

Review Article

A Research on English Translation of Chinese Public Signs and Their Translation Strategies

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Abstract: As a special practical writing, the translation of public signs also has certain skills and strategies. Under the background of globalization, English, as an international language, is widely used in various public places. In some public places in China, such as airports, subways, tourist attractions, etc., there are Chinese and English bilingual public signs everywhere. However, the English translation of some public signs is not standardized, which not only damages China's international image, but also brings trouble to international friends coming to China. This paper analyzes the non-standard phenomenon and causes of the English translation of Chinese public signs, and provides some skills and strategies for the C-E translation, so as to better help the international friends in China know about China and provide convenience for their life and work.

Keywords: Public signs, nonstandard phenomena, translation strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

Public signs are a unique practical style. They are important parts of social language and play important role in public places. However, the English translation of some Chinese public signs is not standardized, which does not play its due role. On the contrary, it easily puzzles international friends who come to China. The public signs are symbol of the degree of social civilization, a window to understand the construction of social spiritual civilization, and also reflect the overall cultural quality, moral cultivation and spiritual outlook of this social group. To understand the features of an era, a society, a country or a city, people often get a preliminary impression from the pragmatic level of the era, society, country or city [1]. However, some nonstandard phenomena in the English translation of Chinese public signs, such as spelling errors, Chinese Pinyin annotation, mistranslation, missing translation, ignoring cultural differences, can be completely avoided. In addition, some nonstandard phenomena in the English translation of other Chinese public signs can also be avoided through translation skills and translation strategies. Standardized English translation of Chinese public signs can not only improve people's English cultural literacy, but also appropriately export excellent culture of our nation, make international

friends in China feel the charm of a big country and establish a good image of international exchange.

PUBLIC SIGNS

Concept of Public Signs

Although public signs can be seen everywhere in public places, the academic circles have not reached an agreement on the definition of its concept. This article quotes the definition of public signs in Baidu Encyclopedia, and the relevant contents are as follows: "public signs, also known as social signs, belong to the category of social management terms, and are a special language phenomenon applied to social public places. It covers a wide range. Any language signs or slogans posted or printed in public places to provide publicity and services for the general public or special groups can be classified as public signs [2]." It can be seen that the public signs belong to a relatively special application language system. Their purpose is to inform the public of relevant information or put forward restrictions and constraints on the behavior of the relevant public. And usually they are in the form of pictures and words, concise and comprehensive, with a strong prompt effect.

Linguistic Features and Functional Classification of Public Signs

Since public signs are a special language phenomena, simplicity is their biggest feature, such as the use of simple and understandable words, concise and comprehensive expressions, etc. [3]. According to speech act theory [4 5], public signs are an art of persuading others through effective speech means. They are also a part of language activities and belong to a special kind of communication. Public signs are a kind of “single communication”, and their binding force or influence will not be as effective as face-to-face communication, but their use is also to perform actions and affect the behavior of the audience with distinct purpose.

According to their functions, public signs can be divided into four categories: indicative public signs, suggestive public signs, restrictive public signs and mandatory public signs. Indicative public signs reflect thoughtful information service without any restriction and mandatory meaning. Therefore, language application does not necessarily require the public to take any action. Their function is to indicate the service content. Suggestive public signs have no special meaning and only play a suggestive role, but they are widely used. Restrictive public signs put forward restrictions and constraints on the behavior of the relevant public, and require the language to be used directly, but do not make people feel tough, rude and unreasonable. Mandatory public signs require the relevant public to take or not to take any action. The language application is straightforward, tough and non-negotiable [6].

NONSTANDARD PHENOMENA IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF CHINESE PUBLIC SIGNS AND THEIR CAUSES

Misspelling and Chinese Pinyin Annotation

Although some mandatory or restrictive public signs are accurate in Chinese expression, their English translation often has very low-level mistakes. For example, Keep is misspelled as keap in “禁止踩踏”(Please Keap Off The Grass). The Chinese public sign “请勿随地吐痰” is directly translated into “Qing Wu Sui Di Tu Tan” in Chinese Pinyin annotation. The appropriate translation should be “No Spitting.” The author found that in her university there is also the phenomenon of irregularities in the English translation of Chinese public sign, such as “如遇火警, 请勿乘坐电梯 (INCASE OF FIRF PLEASE DO NOT USE ELEVATOR)”, in which the word fire is misspelled as fief. These errors may be caused by the carelessness or negligence of translators. Although there is no problem in understanding, this nonstandard spelling is a disgrace to the image of a country or tourist attractions, and is not conducive to the civilization construction of the whole society.

