

Research on the Translation of Public Signs

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Abstract

Because of the increasing international image of China, the translation of public signs in city has become the very important issue. From the point of view of cross-cultural communication, the public signs have crucial influence on the image of the city, even for the whole China. However, there exist many translation errors of the public signs in China. This paper makes some research and analysis on the Chinese-English translation of public signs. On account of the current situation of public signs' translation in China, and take the characteristics and function of the public signs into consideration, this paper proposes some main principles and strategies which public signs' translation should pay attention to.

Keywords: Translation, Public Signs, Error analysis, Principles and strategies

1. Introduction

With our economic development and acceleration of opening to outside, it has a great growing about international friendship and economic cooperation. Besides, the international communication become more frequently. Public signs are the important part consisting of language and human environment in the international city and tourist destination. The success of Beijing Olympic Games and World Expo 2010 Shanghai reflect that China play an important role in the world, and more and more people will know and come to China. So the image of city in China is very important. Public signs are the indispensable part of a city. Translation of public signs, to a large extent, reflects an international level of environmental establishment in a city or a region. Whether the proper use of public signs will have a direct impact on the international image of the city, region or even the country. Meanwhile, it relates to the understanding of Chinese culture, status of society and economic situation, so that China can get better developments from each aspect. Therefore, the English translation of public signs has a growing importance. But now, there are uneven translation errors in major cities in our country.

For the whole situation, translation study of public signs in China developed comparatively late. Now it includes mainly the achievements in 2005. Beijing Second Foreign Language Institute, which is regarded as forerunner of translation on public signs, projected financing for "English Translation of Public Signs" and established the research center of translation on public signs, which has brought lectures at college circuit for Translation Studies on Public Signs. "The First National Public Signs Translation Seminar" was held in Beijing Second Foreign School in Sep. 2005. It signed the beginning of translation system and deep study for public signs. Scholars gain the obvious achievements in error analysis, normalization, language and function, methods, principles and theory on translation of public signs.

In partial cities, because translators have not grasped the principle of pragmatic equivalent, many public signs have problems of incorrect information and obstacles in communication, which are pragmatic errors. This paper aims at to analyze the existing problems from pragmatic equivalence, proposing the principles and methods through analysis of language characteristics and functions on public signs.

2. The Introduction of Public Signs

"Public signs" is the new general popular vocabulary. But, it is not used widely for the translation industry and the foreign sector. Few people know this new vocabulary, so we come to know it.

2.1 The Definition of Public Signs

"Public signs" means the text language for people in public. There are many similar expressions, including "sign language", "logo", "signs", and "slogans" and so on. It is widely used in transportation, tourism, transport and other public areas in the combination of sign language and signs. Signs in the IT industry have been widely accepted and it is almost a language branch of the industry. Logo is the promotion language in the marketing, advertising and it is

often used with corporate identity. Slogan is the public welfare, political, promotional text language which people are more familiar with. Therefore, there is no vocabulary that can accommodate the connotation and extension under the “sign language”, “logo”, “signs”, “slogan”, except for “Public signs”. Currently, it is difficult to select the other word to include the vocabulary. For this reason, public signs become a collective noun for “sign language”, “logo”, “signs”, “slogan” indeed. These vocabularies have been replaced in government standard conception by a new general popular vocabulary that is the public signs. Public Signs is a special style and it has been involved in every aspect of our lives penetrating into every corner of society, such as street signs, store signs, slogans, warning language, propaganda slogans and so on. It can be seen everywhere in our lives, for example, “小心地滑(Caution, Wet Floor)”, “售票处(Ticket Office)”, “中央电视台(CCTV)” and so on. We have seen businessmen put up the “营业(Open)” sign in front of the door. So customers only need to glimpse to know that the store opened that they can go shopping. But we have never seen such signs as “我们现在开门营业了(Now we are open)”. In addition there are some signs as “游客止步(Closed to Visitors)”, “客房中心(Housekeeping Center)”, etc. Sometimes, public signs are also coupled with a simple icon in order to make more concrete visualization. Different types of public signs can play a role in making a normative social behavior, interpersonal adjustment, increasing productivity, deterring criminals and passion inspiration. So some scholars take the public signs in brief as to the text language in public for public people. The scholars also define it as a special style in the common places, or with very small text, or with simple icons, or with the combination of icons and text. It stands for a request or some attention for the audience. This view is a more comprehensive overview of public signs, which refers to its content, nature and characteristics. It is open to the public. It is textual and graphical information relating to life, production, ecology, and industry. Good translation of public signs can help the foreign businessmen, tourists feel convenient and enjoyable in clothing, food, living and transport. So it is necessary to take seriously the Chinese-English translation of public signs.

