

The English Translation of Public Signs in Qingdao—From the Perspective of Eco-translatology*

Jing Ma

Foreign Language Department, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao 266001, China

Abstract—The success of 2014 Qingdao International Horticultural Exposition has drawn many visitors' attention of the world and has also greatly improved China's image in the global arena. Under this circumstance, the English public signs are increasingly important. However, there has been inadequate attention to the importance of C-E translation of public signs. The present situation of its usage is far from satisfaction. With regard to the above facts, the paper attempts to explore the translation of public signs in Qingdao from the perspective of Eco-translatology. After introducing the core concepts of Eco-translatology and translation principles of public signs, the author analyzes problems and causes of the translated public signs with different kinds of examples. In the end, the author puts forward several corresponding C—E translation strategies of public signs under the guidance of eco-translatology.

Index Terms—public signs, Eco-translatology, Qingdao

I. INTRODUCTION

Public signs are used as tools to help foreigners understand a place. Translation of public signs even influences the political, economic, social and cultural development of the place. A lot of translations have been done about public signs. However, the previous studies about translation of public signs are mainly about the relevance theory, Skopos theory, inter-textuality theory and the perspective of function and aesthetics, but eco-translatology with adaptation and selection as the focus is seldom applied.

The success of 2014 Qingdao International Horticultural Exposition has drawn many visitors' attention of the world and has also greatly improved China's image in the global arena. "From the earth, for the Earth", the theme of the Expo, which embodies that "earth" and "Earth" are regarded as the two topics that the world concerns. The mascot is named "Qingqing" which may indicate the city of Qingdao and the old Chinese saying that blue-green (qing) comes from but also excels blue. The design is a combination of natural landscape and ideals, inspired by such images as rolling waves, drifting clouds, lofty peaks and wavering tree crowns. Qingqing raises her hand to extend her sincere invitation and warm welcome to friends from the five continents and show Qingdao's positive and aspiring mentality as well as its confidence and resolution to deliver an international horticultural feast. The image of wavering trees indicates the theme of Expo 2014 "From the earth, for the Earth" and the idea of ecology and environment friendliness.

In Qingdao City, bilingual signs are offered in order to give foreigners' lots of convenience. However, problems of the translation exist everywhere. Therefore, it is of great necessity for researchers to improve the quality of the public signs. In terms of ecological translation study, there is a theory proposed by Hu Gengshen. Through applying ecological approach to study translation, it made a new explanation to the essence and process of translation. Therefore, based on the study of Eco-translatology, the paper attempts to apply it to the translation practice of public signs in Qingdao City.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. An Overview of Eco-translatology

In light of Darwin's theory, Professor Hu Gengshen put forward Eco-translatology in 2001 in his paper "*An Initial Exploration into an Approach to Translation as Adaptation and Selection*". In 2008, Professor Hu published *Translation as Adaptation and Selection* which marked the establishment of Eco-Translatology.

As a strong interdisciplinary subject of ecology and translatology, this theory is understood to be an ecological approach to translation studies. Eco-translatology deems that the translation activity, as all the other activities in the natural world, should adapt to the "nature", which refers to every factor influencing the translation and is defined as "translational eco-environment". Hu Gengshen (2008) states that translational eco-environment refers to the situation and condition presented by the source language, source text, target language, target reader, and the social environment of the translator's time, etc. This theory also holds that the translator's selection of the target text is

* This paper is granted by the project "On Multi-disciplinary Integration Interpreting Talent Training Model (13XB39)

based on his or her multi-dimensional adaptation to the translational eco-environment. If the translator couldn't well adapt himself to the translational eco-environment, his choice of the target text would be doomed to fail from the very beginning.

"Adaptation" and "selection" are two core concepts through the whole theory of Eco-translatology. Under this theory framework, translation is defined as "a translator's adaptation and selection activities in a translational eco-environment." (Hu Gengshen, 2004, p.219) Therefore, the practice of translation highlights two stages, one is the stage of translator's adaptation, and the other is the stage of translator's selection. (Hu Genshen, 2004, p.121-127) On the one hand, it limits and restricts translator's best adaptation to itself; on the other hand, it is the basis of translator's adaptive selection of the translated text.

The first stage is the translator's adaptation. In order to survive, translators should fully understand the source text, perfectly adapt to the translational eco-environment, and simultaneously take the reader and consignor's thinking and feeling into consideration. The second stage is the translator's selection. It is true that the production of translation text is on the basis of translator's actively adaptation to the translational environment, but it is the translator that makes final choices. In a word, the adaptation of translators to the outside environment is the practice of "selective" adaptation, and the production of translation text is also practice of "adaptive" selection.

