An Analysis on the Translation of Public Signs in Wuhan

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Abstract. As an important language phenomenon, public signs perform great social functions in people's daily life. Public signs, which can be seen in public place affect us in many ways are necessary to us. With China's development, more and more foreigners come to China for their business, tour and study. Public signs can bring convenience for their daily life; meantime, it also can help them know better about China. However, there exist many problems in the translation of public signs causing the pragmatic failure and damaging our international image. So we should pay more attention to it. Only when translation of public signs achieves the intended purpose can we say our translation is successful. This paper attempts to choose the Chinese-English translation of public signs in Wuhan as the subject of research, analyze the problems and put forward some solutions. Moreover, the SPSS is used to make a T testing of independent sample to data so as to analyze the pragmatic failure during the course of the application of translation.

Introduction

With the increase of economic and cultural exchanges, more and more foreigners have come to China. The importance of English as "the world's the language" seems particularly outstanding especially through the Olympic Games and World Expo. Public sign, as a city card, leaves the first important impression to foreign people. Therefore, the English translation of Chinese public signs becomes more necessary than ever before. But there are still many problems in the translation of public signs, and some of them are serious. Even in international metropolis such as Beijing, Shanghai, the situation is not optimistic. The situation doesn't match with the rapid development of our economy, culture and expansion of international communication.

Definition and Classification of the Public Sign

In Oxford English Dictionary, a sign refers to a characteristic device attached to or placed in front of an inn or shop, as a means of distinguishing it from others or directing attention to it; in later use commonly a board bearing a name or other inscriptions, with or without some ornament or picture. According to the Webster's Third New International Dictionary, it is defined as a lettered board or other public display placed on or before a building, room, shop or office to advertise business there transacted or the name of person or firm conducting it.

Sign is a broad term, widely used in public facilities, ranging from travelling, catering, accommodation, recreation, shopping to medical service, educational institution and financial service. It includes words of caution, public notices, bills, posters, slogans, outdoor advertisements, traffic notices and so on. Specifically speaking, it covers street signs, road signs, road markers, parking signs, school signs, construction signs, non-smoking signs, signs at scenic spots, slogans etc.

Functions and Characteristics of Public Signs

Public signs in social terms as an important part of the language are areas of social management. Public signs as a specific functional form of text has a long history in the nations of the world's socio-cultural and economic development process are playing a standard, coordination, security, stability of the functional mechanism. Public Signs covers a wide range, from the stylistic

characteristics of English public signs five characteristics: First, use all capital generally, without a period; Second, words are few, at least in some only a word; third term streamlined, common noun, gerund, or noun phrase; fourth, sometimes using the imperative; five is sometimes also use an informal style. From the applications point of view, public signs possess indicative, suggestive, restrictive, mandatory four prominent features.

Public signs reflect the different functions, information display state is different: to highlight the services indicator is often displayed with a "static" in the information; highlight tips, restrictions, mandatory features more use of public signs of "dynamic" significance of the word. For English signs, the two major difference is: more use of public signs in Chinese is imperative, simple and concise; more use of public signs in English expressions is physical presentation, tactful and indirect; Chinese tend to use more verbs, narrative is dynamic; English tend to use more nouns, narrative was static.

Table 1   Functions & characteristics of public signs in English & Chinese

Public Signs	Functions			
	Standard	Coordination	Security	Stability
	Characteristics			
	Indicative	Suggestive	Restrictive	Mandatory
English	Static	Imperative	Simple	Concise
Chinese	Dynamic	Physical	Tactful	Indirect

From Table 1, we could easily find that both share similarities, of which, the language styles are concise, convenient and conspicuous; moreover, the figures of speech are often adopted. Yet, a series of differences still exist. Such stylistic analysis focuses more on its functional significance in the sign translation than on the formal features of texts for its own sake.

Translation Principle of Public Signs

The language structures and expressions present diversity, triggered by the differences between the two cultures in social systems, values, and thinking modes. Based on the Skopostheorie, the A-B-C approach, which has a clear functional orientation, is a well-tested principle for the translation of the public sign.

The A-B-C approach refers to the adapt approach, borrow approach and create approach. If the similar signs exist in English-speaking countries, then adapt the original ones. If the corresponding English equivalents can be consulted, then directly borrow them. As to some public signs unique with Chinese characteristics, translators need, according to the purpose of the target text, create the proper expressions.