Ignoring Cultural Differences

Any language in the world is deeply rooted in its own culture. Chinese and English belong to two very different cultures. Cultural differences determine the different expressions in different languages. Therefore, one of the problems in the English translation of Chinese public signs is to ignore the cultural differences. This is a phenomenon that the translators do not fully understand the English cultural background, resulting in the nonstandard English translation of Chinese public signs. For example, one suggestive Chinese public sign “当心碰头” is translated into “Watch Out, Knock Head”. But it should be known that the word “knock” means “strike, hit”; and “knock head” in English slang also means “fool” [7]. Then for international friends, this public sign means “be careful, fool”, which expresses very impolite meaning, so the correct translation should be “Watch Your Head”. Another example is the translation of some road public signs, and there are many jokes due to the random translation without considering the cultural background. For example, on the highway near “安宁市(Anning City)” in Yunnan Province, the public sign is translated as “it is peaceful”. Similarly, “楚雄(Chuxiong)”, an autonomous prefecture under the jurisdiction of Yunnan Province, is translated into “Chu Male”. However, according to the norms of place name translation, they should be transliterated as “Anning” and “Chuxiong” respectively [8].

Taking the Words too Literally

Some indicative public signs are translated according to their literal meaning, which is ridiculous. This is because the translators fail to put the translation under a specific situation, but directly translate it mechanically. Mechanical translation of the source language without considering its pragmatic environment will lead to the meaning out of context, which will not only confuse international friends, but also weaken its functionality and make it difficult to express the real meaning of the communicative object. For example, the indicative public sign “出口(exit)” means the place or through which people or stuff can go out. It can be seen everywhere in many public places and is used very frequently. However, it is translated literally in many public places. The word “出口(exit)” is directly translated into “export”. At first glance, it seems that there is no problem, but in fact, it does not consider that the word “出口” is polysemy in Chinese and the pragmatic environment of its use. Such mistakes include translating “儿童乐园(children’s amusement park)” into “children’s paradise”. According to the dictionary, the word “paradise” means “heaven and blissful place”, and the “儿童乐园(children’s amusement park)” here refers to the children’s playground, so it should be translated into “Children’s Amusement Park” or “Children’s Playground” according to foreign customs. Therefore, if the English translation of some Chinese public signs is

only superficial and mechanical, it will lead to the nonstandard phenomena of taking the words too literally. Only taking their pragmatic environment into account, can translators get standard and accurate public signs.

Chinglish Translation

In the process of learning English, Chinese English learners are often affected by the negative transfer of their mother tongue. Although such Chinese English as “long time no see” has been accepted internationally, most Chinglish belongs to expression errors, resulting in many misunderstandings and ambiguities, and the English translation of Chinese public signs has no exception. For example, the suggestive public sign of a scenic spot, “小心地滑(Xiao Xin Di Hua)”, is translated as “slip carefully”, which makes foreigners confused. It is more appropriate to translate it here as “Watch Your Steps”. In addition, the suggestive public sign such as “五讲四美三热爱(Wu Jiang Si Mei San Re Ai) advocated by China is translated into “we advocate: Five stress, Four beauties and Three loves” in some public places. Five stresses refer to stress on civilization, etiquette, hygiene, order and morality. Four points of beauty refer to beauty of mind, beauty of language, beauty of behavior and beauty of environment. Three love refer to love of motherland, love of socialism and love of the Communist Party of China. Therefore, its English translation is “The movement of “five stresses, four points of beauty and three loves”, which plays an important role in a nation’s cultural output and cultural charm. Thus, in the English translation of Chinese public signs, translators should ensure that translation should try to avoid being influenced by Chinglish and make the expression more native, so as to avoid misunderstanding by international friends due to Chinglish.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION STRATEGIES OF CHINESE PUBLIC SIGNS