Eco-translatology forms its own approach to studying translation by researching the translation process from a macroscopic way. According to Eco-translatology, the evaluation standard of translation is the "degree of holistic adaptation and selection", (Hu Gengshen, 2004, p.144) which directs researchers to evaluate the quality of the translated versions from their translation processes and holds that the excellent translation results from the translator's perfect adaptation to the translational eco-environment and adaptive transformation from the three dimensions of language, culture, and communication. In that sense, a translation text can be evaluated in accordance with this standard.

B. *Researches on Public Sign Translation*

"Public signs are characters, words and graphic information that are closely related to people's life, environment and business, and intend to have the functions of notifying, directing, displaying, warning and labeling to the public." (Da & Lv, 2005, p.38) In the 21st century, with the deepening contact between China and other countries, China takes an increasingly important part in the international cooperation in economy and other fields. More and more public signs are written in both Chinese and English all over the cities in China.

The study of public sign translation enjoys a comparatively long history abroad, while in China it is still a new domain. Some scholars began to study the C-E translation of public signs from certain aspects only in the late 1980s. In the early studies of public sign translation, most essays focus on the collection of wrongly used public signs. As time goes on, researchers have done academic researches on the perspective of pragmatics, social semiotics and aesthetics and have explored the guiding principles and translation strategies and skills for public sign translation with related translation theories.

In 2002, Beijing International Studies University subsidized the study on "*C-E Public Signs Translation*" and set up a research center for public signs. And in 2003 the research center started the website of "*Study on C-E Public Signs on Line*". In 2004 C-E Public Signs Dictionary by Lv Hefa and Shan Liping was published. It is the first reference book concerning the translation of public signs from every aspect of social life, providing abundant authentic pictures of public signs. Besides, the first and second national seminars of public signs translation were successively held in 2005 and 2007. From then on, domestic research on public signs is increasingly standard and sound. For example, Deng Yan applies functional approach in the C-E translation of public signs and argues that different strategies should be adopted according to the intended purpose and function of the target text. Zhao Xiang generalized the current situation and existing problems in the translation of tourism public signs through many examples. Wei Zhirong and Ling Wei discuss the translation of language on public signs from the perspective of skopos theorie. Shi Jianhua discusses three special language characteristics of public signs and comes up with four strategies according to its characteristics and Peter Newmark's translation theory. The reviews of domestic related literatures on public signs translation are abundant. However, despite the fact that the academia attaches importance to it, the translation quality of public signs in our daily life is not satisfactory at all.

After a special review of public sign translation of specific cities in China, the author finds that there is no related public signs translation study in Qingdao under the guidance of the Eco-translatology. However, Qingdao stands at the forward position of the Eastern coastal cities in China; furthermore, Qingdao is becoming an important international metropolis. The situation of academic study in public translation field is far less satisfactory. Especially in 2014, with the World Horticulture Expo as a turning point, scholars and translators should seize the opportunity to deepen the study of public signs translation in Qingdao.

III. PROBLEMS IN C-E TRANSLATION OF PUBLIC SIGNS IN QINGDAO

Trying to collect and obtain the material of public sign translation, the author managed to travel around the whole city of Qingdao including Huangdao and Jiaonan, photographing and noting down the English versions of public signs. The existing public signs translation in Qingdao is far from satisfactory. From the research on these English versions of public signs, various problems, such as spelling mistakes, word-for-word translation, ambiguity, misunderstanding and

misapplication can be easily found among them. Some translations are too awkward to read. Some are so confusing that the readers feel at a loss. The paper probes into the problems in C-E translation of public signs from linguistic level, pragmatic level and cultural level.

A. *Problems on Linguistic Level*

Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language group, whereas English belongs to the Indo-European family. Chinese is a typical analytic language, while English is a synthetic language marked with inflexions. Linguistic translation errors are often due to deficiencies in the translator's source or target language competence (Nord, 2001, p.77). According to the author's research, linguistic translation errors in public signs mainly consist of the following kinds: spelling errors, grammatical errors, lexical errors and inconsistency in translation method.

1. **Spelling errors**

The spelling errors can be easily found in the public signs translation. This kind of errors will make a negative impression on the target readers because of the incapability and carelessness of translators or sign-makers. What's worse, these mistakes may be harmful to the image of Qingdao City. The following are some misspelling examples collected in Qingdao.