2.2 The Language Style of Public Signs

The public signs use the noun, verb, gerund, phrase, abbreviations, combination of text and logo, present tense, imperative sentence, and normal and standard vocabulary. It is simple and concrete vocabulary with local characteristics.

2.2.1 Great Deal of Noun or Gerund

The English public signs sometimes use a great quantity of noun or gerund. Thus, it can reflect special information directly and bring concrete content by simple forms. Meanwhile, Chinese use verbs corresponding to these public signs. Such as Food & Beverage (餐饮部) Business Center (商务中心) Director (经理) Slow, School (前方学校, 减速慢行) Safety First (安全第一).

2.2.2 Use of Abbreviations

The public and tourists access to public signs in most public facilities and services with abbreviations, such as IDD 国内直播, DDD (国际直播), WC (厕所), P (停车场), YMCA (基督教青年会), F & B (餐饮服务), YHA (青年旅社), SQ (广场), CNTR (中心), GDNS (花园), VIP SUITE (贵宾候机室), ENT DEPARTMENT (耳鼻喉科), etc.

2.2.3 Strictly Banned Uncommon Words

Considering the knowledge level of public and tourists, public signs strictly avoid the use of rare words, the old saying, slang, and terminology. Such as: NO LITTERING (请勿乱扔垃圾), OCCUPIED (厕所(有人)), DETOUR (绕行). The effect is more obvious that text are used in most public places with logo, such as: EXIT (出口), CITYRAIL (城市铁路), CHINA POST (中国邮政).

2.2.4 Application of Present Tense

Signs give the instructions, tips, and limits of actual behavior of public in specific areas. Therefore, public signs only use the present tense. Such as: KEEP DRY (保持干燥), DON'T DRIVE WHEN TIRED (严禁疲劳驾驶), PROTECT AGAINST HEAT (怕热), FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELT (系好安全带), BEWARE OBSTRUCTION (小心障碍), etc.

2.2.5 Use of Imperatives

For the public often go out or travel more than a hurry, public signs have a large number of applications of imperative. Such as, DO NOT DISTURB (请勿打扰), KEEP OFF THE GRASS (勿踏草坪), HANDLE WITH CARE (小心轻放), BEWARE PEDESTRIAN (注意行人).

2.3 Function of Public Signs

Public Signs apply to all aspects of daily life, and it also directly affects our lives. Public Signs in practical applications has indicative, suggestive, restrictive, mandatory application of the four prominent functions.

2.3.1 Indicative Public Signs

Indicative public signs reflect the thoughtful service of information without any restrictions and mandatory meaning.

Therefore, this language use is not necessarily asking the public to take action and its function is to instruct services. For example, INFORMATION(问询服务), CAR RENTAL(租车服务), TRAVEL SERVICE(旅游服务), OUT-PATIENT DEPARTMENT(门诊部), NIGHT CLUB(夜总会).

2.3.2 Suggestive Public Signs

Suggestive public signs have not any specific relation, but it is widely used. RESERVED(预留席位), FULL BOOKED(客满), SOLD OUT(售完), EXPLOSIVE(易爆物品)。

2.3.3 Restrictive Public Signs

Restrictive Signs put restrictions, constraints or requirements for relevant people. The application of this language is straightforward, but it will not make people feel strong, violent or irrational. Such as KEEP RIGHT(右侧行驶), GIVE WAY(让路), TICKET ONLY(凭票入场), 60km/h(限速 60 公里/小时) etc.

