

Translating China's Public Signs into Good English: A Perspective of Linguistic Landscape

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Abstract—As part of linguistic landscape, English public signs play a significant role in promoting international communication for a city and boosting its overall image to tourists from home and abroad. Various monolingual (English) and bilingual (Chinese and English) signs in China, however, are found to be erroneous and misleading despite multiple positive endeavors. Causes underlying these errors are tracked down and analyzed. A quality control mechanism is proposed to address the indecent urban English landscape issue.

Keywords: *linguistic landscape, public signs, mistranslation, good English, quality control*

I. INTRODUCTION

Public signs, positioned as a directive or explanatory information in public places or for public services, are part and parcel of almost all cities around the globe. They constitute what is now known in the academia as linguistic landscape, or more specifically, multilingual cityscape [1]. Linguistic landscape is also called environmental print or inscription [2]. The research into bi- and multi-lingual landscape was initiated from and marked by four scholars in 2006. [3] They compared different types of ethnic landscapes in settlements for Jews, Israelis, Palestinians and other minority groups. Later researchers explored public signs in city streets and tourist sites in Thailand, Japan, Korea, China, Nigeria, and the Western world [4-7]. These studies have enriched and broadened the research approaches to studying multilingual phenomena.

Relevant researches regarding China's linguistic landscape have also been fruitful. The revised second edition of *A Chinese-English Dictionary on Signs* was published in 2015, claiming itself as a signage tool for as many as 8 industries. [8] In May 2017, the *Guidelines for the Use of English in Public Service Areas (GUEPSA)* was jointly issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Standardization Administration of China (SAC) and the State Language Commission (SLC), and came into effect as of December. [9] Scholars like Ming & Tian believe the bilingual environment will improve as signage standards and criteria have been established. [10]

All these positive efforts, however, seem unable to curb the confusing and misleading signage English in cities and scenic spots in China, where bi- and multilingual signs are currently an essential part of the metropolises and tourist sites. The underlying concept for city authorities, in a large sense, is that the public English landscape is a visiting card and even part of international image for their city.

We attempt to explore the hidden causes that have been generating one bad English poster after another, before proposing a feasible quality control mechanism that aims for a constant crackdown on negative practices and signage versions of English landscape in the country.

II. MAJOR TYPES OF ERRORS

Errors of translated English public signs in Mainland cities usually fall into three types.

A. Words, Spelling and Punctuation

Errors of diction, spelling and punctuation are low-level violations of language principles, which will either affect comprehension or cause misunderstanding in the target audience. Typical examples, which were collected in the City of Wuhan, go as follows:

1) *Rukou; Chukou* (pinyin transcribed from original Chinese characters printed on building Entry and Exit signs; pinyin applies hereinafter): Import; Export (English version printed on the above public signs; English applies hereinafter)

This example is a typical error of diction. In the Chinese language, *rukou* and *chukou* have multiple meanings, i.e., import / way in and export / way out, respectively. When an English-speaker reads the sign "Import / Export" at the entrance / exit of a building or basement garage, he or she will be presumably confused. Proper English signage for building *rukou* would be Entry / Entrance / Way In, and *chukou* could be Exit / Way Out. [8]

2) *Gongce / Cesuo* (pinyin for Toilet or Washroom): The indicative sign of "WC" will probably cause an unpleasant association or confusion among English-speaking tourists. For

one thing, the abbreviation WC, if referring to a water closet, will impress them as dirty and stinky. For another, WC can also mean wheelchair, World Cup, and without charge, etc, which will eventually confuse those target readers who know nothing about Chinese signage. In the case of this public sign, Toilet, Restroom, or Public Toilet is the general expression in practice. [8]

Wrongly spelt words, punctuation marks of typical Chinese style are also found on English signs, which will not be exemplified here.

B. Grammar

Grammatical mistakes such as wrong tense, number, and / or form of a word, bad collocation, and illogical connectives between clauses are widespread in public sign translation.

1) *Xiaoxin Dihua (4-word pinyin for Careful: Floor (is) Slippery): Carefully Slide (English)*

The above meaningless English version, a result of wrongly segmenting Chinese words, is presumably an awkward product of machine translation. “Carefully” stands literally for the first 3 Chinese characters *Xiaoxindi* which acts as an adverb, and “Slide” corresponds to one of the various senses of Chinese *hua*. It is almost certain that no real translator has played any role in the sign rendering. It may well be translated as Caution: Wet Floor. [8]

C. Stylistics and Pragmatics

Errors in stylistics and pragmatics are usually ignored because they are not as apparent as the above two kinds of mistakes. However, public signs with these errors are regarded by native speakers of English as unacceptable due to their failure to conform to stylistic and pragmatic norms.