In the Sun Shine Department Store (青岛阳光百货), a piece of public sign “顾客止步” is incorrectly translated as “Stuff Only”. As a matter of fact, it should be translated into “Staff Only”. The word “Stuff” in the original version is rather ridiculous, which refers to matter, material, article, or activities of a specified. The misspelling error will make foreigners feel strange and confused and they will never guess the original meaning “Staff”. On a public telephone in Youke Convenience Store (友客便利店) near Weike Square (维客广场), “IC 卡” is put into “Ic Card”. Apparently, the word “Ic” is a spelling error and the correct form is “IC Card”, for the word “IC” is the abbreviation of “integrated circuit”, and both of the two letters should be capitalized.

2. **Grammatical errors**

Words are the carrier of meaning. The roles of grammar are just the organizers of words during the process of translation. In the light of the angle of coherence rule, a satisfactory version of public signs translation should at least abide by the grammatical roles of target language. Because of the differences between Chinese and English grammatical rules, various kinds of grammar errors occur in the C-E translation of public signs. In Qingdao, it is very common to find grammatical errors in English versions of public signs, which are noticeable and eye-catching bringing much trouble in understanding.

The Chinese render for “Nonrecoverable” as “不可回收物”. However, the existing translation of “不可回收物” in China University of Petroleum (中国石油大学) is “No recoverable” or “Organism”. The problem of this public sign belongs to the error of part of speech.

3. **Lexical errors**

The translated public signs should be in accordance with habitual use of the target language, but some lexical mistakes exist seriously in public signs. Some examples are taken from some supermarkets in Qingdao, e.g. 干货 *Fuck Foods*; 干锅鱼头 *Fuck a fish head*; 一次性用品 *One time sex goods*.

They are very much ridiculous, and obviously the translation done by some people with a smattering of English. Try to imagine what foreigners will feel when they see signs with such filthy words.

4. **Inconsistency in Translation Method**

“Public signs are semantically characterized by specificity and unity. When one sign appears in any situation such as publications, publicity materials, guideboards or traffic signs, the translation should be consistent, otherwise it will confuse the readers.” (Tian & Zhang, 2010, p.176) However, inconsistency in translating public signs is very common in Qingdao. Some public signs are presented in Chinese and English while some in Chinese and pinyin. For example, “中山路” was translated as “ZHONGSHAN LU” on road signs but as “ZHONGSHAN ROAD” on bus. To foreigners who do not know Chinese, they may consider the translations as two different roads. This kind of problem, disobeying the international standard, would bring much inconvenience to foreign tourists. Therefore, in the translation of public signs, the translators should standardize and unify the translated terms to meet the tourists' demands.

B. *Problems on Pragmatic Level*

In communication activities, people with different cultural background probably have language barrier or misunderstanding. The pragmatic problem often appears between original text and translated text. There are many reasons that constitute the pragmatic errors. In a general way, these pragmatic errors are embodied in the incorrect expression and misunderstanding of both sides. Jenny Thomas (1983) points out that pragmatic failure means improper expression or expression method, or wrong collocation in the target language, which results in some unexpected effect. Here it refers to the fact that the translator imitates the mode of expression, the structure or the sound feature of the source language to produce the awkward language or translationese.

1. **Word redundancy**

The C-E translation of public signs should also be concise and accurate. That is to say, any word that doesn't function in the sentence should be edited out. However, in the C-E translation of public signs, the problem of word redundancy can be easily noticed in public. As a particular failure in the public sign translation, word redundancy goes against the

coherence rule and leads deviation. For example,

遇到火灾，勿用电梯 *When there is a fire, don't use the elevator!*

This one is from a residential area called “Harmonious City” in Qindao. The translation seems to be all right, but if we analyze it, we can find the error. First, it violates the principle of “terse” and gives a tedious impression to the public. Second, it leaves people with an unsafe feeling because it seems that the fire will happen at any time. So we had better employ the phrase “in case of” to get rid of the underlying meaning.

2. Chinglish

Chinglish is a kind of interlanguage formed by Chinese grammar and English words. It can be defined as English with Chinese characters. In the course of learning and using English, Chinese learners would be influenced by Chinese thinking pattern and culture, and then Chinglish is created. As for public sign translation, the translators sometimes mechanically apply Chinglish due to the negative transfer of their mother tongue, which would lead to the poor transference of information. Chinglish neglects the idiomatic use of English language and violates the intended function of public signs. In the learning process of English, Chinese learners get incorrect conclusion and deduction of language rules under the influence of Chinese thinking pattern. For example:

我国人口基数大，生育需要有计划 *The base of our country is large, so birth need plane*”.