Avoid Low-level Errors and Strive for Standardization

Firstly, in view of the pure language problems such as spelling errors and Chinese pinyin annotation in the English translation of Chinese public signs, translators should pay attention to details, not only focus on the translation of each sentence, but also ensure that each word is written with authentic English expression. While the English translation of some indicative public signs, such as “春熙路, (Chunxi Lu) and “长安街(Chang’an Jie)”, can be translated into Chunxi Road and Chang’an Street by Chinese pinyin annotation plus English words. This kind of English translation is only applicable to Chinese public signs such as place names. Therefore, the translation of public signs should be standardized as much as possible to avoid negative impact on a scenic spot, city or country due to some low-level errors.

Be Accurate and Concise

The subject and object of Chinese public signs are integrated. Many Chinese public signs have the same number of words, neat structure, and harmonious rhythm, pay attention to rhetoric and advocate aesthetics, which are often manifested in the use of various techniques such as pun, duality, metaphor, metonymy, personification and parallelism. While the subject and object of English public signs are separated, focusing on the accuracy of text information without too much requirements in form [9]. Therefore, when translating Chinese public signs into English, translators should follow the translation rules of English public signs as much as possible. For example, in a suggestive Chinese public sign, “小草微微笑, 请您走便道 (Xiao Cao Wei Wei Xiao, Qing Nin Zou Bian Dao) does not need to be translated in this anthropomorphic language, but “Keep off the grass” is more concise and clear. In addition, the English translation of Chinese public signs should avoid using complex sentences as much as possible, and most of them are imperative sentences that omit the subject. The author found that in Kanas tourist attraction in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, a mandatory Chinese public sign “请勿下水, 禁止游泳(Qing Wu Xia Shui, Jin Zhi You Yong)” is translated into both “It is forbidden to enter the water or swim” and “No Swimming in Water”. In order to avoid confusion in the English translation of Chinese public signs in the scenic spot, the same translation should be adopted, and according to the above-mentioned English translation strategies of Chinese public signs, the latter one is more appropriate here because of conciseness.

Follow International Practice and Strive for Consistency

Many scholars advocate “bringism” in the English translation of Chinese public signs. Indeed, directly quoting international public signs is more in line with the reading habits of international friends, which is a good translation strategy. To a great extent, the English translation of Chinese public signs is to help foreign friends quickly obtain accurate and effective information, so international standards and practices should be adopted in the English translation as far as possible. For example, “男士止步(Nan Shi Zhi Bu)” can be translated into “Only Ladies” and “油漆未干 (You Qi Wei Gan)” can be translated into “Wet Paint”. Moreover, the suggestive Chinese public sign “贵重物品, 请随身携带(Gui Zhong Wu Pin, Qing Sui Shen Xie Dai)” on the bus should be translated into “Please don’t leave valuables unattended”, rather than “Valuables things, take it with you” [10]. Convention is something that people have established through long social practice; translators should try to follow it in the English translation of Chinese public signs.

Avoid Chinglish Expression and Strive to Be True to the Original Text

As mentioned above, Chinglish is a major reason for the nonstandard English translation of Chinese public signs. The significant differences between Chinese and Western cultures make translators unconsciously add ‘Chinese characteristics’ in the translation process. In cross-cultural translation, the first thing is to understand the cultural traditions and idiomatic expressions of the target language, so as to avoid the ridiculous Chinglish translation of “Good Good Study, Day Day Up (好好学习, 天天向上)”, and the standardized translation is “Study hard and make progress every day”. To avoid Chinglish expression, translators should deeply understand the culture of the target language and understand the differences between source language and target language, so as to be faithful to the original text and translate a concise, clear and functional translation.

CONCLUSION

Public signs, especially bilingual public signs, play important roles in public places, such as prompt, guidance and notification, and provide convenience to different people. As a special practical style, there are also various nonstandard phenomena in its English translation. In order to solve the problems of nonstandard phenomena in the English translation of Chinese public signs, this paper gives corresponding translation strategies, that is, translators should not only consider the differences between English and Chinese wording and language use, but also explore the differences between English and Chinese ways of thinking. Only in this way, can translators really play the role of public signs, better serve the public, especially international friends in China, and establish China’s international image.

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