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An Op-Ed on “Changing translations of Ayurveda: Understanding cancer through the words *Arbuda* and *Granthi*”

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Abstract

While it is good that we try to understand ancient medical practices such as Ayurveda, modern day translators often go too far when trying to place them in a modern context. There exist many examples of these translations turning often vague terms into very specific terms. The most common causes are that they either distort the meaning while trying to make the concepts understandable with all the advances we have today or perhaps even stretch the truth to emphasize the concept's importance in the foundation of modern science.

Keywords: Translation, traditional medicine, Ayurveda, cancer

Introduction

Ayurveda is an ancient set of medicinal practices originating in India. Texts were written describing different types of diseases and treatments of them, as well as how the practices came to be. Translated versions of the traditional texts are used all the time in order to understand how more traditional methodology in medicine was derived and how it may apply to modern day medicine. A good translation should try to retain the content and meaning of the original text but still try to make the contexts of the text understandable by modern audiences. Often, this is done by altering the text to place it in modern contexts. However, it is very difficult to strike a balance and often translations become hyperbolic, altering the text to a point where the original meaning is lost. My intention here is to provide an unbiased critique on Sonya and Neil Davey's article entitled “Changing Translations of Ayurveda: Understanding Cancer through the Words *Arbuda* and *Granthi*”, published in *International Journal of Sanskrit Research* 2017; 3(2): 132-137.

Background

I asked one of the authors of the article, Neil Davey, a couple questions on writing this article. He explained that lately there has been a re-interest in Ayurveda, but that this re-interest has also involved contextualizing Ayurveda with modern medicine techniques, often forcefully. Originally he witnessed his Sanskrit teachers stretching translations somewhat in order to emphasize the view of the major importance of India in the development of modern medicine. In many other cases, the mistranslation isn't on purpose, but rather because it is simply difficult to explain these ancient practices in a time where so many drastic advances are present.

Translations

Cancer specifically is a major example of how inaccurately these texts may be translated. In many translations of the texts *Caraka Samhita* and *Susruta Samhita*, the words *arbuda* and *granthi* are, often indirectly, defined as types of tumors. In reality, a more accurate translation of *arbuda* may be “rounded, stiff, wide, and deep”. These translations contain a lack of a direct definition, and instead only try to include a single possible modern context. This misleads readers into assuming that these ancient texts were directly speaking about the concepts behind modern biomedical terminology.

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Another example is the steps of the pathogenesis of tumors. Popular scientific translations by Balachandran and Govindarajan identify these steps in very specific manners relating to more modern terminology, such as translating step 2, *Prakopa*, into “the transformation of primary growths into metastatic progenitors.” In reality, the literal translations of these words actually have very broad definitions.

In the example from earlier, the literal meaning of *Prakopa* is vitiation or excess. Even with extra information and context, this is an unusually large jump to make. The definition goes from a relatively simple term to a very specific reference to modern biomedical theories. The same occurs with countless other words, such as the other terms in the six steps: *Sancharya*, *Prasara*, *Sthana samsraya*, *Vykati*, and *Bhedi*.

Conclusion

The practice of translation is not only vital for the purpose of preservation, but also necessary in order to apply ancient techniques to modern contexts, understand how they came to be, and check their accuracy relating to modern understandings and models. Therefore, it is also crucial that these translations be accurate, make sense, and do not overstep clear boundaries. The modern version of these texts are not like remade movies, video games, or plays where some want absolutely the original material just updated and some desire severe changes to fully exist in a different, modernized context. Translations are not standardized, and can still change with time. This means that it is absolutely possible to improve these translations. A fine line must be walked upon, though admittedly, it is far easier to tightrope in a circus than manage this balancing act. However, translation is a necessary practice for us to learn from our past and continue the progression of humanity.

We translate so that large collective groups of humanity can look upon their past to observe changes for historical purposes, but also to find wisdom that may be learnt from the future. Undeniably, proper remembrance of the past is vastly important for the forward movement of society. This is why it is important that these translations are accurate but make sense in a modern context. Words such as *arbuda*, *granthi*, and *prakopa*, if assumed to mean modern biomedical concepts like “tumor”, should have footnotes or other methods of showing exactly how the translators came to that conclusion based upon the broad definitions and the context of the text.