This example is taken from a district government slogan. Here, the translator did a rigid word-for-word translation with typical Chinese way of thinking and expressing patterns without considering the target language conventions. The translation is not only grammatically incorrect, but it would puzzle the target readers who know little Chinese.

Another example, 小心其他场地球飞入 *Caution! Beware of Flying Ball from the other field*.

Although the original intention of the sign is to warn people against an accident, the underlying meaning is that the ball will hurt the players in this field at any time. The poor facility allows the balls to fly everywhere and even hurt people, which is a phenomenon that should not happen to foreigners. So what the owner of the gymnasium should do is to improve the facilities rather than to erect such a useless sign.

3. Word-for-word translation

The most common translation method of public signs is word-for-word translating source language with incorrect expressions. The reason should be that the translator does not understand the real meaning of source text, or ignores the cultural connotation of the original text. In most situations, the real meaning of a word is not its literal meaning. Only in the contextual environment can the word convey the exact pragmatic meaning.



(Picture 1)

The above example is taken from the park of Licun River in Qingdao. It tends to warn people of watching out in order to avoid falling down. However, the translation adopts word-for-word translation to tell people to be careful when dropping into the water, instead of warning people of their safety. “当心地滑” “*Caution, slip*” from a shopping mall named Jusco is another typical example of word-for-word translation. The translation neither conveys the meaning nor realizes the appellative function of the source text. The translator ignores the pragmatic linguistic function and the concise feature of public signs. Therefore, adopting the explicit and implicit linguistic form beyond the limitation of the original text makes the sign much more effective in addressing the warning.

C. Problems on Cultural Level

Language and culture are closely related. Westerners and Chinese people have different thinking mode and logic feature. Generally speaking, the logic thinking of Chinese people is circuitous, Chinese people is accustomed to expressing something in indirect way. While the logic thinking of western people is very simple, they express their thinking directly, yes or no, like or dislike, etc. Therefore, we must show our respect for different cultural practices and forms, and do our best to eliminate the conflict of cultures. Some signs use the English translation without considering cultural differences, which are sure to bring about the failure in delivering information properly.



Picture 2 is taken from a bus in Qingdao. The translation is too long and not habitually practiced in English speaking countries. In English, we usually use “she is in a family way” to describe a lady who is pregnant. It is a euphemism. In Britain and the United States, such signs on these seats are labeled with “Courtesy Seats”. These seats have a similar function in China and in the West, so it is better to use this version to avoid cultural conflict. Another example, “圣象地板 *Saint Elephant floor*”, We can see the white elephant have a high status in Buddhist temples. Actually, “elephant” is treated as a symbol of trickery or deceitful favor in western countries. It stands for something which is expensive but useless. So it is better to translate it with Chinese pinyin: Sheng Xiang Di Ban.

IV. ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY-ORIENTED STRATEGIES FOR PUBLIC SIGNS TRANSLATION

According to Eco-translatology, the process of translation contains the stage of translator’s adaptation and the stage of translator’s selection. Here, the author attempts to discuss the process of adaptive selection in three dimensions: linguistic dimension, pragmatic dimension and cultural dimension.

A. Adaptive Selections in Linguistic Dimension

The adaptive selection from linguistic dimension emphasizes the translator’s adaptive transformation of the linguistic forms in the translation process. In the aspect of linguistics, many factors should be considered, such as words and phrases, grammars, linguistic styles, and so on. Lv Hefa (2004) illustrates eleven translation methods from the linguistic characteristics of public signs, but in this paper, the author will discuss the following.

1. Formulated translation

No+noun / gerunds

This pattern is used to prohibit readers from doing something. It can be substituted for “禁止”, or “请勿”, so “禁止吸烟” can be put into “No Smoking”.

Caution! / Danger! +noun / verb

This structure is employed to warn readers of danger or risk. Words like “Caution!” and “Danger!” in this pattern are used to draw people’s attention and they can be substituted for “小心” or “注意”. Here are some more examples:

小心滑倒 Caution! Wet Floor

小心落物 Danger! Falling Objects!