2.3.4 Mandatory Public Signs

Mandatory public signs demands public to be taken or not taken any action. Language application is straightforward, tough, no question. NO SMOKING(严禁吸烟), NO ENTRY(严禁驶入) DON'T WALK(禁止通行).

3. The Principles of Translation and Strategies of Translation

3.1 The Principles of Translation

3.1.1 Simple

Public signs are written in the limited space on the bulletin board or poster, so its readers often have temporary reading. By this way of reading, the readers must have enough time to finish reading. Therefore, the translation requires being simple and concrete which is a basic principle of public signs in English. Compared with English, Chinese public signs tend to be more specific, clear and sometimes appear to be more complicated. Therefore, be sure to maintain a simple style in English. For instance, “勿动展品”---this is written on the little marked card and indicate visitors not to touch the exhibits. Somebody translate it into “Please don't touch the exhibits”. In fact, “勿动”can describe the whole meaning. The marked card is put on the exhibits, so visitors can understand that people can not touch the exhibits, not the other thing. So, it is okay to be translated into “Hands Off”.

3.1.2 Clear

Readers of public signs are common people who understand the public signs without any professional training. It is not the problem of public signs when readers can not understand the signs. So, it is chief principle of translation that can make readers understand the signs. For example, “餐点饮食 严禁带入教室”, if this sentence is translated into “No Foods to Classroom”, readers may have such a question, whether there is no need to eat before accessing to classroom?---classroom provides the food, or can not take food into classroom? Thus, it lost the clearness of public signs. If it is changed into “No Sandwiches to Classroom!” readers will be clear to know that food like sandwich can not be taken into the classroom.

3.1.3 Appropriate Tone

We should grasp the Chinese tone before we translate the public signs. In general, the tone of public signs can be classified into four types, such as prohibited, warning, command and suggesting.

Prohibited: it refers to prohibiting or stopping something that people want to do. For example, “勿食用”(Don't eat!), “禁止堆放易燃易爆物品”(No flammable materials!)

Warning: it refers to warning people the danger that would happen, such as “小心火灾”(Danger of fire!) “危险”(Danger!) “当心爆炸”(Danger of explosion!)

Command: it refers to complying with what it commands. For example, “保持车距”(Keep distance!) “竖放”(Upright!) “小心轻放”(Handle with care!)

Suggesting: it refers to suggesting the target information of location and direction. “正在营业”(Open) “灭火器”(Fire Extinguisher).

There is an example to show the importance of the appropriate tone. “勿倾斜”--this is a sign on a refrigerator, it is translated into “Upright”. It belongs to command. As we all know, compared to other upright goods, refrigerator needs to be completely upright not only during the transporting, but also when it is static. Here, “upright” can not express the special command enough. So, it will be more appropriate--Never Slope!

3.1.4 Normalization

Translators also should realize the normalization of public signs. The so-called normalization is that the

translation should be consistent with the expression of general public signs, and some industries which have drawn up the international standards should be consistent with it. For example, “紧急出口” generally refers to the emergency exits in case of emergency situation from the building, but domestic public signs that express “出口” are almost translated into “exit”. In fact, some “出口” are not used for emergency evacuation, and some are simply just a way-out only. According to the requirements of international standards ISO 700-ADD Public information graphical symbols, those “出口” which are not emergency exit should be signed as WAY OUT rather than EXIT. Especially for some industries, such as tourism, public transport and construction should be translated in accordance with international common words.

3.2 The Strategies of Translation

Communicative translation takes the target readership as the central and focus on the contextual meaning. Its focus is the reader of target language and it helps them get rid of difficulties or obstacles of understanding. It emphasizes the effect of translation. So the translation of public signs should be results-oriented, with fluent and understandable language delivering a message to the public. Thus, the translation of public signs can achieve the desired results.

