

# UNPACKING TRANSLATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TWO ENGLISH VERSIONS OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE DIAGNOSTICS

**Yuki Tanaka**

Department of Linguistics, Kyoto University of Health and Medicine, Kyoto, Japan

**Abstract:** This paper delves into the intricate realm of translation using Jacques Derrida's concept of "différance" from the perspective of deconstruction. It navigates through the philosophy of language and structuralism, asserting that language can only refer to evolving concepts rather than fixed meanings. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), steeped in a history spanning over two millennia, represents a reservoir of Chinese culture, embodying the wisdom and knowledge amassed in the battle against diseases. The diagnostics of TCM form the vital bridge between its fundamental theories and clinical practice. With TCM gaining global recognition and acceptance, its translation plays a pivotal role in its integration into international medical discourse and the promotion of TCM culture. This paper scrutinizes the translation of TCM terminology in two English versions of "Diagnostics of Traditional Chinese Medicine" through the lens of Derrida's "différance," shedding light on the nuances and complexities of this linguistic endeavor.

**Keywords:** Deconstruction, Translation, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Diagnostics, "Différance"

## Introduction

Deconstruction is the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's exploration of the essential attribute of translation from the level of linguistic philosophy based on the critique of structuralism in linguistics. Derrida argued that language cannot specify the meaning it is intended to convey but can only refer to the concepts associated with it. However, that meaning constantly changes, replaces, and renews itself over time and can only ever be the particular meaning of the specific content without an immutable "meaning". Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has had a long history of development spanning more than 2000 years, carrying the rich connotations of Chinese culture. It is the experience and theoretical knowledge of the ancient Chinese people in fighting against diseases and a medical theoretical system that has been gradually formed and developed through long-term practice. Diagnostics of Traditional Chinese Medicine is based on the theories of TCM to study and diagnose illness conditions, identify disease types, and differentiate syndromes. It is not only the foundation of TCM, but also the bridge between the basic theories of TCM and clinical practice. In the era of globalization, TCM is becoming increasingly widespread in the international medical community and among western audiences. Diagnostics of Traditional Chinese Medicine is an important theoretical foundation and support for the integration of TCM into the international medical community and a crucial link in the overseas dissemination and promotion of TCM culture. From the perspective of Derrida's "différance" in deconstruction, this paper analyzes and discusses the translation of TCM terms in the two English versions of *Diagnostics of Traditional Chinese Medicine*.

## **1. The Perspective of “Différance” in Deconstruction**

Deconstruction, also known as “post-structuralism”, is a rebel theory against structuralism by deconstructionists represented by Jacques Derrida. It systematically criticizes thoughts on the structure and meaning of structuralism, so it is called “deconstruction”<sup>[1]</sup>. As a descendant of Heidegger’s thoughts in France, Derrida, on the one hand, was deeply influenced by Heidegger’s anti-metaphysics and anti-Logos theory; on the other hand, he also absorbed new learning essences. From the perspective of linguistics and semiotics, he proposed a set of anti-logocentrism strategies: *différance*, dissemination, trace, *supplément* and so on<sup>[2]</sup>.

One of the most influential concepts of deconstruction in contemporary translation study is his own creation of the French word “*différance*”<sup>[3]</sup>. The word is a combination of the words “deferment” and “difference”. “*Différance*” is just the opposite of traditional logocentrism, which assumes the existence of a fixed meaning and asserts the unity of thought and language. “*Différance*” represents a state in which the ultimate meaning is constantly deferred. Derrida believed that language cannot accurately indicate a specific meaning, but can only refer to the concepts related to it, constantly being marked by its differences from other meanings, thereby deferring the meaning. Ultimate certainty and finality are never achievable<sup>[4]</sup>. “*Différance*” states that meaning lies in the “difference” in space and the “deferment” in time. Meaning is not fixed but generates a specific meaning with spatial differences and changes in time to suit the needs of the context. Therefore, the meaning of a text is in a dynamic process of uncertainty.

## **2. Comparative Analysis of Translation Examples between Two English Versions of *Diagnostics of Traditional Chinese Medicine***

### **2.1. Introduction to Two English Versions and Translators**

In this paper, the author compares the specific translation examples of TCM terms in the English version of *Diagnostics of Traditional Chinese Medicine* translated by Han Chouping and the cooperative translation version by Li Zhaoguo and Bao Bai. The English version of *Diagnostics of Traditional Chinese Medicine* translated by Li Zhaoguo and Bao Bai cited in this paper was completed in December 2000<sup>[5]</sup>, and the English version translated by Han Chouping was completed in June 2017<sup>[6]</sup>. The two translation versions are 17 years apart. With the change of time, the progress of the times, and the advent of the information age, there will also be a considerable impact on the translators and their translations, such as the broadening of the translator’s horizons, the upgrading of the translation-related knowledge structure, the development and advancement of the knowledge of TCM, and so on, which will affect the translator’s understanding of the text and its translation.