Noun+only

This structure is used to generalize facilities that they are specially used for somebody or something. The corresponding Chinese expression of this structure is “.....专用”, “.....止步” and “仅限.....”. The following are some examples:

顾客止步 Staff Only

送客止步 Passengers Only

残疾人专用 Disabled Only

会员专属 Members Only

Do not/please + verb

This pattern is used in imperative sentences in order to give directions to readers. The corresponding Chinese expression of this structure is “请.....”. Take the following public signs for example,

请走旋转门 Please Use Revolving Door

文明游览, 请依次排队 Please Queue Up

请主动出示证件 Please Present Your Certificates

B. Adaptive Selections in Pragmatic Dimension

Pragmatic dimension is the adaptive selection of translators who lay their emphasis on bilingually communicative intention during the process of translation. The transformation demands translators transforming linguistic and cultural connotation and stressing on the level of communication, to realize the communicative intention of the translation text.

(Hu Gengshen, 2008, p.3)

The strategy of substituting corresponding expressions in the target language which carries equivalent referential or pragmatic meaning for that in the source language can be defined as “equivalent translation”. Now that English-speaking countries have their own standard usage for such public signs, it is better for Chinese translators to follow convention. For example:

| | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 强电间 High Voltage Room | 单程票 One-way Ticket |
| 普通席 Economy Class | 北出口处 North Exit |
| 留言板 Message Board | 游览观光车 Sightseeing Bus |

C. Adaptive Selections in Cultural Dimension

The adaptive selection in cultural dimension requires translators be conscious of culture in the process of translation, and realizing that translation is practiced in a cross-cultural environment. For the purpose of interchanging information, translators should also be ready to deal with cultural differences. (Hu Gengshen 2004, p.137) Transliteration, replacement and amplification are three typical translation methods for the translation of public signs with cultural difference. While, the author particularly specifies the fourth one: omission.

Due to different conditions, many Chinese public signs are with Chinese characteristics. While in English-speaking countries there are no similar signs. It is called cultural absence. If people translate these Chinese public signs into English, it is likely to cause cross-cultural mistakes. For example, family planning is a basic national policy of China, people can see the slogan of “计划生育, 人人有责” in many places. If it is translated into “Everyone is responsible for family planning”, although the meaning is no problem, people from English-speaking countries are not necessarily able to understand, so it can be only Chinese without translation.

V. CONCLUSION

Public sign is a tool that can help the communication between Chinese and westerners. It is not only the change between two languages but also the communication between Chinese and Western culture. Whether the translation of public signs can achieve its original function not only affects the foreigners’ life in Qingdao, but also relates to the mental outlook and the overall image of the city, thereby affecting China’s international image. Eco-translatology provides a feasible theoretical framework for the author to conduct researches on translation of public signs in Qingdao. However, due to limit of time and material collections, there is much still to be further desired in this paper. Besides, it would be better if qualitative analysis was to be made.

REFERENCES

- [1] Deng Yan. (2010). Functionalism on Public Sign Translation of Scenic Spots in China. *Journal of Hu Bei Radio & Television University*, 05:84-85.
- [2] Hu, Gengshen. (2004). Approach to translation as adaptation and selection. Hubei: Hubei Education Press.
- [3] Hu, Gengshen. (2008). Understanding Eco-translatology. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 6:11-15.
- [4] Lv Hefa. (2004). The C-E Translation of Public Signs. *Journal of Chinese Science & Technology Translation*. 1:38-40.
- [5] Lv Hefa & Shan Pingli. (2004). A Chinese- English Dictionary on Signs. Beijing: Commercial Press.09.
- [6] Nord, C. (2001). Translation as a purposeful activity: Functionalist approach explained. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [7] Shi Jianhua. (2008). Language Features of Public Signs and Translation Strategies. *Journal of Taizhou College*, 01:52-55.
- [8] Thomas, Jenny. (1983). “Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure”. *Applied Linguistics*, 42:91-112.
- [9] Tian Wenhan & Zhang Feng. (2010). The Status Quo and Standardized of Translation of Urban Public Signs. *Forward Position*, (14): 176-178.
- [10] Wei Zhirong & Ling Wei. (2008). On the C-E Translation of Language on Public Signs from the Perspective of Skopostheorie. *Journal of Pingxiang College*, 01: 114-116.
- [11] Zhao Xiang. (2006). A Review of Public Sign Translation. *Foreign Language and Their Teaching*, 12:52-54.

Jing Ma was born in Taian, Shandong Province, China in 1979. She received her M.A. degree in linguistics from Shanghai Jiaotong University, China in 2005.

She is currently a lecturer in the School of Foreign Language, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China.

Her research interests include language testing, translation and interpretation. This paper is granted by the project “On Multi-disciplinary Integration Interpreting Talent Training Model (13XB39)”.