Translation Methods of Chinese Public Signs

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Abstract

Globalization brings more and more foreigners to China, so it becomes necessary to translate the Chinese public signs into English. The public signs perform various functions. The translation of them should be based on the functions. This paper puts forward some methods of translating Chinese public signs into English.

Keywords: public signs; functions of public signs; translation methods of public signs

1 INTRODUCTION

With the accelerated process of globalization, China has attracted more and more overseas visitors to its beautiful land and time-honored history and culture. Public signs, performing functions of directing, prompting, restricting, and compelling, play a significant role in guiding foreigners to live and tour in China more comfortably and conveniently. However, the English public signs in big cities, translated from their Chinese counterparts, are far from being desirable and have caused great inconvenience and even troubles for foreign tourists.

2 Study of public signs in China

In recent years, many scholars in China show great interest in the English translation of the public signs. By the end of February in 2017, there have been almost 64,223 results with key words as “public signs”. The English translation of the public signs has already been researched from different perspectives. Some scholars focus such information about the public sign as the definition, the functions, the characteristics, the language style and some problems or errors in the current English translation of the public signs and then put forward some principles, strategies or procedures on the English translation of the public signs in practice. Dai Zongxian and Lv Hefa (2005), took London, the host city of 2012 Olympic Games as a sample and took a close look at the functional features of public signs as well as their most prominent linguistic characteristics with a conclusion that back translation is the approach that the translators ought to adopt in the English translation of signs in public places. Yang Fang (2006) thought that the English mistranslations of Beijing’s public signs stemmed from the unequal amount of illocutionary force of target language and source language, which led to the failure of communication. Huang Jianlin (2016) dealt with public signs by analyzing the problems in public signs.

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3 Public signs in China

3.1 Definition of public signs

In 2002, the study of public sign translation, as a research project got funded in Beijing Second Foreign Language Institute; and the research center was established immediately as a term was formally used. But as for the definition of public signs, scholarly works have bulks of definitions of public signs. Dai Zongxian and Lv Hefa (2005, 38) proposed that public signs refer to the language or picture information related to people’s life, production, study and ecology and are open to the public. Also, as the study of the linguistic landscape in western countries, the public signs have been defined as follows:

The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration. The linguistic landscape of a territory can serve two basic functions: an information function and a symbolic function. (Landry and Bourhis, 25)

3.2 Functional features of Chinese public signs

Public signs are applied in every aspect of daily life, and they directly influence our lives. Public signs belong to a type of practical texts with different functions which can fall into four categories: directing, prompting, restricting and compelling.

3.2.1 Directing

Public signs of this kind offer only service or detailed information with no restrictive or compulsory meanings. These signs can be seen everywhere in public places. For example:

Lost and Found
Information
Public Toilet
Exit
Ticket Office

These public signs do not necessarily require the public to take any particular actions. They only provide the public with some useful information that they might need, for example, they tell the readers what he or she is reading is used for.

3.2.2 Prompting

Public signs of this kind are widely used to remind people to pay attention to a certain fact before they take any action. They mainly aim at mobilizing people to move and act, serving as a reminder in a warning tone in most situations. For instance:

Reserved
Full Booked
Sold Out
Wet Paint
Explosives

3.2.3 Restricting

Public signs of restricting show restrictions, constraints or requirements to relevant people. Take the following signs for example:
Stand in Line
Staff Only
Keep Right
Ticket Only
Handicapped Only

Usually these signs with this function give demands and restrictions to the relevant addressees who are expected to pay attention to their behaviors and obey public rules.

3.2.4 Compelling

Public signs of compelling refer to the kind of public signs that force the public to take certain actions without any possibility of consultation or compromise. The choice of words is often imperative with negative words like “No”, “Do not”, “Forbidden”, etc. Examples are as follows:

No Smoking
Don’t Walk
No Photography
No Littering
Don’t Touch Exhibits

Typically this kind of public signs is written in a straightforward way to show warnings or forces to make sure that the information can be accepted. And these public signs are very important in creating a more disciplined and peaceful society by restricting people’s actions. The public must obey the order if they do not want to get into trouble.

4. Translation methods of public signs in China

4.1 Linguistic features of public signs

Public signs with the functions of directing, prompting, restricting, and compelling are different from other texts. The different functions directly result in the differences of language style and mood in the English translation of the public signs. Generally speaking, the linguistic features of public signs in China are simple usually with several Chinese characters. For example, “非请勿入” and “禁止攀爬” are very short expressions. When translating these signs, attentions should be paid to their linguistic features.

4.2 Translation methods of public signs in China

4.2.1. The use of nouns, imperative phrases or gerunds

When expressing the public signs of directing, that is, the “static” indication, nouns and phrases are often used in them to reflect special information directly about service, indication or instruction and bring concrete content by simple forms. Here are some examples:

Shopping Mall
Conference Room
Food and Beverage
Toll Gate
Business Center
4.2.2 The use of abbreviations

A large number of abbreviations are used very often in public places. The reason is that the public are so familiar with the abbreviations that the meanings of them are clear and definite. And there is no need to write the full form. At the same time, it can save a lot of space and effort. For example:

- CCTV
- DDD
- P
- WC
- ENT Department
- WTO

4.2.3 The use of standard and normal phrases

Public signs, as the name suggests, are mainly shown to the public, especially for English readers. Therefore, the language of public signs is quite different from other types of language. Considering the knowledge of public, the use of uncommon words, the old saying, slang and terminology is avoided in public signs. For instance:

- Foreign Exchange
- Domestic Arrivals
- Domestic Departures
- Pay in Cash
- Private Parking
- Duty Free Shop
- Stock Exchange

4.2.4 The use of present tense

Generally speaking, public signs give the instructions, tips and limits of actual behaviors of public in various areas to make them pay attention to their present behaviors. So in most cases, the present tense is used widely in the English translation of the public signs. Here are some examples:

- Don’t Drive When Tired
- Fasten Your Seat Belt
- Give Way to Buses
- THIS TOILET IS OPEN DAILY 7:00 AM—7:00 PM 7 DAYS PER WEEK

4.2.5 The use of imperatives

Public signs are shown to the public who go out or travel in a hurry for their business. Usually people are not willing to spend time reading the public signs carefully. And too long public signs are too difficult for the readers to grasp the idea quickly. Furthermore, most public signs are written on those small billboards without much room. Therefore, in order to save readers’ time and make the public signs to the point, a number of imperatives are frequently used in the public signs. The following are some examples:

- Keep Off the Grass
- Do Not Disturb
- Beware of Pedestrians
4.2.6 The use of the combination of words and symbols

Actually, what come into the eye of the public in public places are those public signs which are composed of words and pictures. The pictures, as the complement and visual explanation of the public signs, will make them eye-catching and much easier to understand. And maybe they are convenient for the people with language barriers. There are two examples:

No parking! 🚗
No entrance! ⛔️

5 CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, public signs are mainly characterized by their briefness. However, in our daily life, there still exist translation problems and errors in the English translation of the public signs. In general, attention should be paid to the function of the public signs in the translation of them from Chinese into English.

References