao Shigao Tang* English Translations

Components of *Mahuang Xingren Gancao Shigao Tang* include: 麻黄 *ma huang* (removed knots), four taels; 杏仁 *xing ren* (removed skin tips), fifty; 甘草 *gan cao* (roasted), two taels; and 石膏 *shi gao* (crushed, wrapped in cotton), half a catty (Table 1). Both Huang and Luo use the phrase "of" in their translations, indicating that the decoction comprises 麻黄 *ma huang,* 杏仁 *xing ren*, 甘草 *gan cao*, and 石膏 *shi gao* in a descriptive relationship (Table 2). However, Huang translates the names of the herbs in English, whereas Luo uses Latin. Wiseman uses a direct translation and its structure is the same as the original, with the English name of the Chinese herb used first, followed by the decoction. Additionally, the three versions of translation and original Chinese medicine are ordered sequentially.

Table 1
Mahuang Xingren Gancao Shigao Tang and Its Prescription and Use for Treatment

Name of decoction	**Prescription and use for treatment**
麻黄杏仁甘草石膏汤	*Mahuang* (remove the knot) four taels[1], *Xingren* (remove the skin tip) fifty, *Gancao* (sizzling) two taels, *Shigao* (crushed, wrapped in cotton) half a catty[2].
Mahuang Xingren Gancao Shigao Tang	Used for the treatment of heat congestion in the lungs as a symptom of asthma. In modern times, it is often used in the treatment of lobar pneumonia, bronchopneumonia, acute bronchitis, bronchial asthma, whooping cough, etc.

Table 2
English Translations of Mahuang Xingren Gancao Shigao Tang

Prescription name (Decoction)	**Huang**	**Wiseman**	**Luo**
麻黄杏仁甘草石膏汤 *Mahuang Xingren Gancao Shigao Tang*	Decoction of Ephedra, Apricot, Licorice and Gypsum	Ephedra, Apricot Kernel, Licorice, and Gypsum Decoction	Decoction of Herba Ephedrae, Semen Armeniacae Amarum, Radix Glycyrrhizae and Gypsum Fibrosum

Huang and Wiseman use English names for the Chinese herbs, 麻黄 *ma huang*, 甘草 *gan cao*, and 石膏 *shi gao*: "ephedra," "licorice," and "gypsum," respectively. Ephedra has been used in TCM for thousands of years, administered to treat asthma, bronchitis, and hay fever, but also specified for cold and flu symptoms (Lee, 2011). A wide range of disorders from the common cold to liver disease have been treated with licorice root in Eastern and Western medical systems (Jung et al., 2016). 石膏 *shi gao*, gypsum in English, is a mineral herb largely comprising calcium sulfate (CaSO4-2H2O) in water (Xie, 2004) that is administered to treat several diseases involving high fever, painful gums, and headaches and toothaches (Mei et al., 2016). Luo translated these three herbs into Latin as "Herba Ephedrae," "Radix Glycyrrhizae," and "Gypsum Fibrosum," respectively.

[1] A measurement used in the Far East (= 1.20 oz or 38 g) (Collin, 2006)
[2] One catty (斤 *jin*) = ~ 0.61 kg ("Units of measurement commonly used and the conversion factors," 2010)

Each author translates 杏仁 *xing ren* differently (Table 2). Huang translates it as "Apricot," Wiseman as "Apricot Kernel," and Luo as "Semen Armeniacae Amarum." Apricot typically refers to a furry, small, round, and soft fruit with a light orange skin ("Apricot," 2021). Kernel refers to the edible part of the nut ("Kernel," 2021). The "Apricot Kernel" is part of the TCM pharmacopeia, and is actually a mix of the bitter-tasting kernels from northern apricots and sweeter-tasting kernels of southern apricots at a 1:2 bitter-to-sweet ratio. Kernels have been used for cough therapy to clear phlegm and to relieve lung congestion (Loh, 2013). "Semen armeniacae amaru," Latin for the Chinese word 苦杏仁 *ku xing ren* (Xie, 2004), is a herbal medicine long known for its therapeutic properties, used to treat various coughs and dyspnea, coughs caused by wind-heat[3], and intestinal Sjögren's syndrome (Cheng, Yu, Wu, & Shou, 2012). Interpretation of each English translation of 杏仁 *xing ren* also differs. In the classic prescription in Shanghan Lun, 杏仁 *xing ren* is sweet and flat, non-toxic, and enters the lung and large intestine meridians, functioning mainly to relieve coughs and asthma, and as a laxative. Modern pharmacological analysis reveals bitter apricot kernel to contain bitter amygdalin (30%) and fatty oil (30%), and for sweet apricot kernel to contain bitter amygdalin (0.11%) and more fatty oil (≥ 50%). Therefore, the cough-suppressing power of bitter apricot kernel is greater, and the moistening ability of sweet apricot kernel is better (He & Chu, 2007). According to Table 1, *Mahuang Xingren Gancao Shigao Tang* is mostly used to treat problems with the lungs, to facilitate breathing, and to relieve asthma, so 杏仁 *xing ren* in this prescription should be bitter apricot kernels for their cough-suppressing effect, in which case Luo's Latin translation is the most accurate of the three.

In terms of translation lexical-composition conciseness, the original language structure of *Mahuang Xingren Gancao Shigao Tang* is longer and richer, with the direct translation using the English herb names being more acceptable to readers in the target language than their translation in Latin. In terms of translation information accuracy, the Wiseman and Luo texts are more consistent with the interpretation of the raw materials for the Chinese herbs: 麻黄 *ma huang*, 杏仁 *xing ren*, 甘草 *gan cao*, and 石膏 *shi gao*; the Huang and Wiseman texts use the English names of the Chinese herbs, and the Luo text uses Latin names. In terms of SLC, no translation retains the uniqueness of Chinese medicine because each integrates Western concepts. This approach ensures the naturalness and intelligibility of the names of the tonics.

Based on proposed integrated principles, translation brevity is most important, and a direct translation (with the English names of the Chinese herbs preferred to those in Latin) being preferable. While this approach does not accurately convey the connotation of "bitter apricot kernel", this could be clarified in a footnote for the explanation of herb.

4. Conclusion

There are various kinds of TCM prescription, and many English translations of them. Herein the translation of *Mahuang Xingren Gancao Shigao Tang*, a Chinese herbal medicine—the name of which is based on the herbs used—is analyzed using integrated translation principles. Because translation of this medicine into English should be as concise as possible to ensure information accuracy and similarity in lexical composition to the original text, a direct translation into English is recommended. However, different translation strategies and

[3] A pathogen that combines wind and heat. The clinical manifestations are severe fever, cough, thirst, and red tongue (Li, Yu, & Ou, 1995).

methods may be required for other TCM prescriptions, depending on the nomenclature that is used. Integrated translation principles proposed herein can be used to evaluate diverse TCM prescriptions and provide suggestions as to what methods could be used for translation.

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