

Chinese-English Translation Strategies of Public Signs Based on Functional Equivalence Theory

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Abstract—As cross-cultural communication between China and other countries becomes frequent and goes deeper, more and more foreigners have flooded into China. Consequently, as the bridge between the source and the target receptors, Chinese-English public signs, become increasingly important, playing an indispensable role in promoting our cities. Any misuse or misunderstanding of them will undoubtedly result in negative effects. Some mistranslated public signs might even damage the image of a city or the whole country. Unfortunately, many translated public signs we observe are of low quality, full of spelling or grammatical errors or marked by inaccuracy. Based on the above understanding, this paper is intended to explore some effective strategies and techniques for translating public signs in the light of Functional Equivalence Theory. The author expounds some views on C-E public signs translation. To begin with, the paper aims to make a detailed analysis of literature review of the Equivalence. Then the author gives the introduction of the public signs and features of them. After that, the author's analysis is the Chinese-English translation errors and the strategies.

Index Terms—public signs, Chinese-English translation, Functional Equivalence

I. INTRODUCTION

Now let us have a look at the significance and status quo of the related research. Economic and cultural exchanges between China and the rest of the world are gaining in momentum with China's economic development and the deepening of its reform and opening up. The country has witnessed a growing influx of foreigners into it for various purposes. Accompanying the inflow, however, some problems occur: how could foreigners get effective guide in a non-English speaking country without bothering to ask others each time when they need such trivial help as finding their way to some places, taking a bus, making reservations, etc. Of course, the most direct, and effective way for them to get such help is to be aided by the translated public signs around them. Considering the reasons mentioned above, any misuse or misunderstanding of them will undoubtedly result in negative effects. Some mistranslated public signs might even damage the image of a city or even the whole country. Unfortunately, many translated public signs we observe are of low quality, which are either full of spelling or grammatical errors or marked by inaccuracy. From this perspective, probing into some effective strategies or techniques in the translation of public signs is of great importance.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ranging from mathematics, logic, chemistry, computing to ethics, law, economy and art, the term "equivalence" may refer to different concepts in different disciplines. While in translation studies, equivalence is always a central issue which has caused heated controversy among many scholars and every theory has its historical background and environmental characteristics.

Eugene A. Nida, a renowned American scholar in the fields of translation theory and linguistics, is a key figure in equivalence theory. Talking about equivalence, we cannot overlook Nida's "Dynamic Functional Equivalence" which is his most notable contribution to translation theory. In order to gain a better perception of Nida's functional equivalence theory, it is essential and necessary to review some other discussions upon translation equivalence by the other scholars as the study of translation theories is systematical and expanded.

Susan Bassnett puts it, "equivalence in translation, then, should not be approached as a search for sameness, since sameness cannot even exist between two TL versions of the same text, let alone between the SL and the TL version" (Bassnett, 2004, P.36). Equivalence can be considered as the relationship between the source text (ST) and the target text (TT). Though the translators want to find a complete equivalence in target-language (TL) to source-language (SL) in both content and form, hardly can this ideal be achieved in reality due to numerous factors, such as the great differences between two languages and cultures, the subjectivity of the source author and so on.

As a famous linguist and one of the most influential translation theorist, Roman Jakobson introduced the notion of "equivalence in difference" and he distinguishes three kinds of translation: intralingual translation, interlingual translation and intersemiotic translation. He believes that any meaning of the signs in a language are the translations of the developed signs which have been change. Based on his semiotic approach to language, as he claims that there is no signatum without signum, he assigns the meaning (signatum) of word to the sign, not to the thing itself.

By introducing four shifts, namely, structure shifts, class shifts, unit shifts and intra-system shifts, the well-known

theorist, C. Catford, defines the for textual equivalence and views equivalence as a "key term". He insists that the main obstacles of the translation job is that of finding the translation counterpart in the target language and that the main aim of the translation theory is that of finding the characteristic and conditions of the translation counterparts. He also makes a difference between "formal correspondence" and "textual equivalence" within this book *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*. As for formal correspondence, he defines it as "exist where a target-language category occupies the same position in its language system as the same or some other category in the source language". C. Catford's also believes that "textual equivalence" can be reached by the choice of translation shifts when there stand no formal correspondences between SL and TL.

