

On the Acceptability of English Translation of Public Signs*

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Abstract—The public sign, a “window” of a city or scenic spot, carries more information and plays the informative role in people’s daily life. The translation of public signs not merely transfers the linguistic information of the signs, but also acts as a cross-cultural communication activity. The study analyzes the types of public signs, investigates the common mistakes of English translation of public signs, and puts forward some suggestions for the public signs translation. The improvement of translators’ competence and cross-cultural awareness, the uniformity of the text, readers’ response, and the cultural context should be taken into consideration. They can contribute to the greater acceptability of public signs translation.

Index Terms—public signs, acceptability, coherence principle, readers’ response, cultural context

I. INTRODUCTION

The public sign, a “window” of a city or scenic spot, means a piece of paper, mental with words or drawings in public places. It carries more information and index and plays the informative function in people’s daily life. The translation of public signs is particularly important for visitors to know the cultural background and enhances their interest in specific scenic spots. A high-quality translated public sign, reflecting the cultural environment and internationalization of a country or a region, can serve as a guide for foreigners and bridge the gap of multicultural exchange.

The study of public signs translation, a hot topic in recent years, has attracted the attention of more scholars at home and abroad and they have done many researches from different perspectives, but it is far more mature and perfect due to the lack of more systematicness, standardization and integrity. The ecological system of public signs translation is not perfect, which demands the necessity of doing such research. This paper, based on the perspective of acceptability, classifies the public signs, identifies the common mistakes collected in scenic spots, analyzes the relationship of elements concerning public signs translation and offers some suggestions with the hope of purifying language environment and promoting cultural exchanges between different readers.

II. TYPES OF PUBLIC SIGNS

Generally speaking, public signs carrier the direction information or notification, and plays the role of suggesting, indicating, restricting and warning. Accordingly, there exist different types of public signs, namely the suggestive signs, indicative signs, restrictive signs and warning signs.

Suggestive signs are a kind of information service which is considerate and meticulous, and there is no task to limit mandatory meaning in the inside. Its function lies in the information content of the service. There is no strict restriction on the cue of the public signs in order to provide service and consumption information as the main content. Its use is very extensive without any specific meaning but the hint, such as “Wet Paint” “Full Booked” “Sold” “Beware of Dog”, etc. while, indicative signs are full of static information without any restrictive and compulsory significance. It is generally used to inform the general public about the location and service information whose function is to indicate the service, such as “This Way”, “Open”, “Take Away”, “Seats are reserved for the needed”, etc. In contrast, restrictive signs are a kind sign for constraining the behavior of the relevant public, which aims to make the people act according to the norms. Its language is very direct, but hardly makes people feel tough, rude and unjustifiable. Different from the above two kinds of signs, restrictive signs offer a kind of dynamic information, such as “Give Way”, “Staff Only”, “Ticket Only”, “Authorized Personnel Only”, “Free for Children under 12”, and the like. The last one is the warning signs, whose tone is strong and the language is tough and direct without any negotiable information. They require the public to follow without alternative choices and provide the dynamic instruction, such as “Hands off” or “Don’t touch”, “No photos”, “No Fishing Here”, “Police Line Do Not Pass”, “No Pets”, and so on.

III. COMMON MISTAKES OF C-E TRANSLATION OF PUBLIC SIGNS

Bilingual public signs are extensively used in Chinese-speaking regions. After analyzing the public signs translation

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collected in scenic spots in Jiangxi province, we find that there exist common mistakes as follows.

A. Spelling Mistake

Spelling mistake is one of the commonest errors in the collected public signs translation, which results from the carelessness and irresponsibility of the translators or painters. For example, “park” is written as “part”, “Sight-seeing car” written as “Sinht-seeing car”, “Toilet” as “Tolet”, and so on. All these not merely make the readers puzzled about the related information they indicate, but also impress the foreigners terribly. What we need to do is to pay more attention to the translation and spend more time in checking after translating each time.

