

Message From the President

Origin – The Naming

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“The buffalo is more than an animal. It is the sun's shadow. Our lives are bound to it. If it lives, we live. If it dies, we die. It is our life and our living shield.”

Momaday

Furthering the Path of the Great Unification,

this Special Edition of the *American Acupuncturist* addresses Asian Medical Nomenclature, exposing the cultural and translational complexities that occur with the emergence of Chinese medicine in the West.

Nomenclature and the study of naming objects and ideas are at the core of the medical professional life. They dictate the procedures of medical culture. The descriptions, names and classifications of disease entities are directly tied to the beliefs of the culture within which the medical services are provided. However, there is the risk that professional language can be used politically to exclude and mystify outsiders, holding power over the public (Said, 1996). Take for instance the bombardier who uses the term ‘target acquisition’ instead of ‘bombing a tank.’ There are further risks if the goal of glossary standardization is achieved through dominance including alienation, fragmentation and conflict.

Evolutionary Perspective

Genetic and cultural drift have an impact on the development of languages via geological, oceanic and atmospheric conditions. Yet there is no direct correlation between genetic and linguistic drift even though the two often occur simultaneously in varying degrees. The spread of the English language as a standard for scientific nomenclature throughout the world provides evidence of this notion (Gianluca Bocchi, 2002).

We don't know how language evolved in human prehistory, but it is quite reasonable to suppose that the needs of communication influenced the development of these linguistic structures (Chomsky, 2001). For the original humans, definitions were simple. The early observers distinguished and classified the world by labeling objects and activities. Once the original definitions were placed, more subtle and abstract possibilities

emerged as humans counted the groupings and classifications of objects and processes. The magical power of naming was transcended by the divine power of numbering (Wilber, 1979). The possibilities presented by drawing a dividing line between objects and events and then labeling them as groups or classes makes pattern differentiation possible.

Language is directly connected to socio-political activities. Recent archeological findings indicate that ever since the demise of egalitarian communities of the Neolithic period, culture has tended to be defined through domination (Eisler, 1987). Linguistic distinctions created in a climate of dominance carry technical and political power. At the same time, they create alienation, fragmentation and conflict; thus in a sense, creating the towers of Babylon. In the words of Edgar Morin, “the differences caused by the diversity of languages, myths and ethnocentric cultures have concealed our common bioanthropological identity” (Morin, 1999).

Grasping the Name

Knowledge and perception are acts of translation and reconstruction (interpretation). Reality is conceived through theories, interpretations and systems of thinking. Knowledge of politics, economics, and medicine is embedded in systems of interpretation which are in turn interdependent with respect to a system of interpretation of the nature of history (Morin, 1999).

Within the polis, conventions of medicine (East or West), humans create conventional medical descriptions that define boundaries. These are based upon actual experiences of life which has no boundaries and then confuse the two. As Korzybski and other general semanticists have pointed out, our words, symbols, signs, thoughts, and ideas are merely maps of reality, not reality itself (Wilber, 1979). This poses a dialectical problem since opposites are often isolated. But these opposites are part of a

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single underlying reality. This story provides an example of the relationship between words and objects:

“One day, Korzybski was giving a lecture to a group of students, and he suddenly interrupted the lesson in order to retrieve a packet of biscuits, wrapped in white paper, from his briefcase. He muttered that he just had to eat something, and he asked the students on the seats in the front row, if they would also like a biscuit. A few students took a biscuit. ‘Nice biscuit, don’t you think,’ said Korzybski, while he took a second one. The students were chewing vigorously. Then he tore the white paper from the biscuits, in order to reveal the original packaging. On it was a big picture of a dog’s head and the words ‘Dog Cookies.’ The students looked at the package and were shocked. Two of them wanted to throw up, put their hands in front of their mouths, and ran out of the lecture hall to the toilet. ‘You see, ladies and gentlemen,’ Korzybski remarked, ‘I have just demonstrated that people don’t just eat food, but also words, and that the taste of the former is often outdone by the taste of the latter.’” (Source: Wikipedia).

Korzybski’s descriptions demonstrate how conceptual distortions can occur. However, these distortions and inaccuracies, while

posing problems on occasion, generate inadvertent solutions. This is part of the beauty that occurs when ideas move from one culture to another. Yet, it is also where a romanticized notion of the medicine can lead one astray.

Personal Approach to Translation

Translational work for me involves a team of practitioners, including native speakers who are culturally connected and have an ability to read modern and ancient characters, as well as native English speakers. Dialogues involving the ideas and concepts continue until a consensus of meaning is achieved and this process is recorded. Then, edits and commentary are conducted with a concern for the integrity of the concepts and the experience of the readership. The value of this process comes from the use of the unconscious deep linguistic structures of each native speaker.

Closing

The current push for a standardized terminology creates clarity for learners and a reduced level of confusion for accurate translational processes. But it also poses risk. The use of political power to mandate standardized translation can create alienation, fragmentation and conflict within our profession. That said, a standardized

professional language permits professionals to self-identify; this is part of what creates the boundary between who is and is not in a profession.

References

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¹ The Buffalo Trust is a non-profit foundation for the preservation and return of their cultural heritage to Native Americans, especially children, founded on the conviction that the loss of cultural identity—and the theft of the sacred—is the most insidious and dangerous threat to the survival of Native American culture in our time.