1) *Lao Ruo Bing Can Yun Zhuanzuo (pinyin, literally translated below): Please offer the special seats to the elderly, weak, sick, disabled and pregnant. (English)*

The English version is grammatically correct, but it is stylistically and pragmatically unacceptable for the following reasons: Firstly, it is wordy and redundant, contrary to the conciseness feature of public signs. Secondly, the words “elderly, weak, sick, disabled” are likely to offend those who are in need of the seats. Therefore, the following versions may serve as better options: Seats reserved for those in need. / Priority Seats. [8] / Courtesy Seats.

2) *Jinzhì Xiyan (pinyin for No Smoking): Smoking is prohibited. (English)*

The word “prohibit” is too harsh in this circumstance, which may offend the general public if no Law or Regulation in effect really bans smoking in public.

3) *Jianshe Dadao (pinyin for an avenue named “Jianshe”): Jianshe Boulevard / Jianshe Ave (2 different English signs for the same downtown street)*

The name of the road is translated into two different versions, and the two signs are found on two downtown spots within 100 meters in between. Two different translators at two different times must have accidentally contributed to this inconsistency, even though they are both acceptable.

To sum up, the manifold types of mistranslation in public signage have been exerting negative impacts on China’s linguistic landscape, which calls for the necessity of cracking down on the major causing factors.

III. MAJOR CAUSES

In light of the aforesaid various shabby linguistic and stylistic practices on public English signage, direct and indirect causing factors shall be sought out and analyzed to facilitate the designing of a possible solution. The following four aspects are expected to be the major reasons for linguistic landscape potholes.

A. Translation Theory

Inappropriate or no choice of translation theory in the translator’s part has disguised the correct direction for public sign translation. It is common sense that a proper theory is the basis for decent practice. In rendering public signs for a city, one has to take into account three major participants, that is, the supplier (usually the government department or service entity), the audience (foreign nationals and domestic language experts), and the translators involved. Vermeer’s Skopos Theory [11], which stresses intra-textual coherence (acceptability of the target language for the target readers) and inter-textual coherence (fidelity between target and source languages), is presumably a preferable theoretical option for public sign translators.

B. Degree of Equivalence

With a relevant theory guiding the direction of landscape translation, it is practically easier to decide to what extent the target language shall be equivalent to the source texts. To achieve the equivalence, the traditional translation criteria of “fidelity, clarity, elegance” – proposed by Mr. Yan Fu in the preface of his translated version [12] of T. H. Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics* – have long been upheld; target language is seldom found compatible with all the three dimensions, though. Take the aforementioned “Courtesy Seats”, for example. Its Chinese poster version clearly states that only “the elderly, weak, sick, disabled and pregnant” can enjoy the privilege of taking these seats. For international passengers on board these vehicles, however, the target English sign clearly poses a prejudice against them. Even if they fall into this group of people in need of the seats, they are labeled either “old” or “sick” or otherwise once they occupy these courtesy seats. Therefore, a rigid literal equivalence between the two languages for linguistic landscape is by no means desirable.

Whether equivalence is achieved also depends on how and “who” one word stays with another, or on the environmental context where they are used. Ignorance of proper or idiomatic collocation in English will inevitably result in bad English signage and in a subsequent negative impression on the landscape audience. As Firth has contended, “You shall know a word by the company it keeps.” [13] Synonym versions in the translation are manifold as has been listed in the above Errors section. It is very likely that the translator involved has failed to check against the situation where the sign is to be positioned, or the party responsible has simply resorted to free translation engine of some kind, which almost will never perceive the “company” a word keeps or the place it is used in. The translated target language is “accurate” regardless of the physical context where the audience will be present. For example, the erroneous “import” equals the Chinese source sign inscription *rukou* literally, which, however, the audience expect to be “entrance” or “entry.” In summary, failure to consider the target text acceptability will likely generate a contextual landscape where “equivalence” wavers.