B. Improper Diction

Diction, concerning the choice and use of the words, is determined by the context and the literary style. Generally, the words of public signs are very brief but informative. As for English and Chinese, both languages are quite rich in vocabulary, properties and specific cultural background, but express the same ideas, thoughts, denotative and connotation meaning. However, two or more words in both languages share a same denotation but convey different connotation. That is to say, they are different in meaning because of the cultural background. If translators are not careful in choosing words, they are likely to mix them in translation. For example, if the “Toilet for the Disabled” is translated into “special for deformed”, it will make the visitors stunned due to the derogatory remark and comment about someone. Another example is the translation of “the White Jade of Ceiling”. When looking up Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, we find “ceiling” refers to the inner surface of the top part of a room, whose original meaning is indoor ceiling and the extended meaning of “the roof of the cave”. In short, “ceiling” is an interior part of an object, while “Canopy” means a covering that serves as a roof to shelter an area from the weather. Obviously, compared with the translation of “White Jade Canopy”, “White Jade of Ceiling” is not very suitable or appropriate.

C. Blind Equivalence

Blind equivalence means the direct translation, also called death and hard translation according to the words order or sentence structure without considering English idiomatic expression or cultural elements, which may lead to the failure of conformity or information conveying, even result in cultural conflict or information misreading. For example, the “Disposable Articles” is often rendered into “One Time Sex Thing”. The former is characterized by short-term or single use for convenience instead of being used for a long-term durability. We find it difficult to understand if it is translated into “A Time Sex Thing”. There exist a lot of such rigid translations, such as “sign everywhere”(“签到处” in Chinese), “Evil Rubbish” (“有害垃圾” in Chinese), “Stylistic Toys” (“文体玩具” in Chinese), “Do You Close Friends”(“做您贴心的朋友” in Chinese), “Beware of to Meet” (“当心碰头” in Chinese) and so on. All of these may result from word to word equivalence according to mandarin pronunciation without taking the cultural elements of target language into consideration, which will destroy the meaning of the text.

D. Redundancy

Redundancy means the repetition of unnecessary messages or information, which may result in the errors in information transmission. As we mention above, briefness and conciseness are the features of public signs, which means the redundant words should be removed and fewer words for correct information or effective transformation of information are advisable in public signs translation. The following translations are those which fail to keep language simple in providing certain prompts or restraining the behavior of the public. For example, “出口” in Chinese, an opening that permits release, escape or going out, is often translated into “Exit Gate” for directing a door in the walls of a building. Actually, the word “Gate” is redundant and should be omitted in the translation. We can find more such examples with redundancy in English, such as “Social Toilet”, “After first under on, do riding with civility”, “Ring the Bell if You Have Something to Do at Night”, “Deformed Men Toilet” and so on. All of the signs above often appear with the strong context, and there is no necessity to render the information word for word. In order to transfer the information precisely and concisely, some of the words should be omitted and they can be translated into “Toilet”, “Queue up”, “Night Bell”, and “Toilet” or “Toilet” plus a wheel chair instead.

E. Pragmatic Failure

As we mentioned above, the public signs play the role of offering information, directing, reminding, suggesting or warning, but if they are misinterpreted, they will fail to achieve a specific purpose and the readers will fail to recognize the intention carried in the signs. Pragmatic failure is another common mistake in the translation of public signs, which includes the syntactic and grammatical translation errors because of the omission of the article, the incorrect use of prepositions and the part of speech (Hao Peng, 2019). The translation, therefore, often makes the readers, especially the foreign tourists puzzled. For example, we often find the translation of “Slip Carefully” in public. As for the literal meaning, it may invite the tourists to slip down carefully. Actually, it intends to warn them that the floor is wet or the steps are steep. Thus, the translation carries the opposite meaning compared with the original text and ignored its pragmatic meaning by using inappropriate expressions. The same failure can be found in other translations, such as “Take Care to Fall in Water” or “Be Careful to Fall Down”.

F. Cross-cultural Misunderstanding

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary, culture refers to "refined understanding and appreciation of art, literature, etc. or the state of intellectual development of a society, or a particular form of intellectual expression, or the customs, arts, social institutions of a particular group or people" (OALD, 2002, p347). Language, containing different cultural deposits, cannot be separated from culture, and the latter is embedded into the former. Moreover, there are differences between language and culture, which influences the effect of cross-cultural communication (Yang Zhengjun, 2010). The transmission of culture, therefore, varies differently. The public signs are full of cultural elements, which should be paid more attention to in translation in case the overlook of cultural difference. For example, the translated version of "Dragon Lake" can be found in a scenic attraction in Jiangxi province. Generally, "Dragon" means a mythical and evil monster, or a horrific giant reptile in English culture but a symbol of power, good luck and intelligence in Chinese culture. The different connotation, therefore, should be taken into consideration in translation and the suggested translation of "龙湖" should be "Longhu Lake", which can avoid the cultural misunderstanding on the one hand, and on the other hand, it follows the translation method of places, namely transliteration plus the proper noun plus literal translation.