Mona Baker, a distinguished Egyptian scholar of translation studies did a great work in her book *In Other Words: A Course Book on Translation*. In the book she talked about equivalence at different levels (word, grammar, text, pragmatics). Unlike others theorists who put lots of elaborate analysis of the perspective of equivalence, Baker probes into equivalence at a different level: at word, above-word, grammatical, textual and pragmatic levels. (Baker, 2004) Besides that, she makes a distinction between lexical equivalence, grammatical equivalence textual equivalence and pragmatic equivalence. (Baker, 2004)

Another influential transition theorist Bassett points out that Popovic's four types make a good start and Neubert's three semiotic classifications direct the way of equivalence in translation. (Bassett, 2004) The classification of four categories of equivalence, namely, paradigmatic equivalence, linguistic equivalence, and textual equivalence, stylistic equivalence were proposed by Popovic and Bassett quite agrees with it. (Bassett, 2004) Neubert assumes that from the perspective of view of a theory of a text, the translation of equivalence should be regarded to be as a semiotic category, including a pragmatic, semantic and syntactic component, following Perice's category and Bassett agrees with it too. (Bassett, 2004) Bassett also believes that equivalence in translation cannot be sought after as the same meaning, because the same meaning cannot be coexistent in the same text, let alone the two different texts both in target language and source language.

Now comes Nida's theory which provides a theoretical framework for this paper. In his great work *Toward a Science of Translating*, Nida distinguished two different types of equivalence-formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. Formal correspondence's central study is the message in the form and content, but the dynamic equivalence's source is the effect in the equivalence. At the same time Nida makes it clear that there are not always formal equivalents between language pairs. If the translation aims at achieving formal rather than dynamic equivalence, he suggests that these formal equivalents should be used wherever possible. Nida asserts that the formal correspondence will change the patterns of target language in grammar and style and so it can make the readers misunderstand the meaning. (Nida, 2001)

Dynamic equivalence can be described as a kind of theory that a translator will try to impress the readers in the target language as the original language in the way of translation. They say that although the original text is translated, the translated way or the changing way can be restored by back translation. That is to say the message can be regarded as a faithful translation. (Nida, 1982).

It is widely acknowledged that translation aims to achieve both formal equivalence of (content-oriented and form-oriented) factors and functional equivalence of extratextual (situational and, above all, recipient -oriented) factors. People can learn that Nida is the supporter of the dynamic equivalence theory and thinks it is a quite effective method to translate texts. Nida's idea is easily understood if we understand his translation phenomenon ----- the Bible translation. That is to say, Nida's translation should have the same effect on the target language reader as the Bible does in its original language readers. That is the reason why Nida thinks dynamic equivalence in the translation practice is correct and it is communicative at the same time.

Nida uses the message of the text in his translation, though he uses linguistic method too. What he has done is to ensure the clearness of the message in the target context. Nida's theories of translation are stated in terms of how to produce an acceptable translation. So we can translate according to his principle of functional equivalence.

III. PUBLIC SIGNS

In both work and life public signs provide much convenience to people, however, it remains a question that how many people really know the definitions and meanings of public signs. But what is a sign because the definition of signs in English is different from what we see in China, and the latter has been given more connotations.

First, let us compare the different definitions of public signs: according to the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, a sign means a piece of paper, metal, etc. to give information in public or warn people. while in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a sign refers to a board or other device outside a shop, hotel, etc, to distinguish its name or its function.

Then according to *A Chinese-English Dictionary on Signs*, which serves the international tourists in China, it is the first specialized dictionary in China on the standardization of C-E signs, the public signs are classified into the following eleven specific categories according to the needs and behavioral characteristics of the international tourists, the eleven categories are: Part one, Signs and Slogans: signs; business promotion; slogans; place names; weather forecast. Part Two, Traveling: customs immigration quarantine; travel by air; travel by cars and buses; taxi; travel by railway; travel by public transport; car/auto repair; travel by boats. Part Three, Catering: restaurants; menus of Chinese

food; menus of Western food; world famous alcoholic drinks; bars and supplies; terms of alcoholic drink servers; non-alcoholic drinks; desserts, candies and snacks. Part Four, Accommodation: accommodation types; management and staff; services and facilities; Part Five, Visiting: tourist destinations; places of interest in China; dynasties and historical periods of China; medical service; educational institutions; armed forces. Part Six, Recreation: sports and games; holidays and festivals; entertainment; television. Part Seven, Shopping: shops; commodities: financial services. Part Eight, Communicating: post and telecommunications; the press; publications; libraries. Part Nine, Titles and Positions: professional titles; ranks and positions; degrees and honors, military and police ranks. Part Ten, Organizations: The People's Republic of China; Part Eleven, Trades and Professions: companies and factories; manufactures and distributors. construction and decoration. services and products repairs, professionals and engineers, consultants, contractors, brokers and agents, advertising and promotion.