So in the process of translation, the translation will be unconsciously endowed with differences in the translator’s subjectivity, such as gender differences, differences in related knowledge accumulation, etc. Different translators may have different understandings of the same thing. The meaning of the original text is constantly changing, being replaced, and updating over time. Meaning can always be the specific meaning of a particular context, and there is no fixed meaning. The concept of “*différance*” extends the boundaries

of meaning and provides creative new perspectives and theoretical support for the diversification of translation.

## **2.2. Analysis of Translation Examples from the Perspective of “Différance” in Deconstruction**

Due to *Diagnostics of Traditional Chinese Medicine* being divided into two major parts: “Diagnostic Method” and “Differentiation of Syndrome”, author selects translation examples from each of them for comparative study. When translating the text, the translator is no longer confined to translating words into words and sentences into sentences, but to find their original meaning in the text as much as possible, utilize the intertextuality of the text to realize the meaning of the words or sentences at this moment, so as to retain the natural meaning of the TCM terms in translation.

Example 1:

The source text: 若面色淡黄消瘦，枯槁无光，称“萎黄”，多属脾胃气虚，气血不充所致。

Li's English version: Light yellow, dry and lusterless complexion is called sallow complexion due to gastrosplenic qi asthenia and insufficiency of qi and blood<sup>[5]-15</sup>.

Han's English version: A pale yellow and lusterless complexion, also known as a sallow complexion, indicates deficiency of qi and blood due to weakness of the spleen and stomach<sup>[6]-18</sup>.

With the examination of the symptoms and signs of a disease by means of the four diagnostic methods in TCM, one can understand the cause of the disease and analyze the pathogenesis of the disease so as to provide evidence for deciding treatment based on syndrome differentiation. In clinical practice, there are four diagnostic methods are used to examine diseases: inspection, auscultation and olfaction, inquiry, and palpation. Example 1 belongs to the inspection of complexion, which is taken from the diagnostic method of *Diagnostics of Traditional Chinese Medicine*. Physicians can diagnose diseases by observing the changes of the color and luster of the facial skin. The visceral essence flows to the face. The color of face is the outward manifestation of blood volume and circulation. Luster is the outward manifestation of essential qi. Therefore, the inspection of complexion is an important part of inspection. In example 1, the sentence is an expression of morbid complexion. In Li's translation version, “淡黄” is translated into “light yellow”. In Han's translation version, it is translated into “pale yellow”. The word “pale” is commonly used to describe a person's pale or grayish complexion, which is often described a sickly whiteness of skin. At the same time, “pale” also has a dull meaning. The use of “pale” not only translates the word “淡” in the original text, but also cleverly uses it to highlight the pathological state of “pale yellow”. The adjectives “light” and “pale” are both commonly used words, but “light” has more meanings and is used more frequently than “pale”. The translation of “light” also indirectly proves that Li's translation version is more free in dealing with the details of translation, which to some extent reflects the translator's flexibility and freedom from details. As for the adjective “pale”, its meaning is much less than “light”, but in Han's translation version, when it is placed before “yellow” to describe the morbid complexion more specifically, meticulously, and accurately, reflecting the translator's delicate handling of translation.

Example 2:

The source text: 脉来迟慢，一息脉动不足四至。

Li's English version: No more than 4 beats in a cycle of breath<sup>[5]-115</sup>.

Han's English version: The pulse rate is less than 4 beats in one breath<sup>[6]-145</sup>.

Example 2 belongs to palpation, which is taken from the diagnostic method of *Diagnostics of Traditional Chinese Medicine*. Palpation means that the physician uses his or her hand to palpate, feels and presses certain part of the patient's body to diagnose disease<sup>[5]</sup>. Example 2 is an explanation of slow pulse in the pulse diagnosis section. Slow pulse belongs to a type of morbid pulses. The normal pulse condition is one breath and pulse beating 4 times, which is called Yi Xi Si Zhi in Chinese. The pulse condition of slow pulse mainly manifests as slow pulsation, with less than 4 pulse beats between breath (i.e., below 60 pulse beats per minute). There are differences in the translation of the sentence's subject and term in two translation versions. In Han's translation version, the subject "pulse rate" implied in the original sentence is translated. In Li's translation version, the translator does not adopt a literal translation of the subject, but rather contain its meaning in the entire translated sentence, and readers will know its original meaning after reading the translated sentence. The term "一息" is translated differently in the two versions. In Li's translation version, it is translated as "a cycle of breath". From this translation, it can be seen that the translator regards inhalation and exhalation as a cycle, which corresponds to the original meaning of "No more than 4 beats in a cycle of breath." In Han's translation version, it is translated as "one breath", which is simple, straightforward and easy to understand.