G. Non-unified Translation

Unity, a significant quality in translation, requires the sameness in terms of proper nouns or expressing the names, tenses, key words, data, etc. According to the survey, the names of the same attraction in different places appeared differently, which leads to the chaos, confusion as well as misunderstanding. For example, "亚龙湾" is translated into "Yalong Bay" in some places, but into "Wan Yalong" or "Bay Yalong" or "Yalong Wan" in other places, which violates the principle of unity. The reason why it appears is that they are translated by different translators or by the same ones at different time. Moreover, the versions fail to be checked at the final stage. As a result, these problems will make the foreign visitors feel confused, and even there is no way to get useful information from the public signs.

IV. ACCEPTABILITY OF PUBLIC SIGNS TRANSLATION

According to the literature review, we find that many more scholars have studied the public signs translation from different perspectives, which provides more reference for its theoretical and practical studies. The first and foremost rule of such translation should be acceptability, that is, the public signs translation should be pragmatic and acceptable by the target readers, conform to the target culture, and meet the cultural context of target language.

What is translation acceptability? There has been no consensus answer to the question so far. Some scholars believe that translation acceptability refers to the closeness to the conventional expressions and acceptability of translated text in the target language. Some think that it not only concerns the content of translation, the ways of translation, but concerns the reasons why the translation is. In pragmatics, translation acceptability is "adhering to the cooperative principle" (Grice, 2002, pp 26-31). In reception theory, the readers-centered translation is of great significance in public signs translation. The theoretical core of the reception theory is to highlight the readers' role in deciding the ways and merits or demerits in translation. That is, translation acceptability focuses on the expectations of translated version and responses of the target readers. In cultural compensation, translation acceptability pays more attention to the cultural information loss in cognitive context. If conforming to the cultural context and the thinking modes of the public in target language, the translation will be acceptable greatly.

V. SUGGESTED RULES FOR PUBLIC SIGNS TRANSLATION

A. The Improvement of Translators' Competence and Cross-cultural Awareness

In the people mind, those who have learned English and Chinese or other two languages could act as a translator. This idea misleads the translation activity and the quality of the translator. The mastery of two languages is a must for a translator, but it is not the whole of a translator. For a qualified translator, he should be equipped with bilingual competence (namely the rich vocabulary, grammar, and other native and declarative knowledge), intercultural competence (namely the cultural elements, encyclopedic knowledge, and other related knowledge), the translation competence (namely the knowledge about translation nature, methods, strategies, process and categories), and the ability of using resources and so on (PACTE, 2000, pp 99-106).

In the existing public signs translation, we find most problems of the public signs translation are the spelling mistakes, grammatical errors, word for word translation, inappropriate expressions, etc. These problems often result from the lack of translators' professionalism. Therefore, the improvement of translators' competence is a must for translation, especially for public signs translation because it is displayed publicly to provide more information and it is a name card for a scenic spot or a city. To improve the quality of the translators, we should build teaching the appropriate teaching objective according to the marketing demands, build systematic translation curriculum, broaden the students' horizon, enhance their comprehensive competence, and cultivate qualified translators, which is the ultimate aim of translation teaching.

Cross-cultural awareness, referring to the sensibility towards the differences of cultures, is another factors influencing translation quality. It requires the translator get rid of the interference brought about the native language possibly. It is

impossible to cultivate this kind of awareness in a short time. On the contrary, the solution to this can be found in the practice. That means, the sufficient training is a direct method to improve the cultural awareness and it is also another way for a translator to improve the translation quality.

B. The Uniformity of the Translation

Translation, the transformation activity of different languages and multiple cultures, aims to communicate between the author and the readers. It focuses on the interlingual uniformity, whose degree is made by translators and translation purpose. If it is coherent to both sides at the first beginning, the translation is acceptable to some extent and conforms to the readers' situation and cognition. Maybe, it is a little difficult to achieve it in that coherence requires that the translation plays the same function as the source text and the readers have the similar response after reading the translation.