Since public signs have a wide use in many fields, scholars have assorted the functions of the language of public signs into four categories: directing, prompting, restricting and compelling. The four features of public signs are concerned with diction, grammar, stylistic and cultural features.

A. *Diction*

Public signs should be concise and to the point so there are less descriptive words such as adjectives and adverbs. Nouns and verbs are frequently used. Noun phrases are usually in the form of "Noun+Noun" to indicate the name of a place or a direction. Noun phrases are quite often adopted in public signs because they are direct, simple and informative, and people will get the important information at the first glance.

B. *Grammar*

The first grammatical feature is the using of simple present tense, which can make public signs clear and concise. Another grammatical feature is that public signs are characterized by being striking and impressive as they are required to be concise.

C. *Stylistic Features*

Affected by its functional features, public signs are firstly characterized by conciseness and directness. Another stylistic feature is that translations should be standard, following the international practice and try to avoid any kind of ambiguity.

D. *Cultural Features*

In terms of translation and culture, many theorists have offered us their remarks. Newmark defines culture as a life way to a specific community. According to Nord, cultural translation errors are due to an inadequate decision with regard to reproduction or adaptation of culture-specific conventions. Nord also said "a culture-specific phenomenon is one that is found to exist in a particular form or function in only one of the two cultures being compared. Translating means a kind of cultural comparison. As a translator he or she has to explain the cultural phenomenon in the source language with the cultural knowledge in his or her own culture. (Nord, 2001) Susan Bassnet once compare a translator to a surgeon because when he is doing the operation on the heart, he has to pay attention to the surroundings. That is to say if a translation does not pay attention the cultural background, it is very dangerous. (Bassnet, 1991)."

Generally speaking, in China, cultural features refer to two general types. One is the local characteristics different from various English speaking countries; the other one refers to public signs that bear Chinese characteristics in China. Eugene A Nida puts forward that because the culture can be regarded as the whole thoughts and beliefs of the society, the most important thing is the way of its interaction among the members in the community.

IV. COMMON PROBLEMS IN PUBLIC SIGNS TRANSLATION IN CHINA

Christiane Nord, a famous German theorist, holds that only a translation error can hamper the aim of translation to have a specific function for the readers in the target language. (Nord, 2001) That is to say, translation errors can be classified into four categories, namely, linguistic translation errors, cultural translation errors, pragmatic translation errors and text-specific translation errors."(Nord, 2001) Similarly, the errors of public signs are divided into three major types, namely, linguistic translation errors, cultural translation errors and pragmatic translation errors.

Among them, linguistic errors are often due to deficiencies in the translator's source or target language competence. (Nord, 2001) As for the linguistic translation errors, the first kind is the misspelling Problem. In reality, it is common to witness the misspelled public signs in China. These errors or the typos are due to carelessness of translators or printers. The second kind is the grammatical problems. Grammatical rules, being just the organizers of words, which considered as the foundation of a language, are quite important during the process of translating. Therefore, the translated public signs having grammatical errors usually make foreigners feel perplexed about the intended meaning of them. Besides that some of these linguistic translation problems are restricted to language pairs, as might be the case of cognates or false friends. Nord thinks that contrastive grammar and comparative stylistics can provide valuable help in solving these problems (Nord, 2001).

For a successful translator, being familiar with two cultures is even more important than mastering two languages because language is the carrier of culture and translation is also an exchange of two cultures. Thus words can only be

meaningful in its cultural background. To make accurate and reasonable translation, translator should put language in appropriate cultural background in translation and shift the cultural perspective from their countries to that of the target culture. Only after that the linguistic and cultural barrier can be overcome. Sometimes one may come across the circumstance that during the process of translation practice, namely, the words of the source text don't have their equivalent counterparts in the target text.