The inconsistent translation of the same word or term by different translators is a manifestation of the perspective of "différance" in deconstruction. Translators do not translate word to word, but rather deconstruct the original meaning and reveal the literal meaning of TCM in the perspective of "différance". For example, the original meaning of "淡" can be translated into "light" or "thin", but in the specific context of TCM text, the translator can combine the specific information of the text, link the cause and effect before and after, and extend the deeper meaning of it in the original text, which makes the use of "pale" more deconstructive. In summary, the same original text has been translated into different English versions by different translators, which reflects the instability and variability of meaning, that is, the embodiment of the concept of "différance"<sup>[7]</sup>.

Example 3:

The source text: 外邪袭表，邪正相争，故恶寒（或恶风）、发热。

Li's English version: Attack of pathogenic factors against the superficies and confliction between healthy qi and pathogenic factors lead to fever and aversion to wind and cold<sup>[5]-141</sup>.

Han's English version: The struggle between anti-pathogenic qi and pathogenic factors can obstruct the normal dispersing and warming of wei-defense qi, resulting in chills and fever<sup>[6]-237</sup>.

Example 3 is taken from the differentiation of syndrome in *Diagnostics of Traditional Chinese Medicine*. This sentence is part of the analysis of exterior syndrome. Exterior syndrome is symptoms where the disease is located in the skin. Generally, the exterior syndrome manifests as a mild condition in which anti-pathogenic (wei-defense) qi fights with exogenous six pathogenic factors or pestilence qi on the surface of the body

when they attack the body through the skin, mouth, or nose, leaving the pathogens on the surface of the muscles, leading to a series of symptoms such as aversion to cold and wind and fever in Example 3.

In Li's translation version, the translator adopts the literal translation method, where "attack of pathogenic factors against the superficies and confliction between healthy qi and pathogenic factors" are translated as parallel causes and "aversion to cold (or wind), fever" is translated as a result. The verb phrase "lead to" is used to explain the causal relationship in this sentence. In Li's translation version, the standard Chinese medicine term "healthy qi" is also used to express "正气" in English<sup>[8]</sup>, while in Han's translation version, it is translated as "anti-pathogenic qi". Although the two translations are different, each has its own characteristics, both of which are helpful for target readers to understand.

In example 3, the original text contains background information on TCM terms. For example, exterior syndrome refers to external pathogens such as the six pathogenic factors that attack the body through the skin, body hair, mouth, and nose. The lung governs the skin and body hair, and through its diffusion and dissemination functions, it transports qi, blood, and body fluids to the whole body, warming and nourishing the skin and body hair in order to maintain its normal physiological function and resist external pathogens. In Han's translation version, the translator uses liberal translation to translate the connotation of TCM information in the original text, that is, "The struggle between health qi and pathogenic qi obstructs the normal dispersing of wei-defensive qi, making it impossible for the body to maintain normal body temperature, leading to symptoms such as chills and fever." The authentic translation of TCM terms such as "wei-defense qi", "dispersing", and "warming" is also reflected in the translated sentence. In the translation, the translator explains the original sentence with TCM knowledge, which not only helps the target language readers understand the TCM culture but also retains the general idea of the original content as much as possible, and the overall view is also appropriately detailed.

From this point of view, of the same text, different translators have their own unique understanding and translation methods, mobilize the translator's subjective initiative and creativity, translate the text according to the context, in combination with the translator's own cultural literacy, knowledge structure, etc., and do not view the text unilaterally and fixedly, which is the real meaning given by the perspective of "différance" in deconstruction.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Through the comparative analysis of the English versions of Li and Bao's cooperative translation and Han's translation, the author finds that the translator has played a strong subjective role in the process of translating TCM terms into English from the perspective of "différance" in deconstruction. For example, Li's translation version tends to be more literal, adopting a more concise and authentic way of expressing meaning when translating TCM terms. Han's translation version tends to be more liberal, and in translation, the translator tends to reveal the hidden background information of the original text to facilitate the understanding of the target language readers.

Through the analysis, on the one hand, we can see that the translators can exert their subjective initiative under the perspective of "différance" in deconstruction<sup>[9]</sup>. The perspective of "différance" in deconstruction



can liberate the translator from his mind and then integrate his knowledge in translation practice to translate the meaning of the original text so that the content of the original text can be inherited indefinitely due to the widespread of the translated<sup>[10]</sup>. On the other hand, compared with traditional translation theories such as functional equivalence and functional translation theory, translation practice under the perspective of “différance” in deconstruction can not only express the diversity of meaning but also affirm the subjectivity and creativity of the translator. “Différance” not only extends the boundaries of meaning but also provides a creative new perspective for the English translation of TCM terminology. This paper attempts to provide a new perspective for the study of TCM translation in order to further promote the overseas dissemination and exchange development of TCM culture.

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