For example, "the Tourists do not enter" is a word for word translation, but it violates the principle of coherence, which makes it unacceptable for failing to provide clear linguistic information because of the use of imperative sentence. The readers will be confused with the question why couldn't enter. Besides, the translation couldn't provide convenience for foreigners and achieve further exchanges of information because of the semantic fuzziness. Thus, it could not bring about the communicative effect. "Staff only", instead, can make the readers accept more easily, since it, translated in accordance with readers' expectation and horizon, can be conducive to the avoidance of cultural information loss.

C. Readers' Response

Translation is a complex interlingual exchange in which the readers' acceptability, responses and understanding highlight the text's value (Wang Caiying, 2018). What's more, the readers can bridge the gaps or blanks of the cultural information that the translated version contains. Here, the readers can be subdivided into the "implied readers" and "actual readers". The former refers to those whom the translation is produced for in the mind and they are the expected readers, while the latter means those who read the translation in reality.

The translation of public signs aims for these two kinds of readers who throw lights on the readability and concrete meaning of the translation, because it not merely provides information to the "actual readers", namely the tourists in different scenic spots, but to the "implied readers" or the future tourists coming to these attractions. Just as Nord (1997, p12) said, every translation is directed at an intended audience, since to translate means to produce a text in a target setting for a target purpose and target addressees in target circumstances. It is the readers' acceptability that determines the quality of public signs translation. Therefore, the readers' knowledge reserve, cultural background, value orientation, specialized knowledge, and other qualities all influence the translation and these should be taken into consideration during the process of translation.

Generally speaking, the public signs often carry the information which is comprehensible for the readers. Based on such expected effect, the translators should follow specific purposes and choose appropriate translation methods for the exchange of cultural information carried in the public signs. For example, we often see the signs of "Please Flush After Urinated" or "Wash After Relief" in the toilet. Obviously, the translations are funny and incomprehensible in that the words "urinate" "wash" "relief" are uncommonly used in signs. In contrast, the expressions of "Come in a rush and leave with a flush" seem more appropriate for homophonic puns in sound, and achieve vivid expression effect.

D. Conforming to the Cultural Context

According to Halliday (1985), "language is the carrier of culture and cultural context is the reflection of the background. Different cultural context exerts influence on the acceptability of translation" (p. 23). Translation has no longer been regarded as the mere transformation of linguistic symbols, but as the transformation of cultural information, especially since the "Culture Turn" in 1980s. Culture, especially cultural context, influences the translation studies. If the translation conforms to the cultural context better, it will be accepted greatly. For example, "残疾人厕所" is often translated into "Deformed Man Toilet" or "Disabled Toilet", which just expresses the literal meaning in an impolite way, and fails to achieve functional equivalence because of the ignorance of cultural context. The public sign, together with the "Male Toilet" or "Female Toilet", often appears in the railway station, shopping mall, hospitals, or some other places. There is no need, therefore, to translate it literally but to use the picture of "Wheelchair" to replace the translation.

Besides, the public signs, containing some cultural elements, are full of culture loaded expression in introducing the historical interests. Better translation contributes to explaining and demonstrating the implicit meaning, and the enhancement of acceptability. For example, the word such as "请勿...", "严禁践踏", "禁止" are frequently adopted in Chinese public signs to express the restriction or restraint of the behavior with strong tone. During the English translation of the signs, however, these words or phrases should be rendered in a mild tone by using "Thank you for Keeping Off...", "Please Keep Off...", "Noun + Only", "No+ Ving" or others in accordance with the readers' reception and the cultural context of the target language. Otherwise, the translation will mislead the target readers or fail to convey the information.

VI. CONCLUSION

With continuous development of global economy, the communication with the other countries becomes increasingly close because China is a great country with rich cultural heritage and tourism and cultural resources. More and more foreign friends are interested in our charming land. English, as the most widely used language in the world, plays a very important role in the cultural exchange between China and foreign countries. The paper, taking the public signs translation as the research objects, lists the common mistakes in their translation, analyzes the reasons why the errors exist from the multicultural system. Besides, the paper proposes the applicable compensation methods in the linguistic and cultural levels, which contributes to the compensation of cultural information loss and the promotion of intercultural exchange. They could be applied to adjust the vagueness of meaning, avoid the cultural conflicts and improve the acceptability of translation, which bring up new demands for further translation teaching.

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