V. STRATEGIES

The remaining part of the paper will mainly focus on some strategies for public signs translation from diversified perspectives. After a thorough investigation of the public signs translation and their application status in China, the author thinks that we shall study and improve public signs translation from the following two aspects.

A. *Macroscopic Perspective*

a. Translator's comprehensive quality

For this perspective, the most important one is the translators' comprehensive quality. Translator should be responsible for the quality of translation and set high standards. Bell described translator's competence that a translator masters as knowledge and skills, and he classified competence into knowledge of source language, knowledge of target language, knowledge of text typology, contrastive knowledge and the competence to decode the source language and code the target language. (Bell, 2001)

b. Setting up specific public signs translation supervision departments

Though standardization of public signs translation has aroused widespread concern in all social circles, most of them are intellectuals and the local governments seldom take any practical action to set up specific departments to supervise and offer guidance to these problems. After sorting out so many mistranslated public signs in China, it is suggested that concerned departments shall be responsible for the standardization of Chinese-English public signs, or specific departments be set up to take charge of the supervision, inspection of Chinese-English public signs as well as replace the current public signs according to national public signs compulsory standards.

B. *Microscopic*

As mentioned above, we have made the study of the public sign's problems from many aspects. Hence, under the guidance of Functional Equivalence, we'll try to find out the corresponding strategies on the microscopic level with an intention for improvement during the practice of the C-E public sign translation.

a. Strategies from Linguistic Perspective

Owing to the translator's the casualness and unsoiled theoretical knowledge, the ridiculous linguistic mistakes are quite witnessed even in the big cities. Without the elimination of linguistic errors, the intended meaning of original text of public signs is hard to achieve. As the causes of producing this language error are multifaceted, the linguistic perspective errors are not easy to shake off, but it does not mean that we will allow this absurd mistakes. Instead, much attention should be paid to this kind of mistakes. Here are some methods to avoid these kinds of mistakes such as correcting the spelling mistakes, back translation and following international standard

b. Strategies from purpose Perspective

To Nida, translation composes of producing the closest natural equivalence of the source language in the way of meaning and the next one is in the way of style. (Nida, 1982) As we know, translators are also message senders. Deriving from different intentions, when handling the cultural factors, translators have their own preference. To the overall translation action, the most important principle determining any translation process is the purpose. Holding his own purpose or an imposed one by his patron in translation, a translator hopes that his translation produces certain influence on the target culture. A translator's translation purpose is quite different from the purpose of the ST author is often the case.

c. Strategies from cultural perspective

There are some techniques for the public signs translation in term of the cultural vacuity such as borrowing, the choice of China English, employment of explanation and use of Pinyin plus Free Translation. If he does not have the beliefs and practices of other cultures, a translator's perspective of the world must be tragically restricted. Nida thinks that if it were not for the many misunderstandings about the language and culture, the cross-cultural understanding can be reached without obstacles. Because words are only meaningful in the cultures, the successful translation method should be the biculturalism instead of the bilingualism. (Nida, 2000)

d. Strategies from pragmatic perspective

To be clear about who he is translating for—the target audience ----- is very important for a translator. Nida also thinks that the target readers are the important factor in deciding the translation method (Nida, 1993) In addition to the analysis about the abilities above, such as the basic bilingual skills and the clear understanding of the cultural difference, some strategies should also be accounted from the pragmatic perspective like standardization.

VI. CONCLUSION

Nida, who was greatly influenced by Modern Reception Aesthetics, emphasizes reader response a lot in his

translation practice and translation theory. He asserts that in lexical, grammatical and rhetorical levels, we can compare the validity of the translation. But we cannot stop here. Rather, we should make sure that the receptors understand and appreciate the translation and that is more important. (Nida, 1993) Enlightened by various equivalence theories interpreted by a number of innovative theorists, the author applies Nida's theory to the public signs translation and discusses the public signs translation strategies from the perspective of functional equivalence. With translation theory being the guidance, the translation activity is supposed to conform to the theories and also further develop them. But every theory has its limitations and it is no exception of Functional Equivalence, so it is impossible to apply Functional Equivalence to all the translation of public signs into English. However, Functional Equivalence has helped to bring the target text into focus, which has brought innovation to the translation theory. This will make contribution to the standardization and regulation of translation on public signs.

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