3.2.1 The Importance of Cultural Realization

Language is the carrier of culture and every nation has rich cultural heritage. There exist differences between different nations by different culture, social background, habits, thinking styles. So the language also has great deal of diversity. Translation of public signs means properly convert the source language into target language, in this process translates should not only maintain the information in the source language, but also take into account cultural differences. In our specific historical environment, often with Chinese characteristics, some words such as “红旗手”, was translated into “Red Flagger”. Translation aims at making foreigners read and understand our culture. But all foreigners may not know what “Red Flagger” means. In fact, “红旗手” implies “先进者” or “模范者”. So, “Model worker” or “Advanced worker” can be expressed very well. One company named “上海万象服饰公司”. Its Chinese name printed in English is called “Shanghai Wanxiang Elephant Garment Co. Ltd.”. Elephant in the eyes of Chinese people are loyal, simple and honest, cute things, but in Western eyes are reckless, stupid and violent things. Being translated into the “elephant garment” means putting on “violent, stupid” clothes? In fact, the “Shanghai Wanxiang Garment Co., Ltd.” is well translated.

3.2.2 Analyze the Context

Public sign is a kind of application style with extensive use. Taking into account the different countries, different national conditions, the translation of public signs should follow the “translating, elegant translating or non-translating” principle. How to grasp this principle depends on the context and a detailed analysis. Some public signs can be translated directly, such as shop signs, street signs and other public signs with indicating meaning. For example, “长安街”—“Chang’an Avenue”, “第一百货公司”—“No. 1 Department Store” and so on. In Chinese language there are a lot of “prohibited” categories of signs, such as at in the hotel, there is “不得自带酒水” at shops there, “所有商品不得讲价”, in public places, there are “不得喧哗”, etc. Translation of such public signs requires us to analyze the context in the case of functional equivalence translation of the source language, which was subtle and tactful. If possible, translation with humor is the elegant translation. Compare two of the three public signs translated “No self-wine beverage allowed” corresponds to “Consumption of our foods only”. “No bargaining” corresponds to “Fixed price” “Noise is strictly prohibited” corresponds to “Please keep silent”. Obviously, the latter is more elegant and acceptable. These public signs are clearly with the Chinese local characteristics, characteristics of the times. We believe, over time as we improve the degree of civilization, such public signs will gradually disappeared from our perspective.

3.2.3 Strive for Easy Understanding

Some experts regard translation as creative process. This shows the importance and difficulties of translation. It is difficult to digest between source language and target language without a deep study. On the first national seminar on translation of public signs, Huang Youyi said,

Many people simply think that you translate what I said and what I wrote. The writing of an article can be used for a week or even months. Translator get the commission when the article is to be published leading to a very short time for translation. Translator has no time to scrutinize article and can not grasp the core resulting in producing low-quality translation draft.

Once a more interesting thing is the translation of “宾客止步”. The translation on the Hangzhou map is “Guest go no further”, “Guests stop here”. In another scenic spot it wrote, “Tourists stop the step”. Some people find it funny that, after the visit, interpreter came back to look for foreign friends, and saw that they were waiting behind a card “Passengers, stop here” (the Chinese as “宾客止步”). Because foreigners believe in public places it is proper to act

in accordance with public signs so as not to go wrong.

4. Conclusion

Translation of public signs is a large and trivial project, involving all aspects of life. In order to solve the difficult ties, it requires great attention by translators even the whole community. The survey of this paper is only a tip of the iceberg. The process of translation is a long way. On the one hand, it requires translator to improve language training and knowledge, knowing about the cultural convention and way of behavior in the English-speaking countries. At the same time in the translation process, translator need to scrutinize carefully of each word, be careful to treat every sentence without any arbitrary. On the other hand, many expressions are the conventions in different cultures, which is the principle of translation that can not be ignored. This also requires translator to pay more attention to the accumulation of expression. Translator may take records when they have opportunity to go abroad. Thus, translator can avoid unnecessary mistakes by borrowing foreign vocabulary. It is believed that people can create a clear language environment through eliminating the wrong language from each word by all people engaging in translation work.

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