C. Cultural Difference

In addition to contextual imbalance between target and source languages on public signs, the distinction between cultures may also lead to different reactions from target language audience. In Asian countries like China and Vietnam where collectivism prevails, public signs in the neighborhood usually bear directives about what to do or what not to do. Code of conduct and rule for raising pets make up a unique landscape for local communities. “No spitting” and “No littering” in their source languages are considered a symbol of civility for the native residents, whereas they might cause unpleasant feelings in the audience who read or know only English rather than Chinese or Vietnamese. Translator’s ignorance of cultural difference gives rise to the English landscape unacceptability, pragmatically or culturally [7], even though the translation itself is accurate and clear.

D. Manuscripts

In contrast to the above macroscopic factors that affect the quality of target English on public signs, the manuscript aspect – which includes inappropriate wording, misspelling, alien punctuation, and unacceptable grammar – attracts and ruins audience eyes in a split-second. The poorly printed landscape is usually attributed to translator’s imprudent version [14], typist’s careless slip, lack of proofreading, and occasionally on-site contractor’s imprudence. In general, no personnel from any party are supervising the whole process from the translation outset till the moment its English version appears in public. More specifically, inconsistency in different versions of landscape manuscripts is to blame

It is obvious, if the above four reasons are re-examined, that the translator plays a major part, directly or indirectly. This has cast light on our proposal to address the troublesome status quo of China’s English public signage.

IV. A QUALITY CONTROL SOLUTION

With the major types of linguistic errors on public signs categorized and chief causing factors probed, it is of great necessity to come up with an efficient proposal to address these problems found in the landscape English. The various English mistakes printed on public signs stated in the Errors section are committed either by the translator, word processor or project contractor, who in turn provides a significant clue to possible measures to solve the public signage challenges.

Since unfit linguistic situations may occur at any stage of the translation process, and translators are just one party of all stakeholders concerned, it is unsafe to suggest – as previous researches usually proposed – how translators shall or shall not conduct the translation task. We strongly contend that the translator coordinate between the project delegator and typist / on-site engineer from the very beginning of a landscape project (receipt of the source text), throughout the whole process of translating (confirmation of target reader(s), translating, proofreading, typewriting, re-proofreading, printing, etc.), till the landscape is finished and the target print on the poster is confirmed and implemented. Three aspects in the process are essential for this quality control mechanism.

- Communication

The translator will be held responsible for the coordination between or among the task consignor, word processor, printer, and project contractor. He or she is expected to confirm the target audience, the consistency between the translated and printed manuscripts, the physical location where the sign is to be used, and so on. In other words, the translator shall bear in mind almost all details related to the task consignment.

- Collaboration

The above-mentioned parties involved in the language landscape project are believed to work closely together so as to guarantee the efficient and precise output of target language in both manuscript and on the bulletin or board. The translator has a major role to play during the whole process of cooperation. So to speak, he or she will work as the supervisor so that the combined efforts are made and facilitated. In the case of possible errors found on eventual landscape signs, the general public, local language workers, and English native nationals are encouraged to report the errors to the tourism authority or department, who, in turn, are bound to transfer to the translator(s) concerned for further manipulation.

- Correction

This means both the manuscripts and project procedures are implemented in a correct and appropriate manner, including the above potential error(s) to be reported. The choice and use of words, terms, grammar and stylistics stand as the foremost factors to be satisfied and guaranteed on the side of the translator and manuscript proofreader(s), if any. The objectively authoritative criteria and standards for the translators and

proofreader(s) are what have been mentioned before, namely the national GUEPSA guidelines for English use [9], and A C-E Dictionary on Signs (2nd edition) [8]. Furthermore, the translator shall also see to it that on-site engineer(s) will put up the English signs with translated and proofread texts as they have been previously designed. The correction of this step is just as important and essential.

Given the above standards, criteria, measures and procedure, the eventual public signs are most likely to present themselves before target readers fair and square.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Erroneous and eye-striking language landscape co-exists with real city landscape on a variety of occasions. A number of factors regarding the English public signage, therefore, are to be taken into prudent consideration. Not all public signs need to be rendered into English; such categories of slogans as social morals, code of conduct, rules for neighborhood, etc. may as well remain in the native language version that will impose a minimum influence on international customers or tourists.

As for those bi- or multi-lingual signs that are substantially convenient to and necessary for foreigners, the translators concerned are expected to assume full responsibility for the accuracy and cultural acceptability of the signage translation. The quality control proposal for a good English translation, in and throughout the whole process of translation transaction and signage construction, requires that the translators be linguistically prepared, physically present, and socially accountable.

Further study into China's tourism linguistic landscapes, especially those decorated with unpleasant English and other language(s), is most likely to become the center of attention for scholars interested in this aspect.

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