The result of an A-B-C approach is a text that may achieve the same functions as an original text. And when a target-text function is the same as that of the source text, it may be called an equifunctional translation. The A-B-C approach makes the functional equivalence come true and thus, corresponding to what Reiss calls communicative translation, where receivers ideally do not notice, or are not even interested in, the fact that they are reading a translation.

Table 2   The pragmatic instances of A-B-C approach

Translation principle		Instances
A (adapt approach)	Adapt the existing English signs	Subject to Availability
		Twists Ahead. Drive with Care.
	Mime the English proverbs	East or West, Guilin Landscape is best!
		Using is believing.
B (borrow approach)	Parking signs borrowed	Time Limit Parking
		Pay Parking
	The established expressions borrowed	Variety Store
		Mail Order Retailing
C (create approach)	No conventional expressions to borrow	It's far better to arrive late in this world than early in the next.
		Drink and drive costs your life.

The public sign is an applied text. As a particular type of pragmatic material, it manifests clear communicative purpose. As for the pragmatic and cultural problems, most of them can be built on an A-B-C Approach. Signs may just contain a few words; however, their translation is by no means easy. To present a favorable image of Wuhan and better communication with the outside world, we should lay much emphasis on the translation of the public signs.

Investigation Results and Analysis of the Translation Errors

Public Signs usually appear in the striking position, with a window function, its application is very extensive, involving almost all aspects of our daily lives. Where is the most widely used public facilities, public transport, tourist attractions and other places, such as gas stations, ticketing centers, museums, historical sites, parks and so on. In addition, there are street district, foreign institutions, public institutions, commercial facilities, sports facilities, cultural facilities, health facilities, services for the disabled and many other places. However, on account of the lack of attention to bilingual public language and unified management, the translation of public signs is far from satisfactory, resulting in the translation errors being found everywhere.

Table 3   The results of T testing independent sample of translation errors

Errors / Positions	Varieties of translation errors				
	Spelling errors	Syntax error	Chinglish	Irregular language	Tone of discord
Public facilities	3.2523	0.6534	3.4033	0.6945	0.069
Public transport	2.743	0.6554	2.8421	0.6131	0.104
Public institutions	3.1376	0.7181	3.2351	0.6617	0.114
Tourist attractions	2.9720	0.7098	3.0531	0.7364	0.206
Commercial facilities	2.7472	0.7785	2.7481	0.7481	0.837
Sports facilities	2.7384	0.7125	2.7063	0.7367	0.741

This results of translation errors come from the records from the writer's on-the-spot investigation, of which 192 valid questionnaires are obtained. After the scores of six positions of translation errors are counted, the data is inputted into computer for analysis by means of SPSS so that the total mean scores can be acquired. Then the data is counted with T testing of independent sample.

From Table 3, it can be found that Pinyin translation of public signs in question is the most common and most easily overlooked an error, including direct write alphabet and misspellings. Directly written alphabet, to understand Chinese people will know what that means, and let the newly arrived foreigners would be incomprehensible. Spelling errors, mainly caused by the careless,

this error though not misleading, but will affect the city's image.

Syntax errors are wrong with the singular and plural nouns, articles used improperly, using the wrong verb form, and part of speech abused. Singular and plural nouns error, such as Man's Restroom should be Men's Restroom; part of speech abuse, such as "be careful meet" translated as " Be mind your head ", mind is a verb not an adjective, should be directed to "Mind your head".

Since both English and Chinese cultural backgrounds, the two languages have their own language habits and thinking. Direct expression of Chinese public signs are bright, such as "No Smoking"; English puts greater emphasis on the object, the expression of euphemism, but also takes into account the politeness principle, there is no lack of humor.

Summary

Public sign in society is an important information carrier, especially economic globalization, the quality of translation cannot be ignored public signs. The English translation of public signs should first consider using the proper norms and standards in English-English one on one replacement, no corresponding translation in the case of public signs in reference to the functional requirements for translation and language style to ensure that public signs the translation is accurate, specifications, and truly play an effective role in transmitting information to promote the inter-understanding as well as communications with other countries, thus making Wuhan more open and inclusive to embrace the culture from the outside world.

Acknowledgements

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