Brief Study on Countermeasures in Chinese-English Translation of Public Signs: from an Aesthetical Perspective

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Abstract. Public signs are a critical part of social terms, with the increasingly-deepening Reform and Opening Up and frequent bilateral exchanges between China and foreign countries, China plays a very important role in the international societies, which highlights the significance of Chinese-English (C-E) translation of public signs. C-E translation of public signs embraces the conversion of two different languages and two different cultures, not only to achieve the language equivalence, cultural equivalence, but also to enhance the understandability and the readability of C-E translation of public signs. However, apart from improper language, distorted language, incompatible language, the errors caused by distortion of aesthetics have seriously affected China’s image. This thesis illustrated the translation countermeasures of public signs from an aesthetical perspective based on the examples.

1. Introduction
With the rapid progress of communication between China and foreign countries, C-E translation becomes more important to public signs language. To serve convenience for foreign friends coming far away, and spread our cultures to the outside world, public signs in English are applied in many public places of cities. However, the mistakes and errors in English translations of public signs as the “City Card” appear time and again, causing inconveniences and misunderstandings to foreigners. Thus, it is high time that translators analyzed the problems and found out the countermeasures based on the current situation of C-E translation of public signs. Searching for the standard and optimized form of translation of public signs would be beneficial for our city’s constructions.

2. The Definition and Characteristics of Public Signs
2.1 The Definition of Public Signs
What is public sign? The definition in Modern Chinese Dictionary is it is as a symbol of brand, which has text, pattern on it. [1] We can infer by this definition that public sign includes slogan, sign and placard in a broad sense, and its purpose encompasses a wide range of service. It can be either information or warning, also used for commercial or public welfare advertisement.

2.2 The Characteristics of Public Signs
The features of sign language can be summed up in five points: concise, conventional, consistent, conspicuous, and convenient.[2] Sign language translation is different from general English translation; it is a special type of writing. The famous English translator Peter Newmark in his book A Textbook of Translation says that all the text is divided into three kinds of language: expressive text, information text, vocative text.[3] Vocative text emphasizes the readers as the center with its main purpose being to call people for action, thinking or feeling. In fact, it is in the form of text requirements to react.[4] The most direct purpose of public signs are to arouse attention and convey information to the readers so as to appeal the readers to take action and follow the instructions. Hence, public signs belong to vocative text. In the process of public signs translation, translators not only need to understand the characteristics of the public signs, but also need to know text type of public signs to improve the quality of translation.
3. The Aesthetic Translation Strategies and Countermeasures of Public Signs

3.1 The Distortion of Aesthetics

Although scholars have put forward kinds of problems in the public signs, like the improper language, the distorted language, and the incompatible language, another main mistake is the distortion of aesthetics, which will be discussed in the followings.

Excellent public signs should not only convey the message of the source text, but also to continue and reproduce its aesthetic effect. However, in practice, the aesthetical value of the source text is difficult to retain in target text.

Take a welfare advertisement of Macao as example: the author translates “减废回收最环保，污者自费齐赞好” into ‘Reducing and Retrieving Wastes Are Most Environmentally Protective, Making The Polluters Pay Is Praised by All’. The source text is concise, clear, and has a very rich sense of rhythm; however, this target text completely violates the principle of concise and rhythm. Take another example, the author translates “小草有生命，脚下请留情” into “Little Grass Has Life, Please Watch Your Step”. The source text has a strong emotional color; unfortunately, the translator translated it as the typical Chinese style English—it is not in conformity with the English expression habits, and lost the beauty of the original work.[5] Still another example, “桂林山水甲天下” is translated into “Guilin landscape tops elsewhere”. This translation is not only typical but also lacking in the beauty of the source text. The solution to the above problems will be discussed in the following.

3.2 Aesthetic Translation Strategy and Countermeasures

The translation of public signs should not only convey the literal meaning, but also combine it with connotations and make appropriate adjustments to endow public signs with aesthetic value. From the perspective of aesthetics, the public signs are characterized by refined language, sonorous voice, fluent rhyme, which makes them more readable and easier to remember and spread.

In public signs translation practice, translators can follow the three principles to improve and to reproduce the aesthetics of the translation.

3.3 Aesthetic Translation Countermeasures

3.3.1 The Iconicity Principle

According to a study of the iconicity of language classification conducted by Wang Ying, the iconicity principle is decomposed into the five aspects, including quantity iconicity, time iconicity, space iconicity, psychological iconicity, and image iconicity.[6] The attributes of the translation of the original information are reflected in the five aspects of self-conscious image, which could reproduce the formal beauty of the original work.

e.g. 1

Original text: “减废回收最环保，污者自费齐赞好”
Translation text: Reduce Wastes, Make Polluters Pay
Analysis: This translation not only reflects the beauty of simplicity and achieves the quantity iconicity of the source text but also rhymes with ‘pay’.

e.g. 2

Original text: “严是爱，松是害”
Translation text: To be strict is to love, to be lenient is to harm
Analysis: In the translation, ‘strict’ and ‘lenient’, ‘love’ and ‘harm’ conform to the the source text both in meaning and syllabus, which makes a catchy rhyme.

e.g. 3

Original text: “同一个世界，同一个梦想”
Translation text: One world, one dream
Analysis: The syntactic and rhetorical features of the source text are perfectly conveyed by the correspondence in the quantity of words between the target text and the source text.
3.3.2 The Creation Principle

The beauty of creation is precious in art. Public signs translation is an art, thus creating principle is applicable to the public signs translation. Professor Xu Jun also holds that a good translation should be endowed with new look, new vitality, and new life to adapt to new cultures and readers in the new form. Following the principle of creation can make up for the loss of aesthetic information caused by interlingual transformation in public sign translation.

e.g. 1
Original text: “来也匆匆，去也冲冲”
Translation text: Come with a rush, Go with a flush
Analysis: This translation by senior translator Wang Yongtai creates a perfect combination of similarity both in shape and in spirit by means of phonetic pun, becoming vivid and humorous.

e.g. 2
Original text: “珍爱生命，远离毒品”
Translation text: Yes to life, no to drugs
Analysis: The translation substitutes ‘yes’ and ‘no’ for the verbs in the source text to express the choice of life and rejection of drugs, thus creating the beauty in a new way.

e.g. 3
Original text: “小草有生命，脚下请留情”
Translation text: Please give me a chance to grow.
Analysis: This translation personifies the grass by using the word ‘grow’, which conforms to “有生命” in the source text, thereby, strengthening the appeal.

3.3.3 The Optimization Principle

The translators should try their best to make use of the advantage of the target language and choose the most appropriate form of expression in target language so as to make the translation better-memorized and influential.

e.g. 1
Original text: “桂林山水甲天下”
Translation text: East or west, Guilin is best
Analysis: This translation by Wu Weixiong is a typical example of practicing the optimization principle. By imitating the well-known proverb ‘East or west, home is best’, this translation not only accords with the source text in meaning but also reinforce the message to advertise the city.

e.g. 2
Original text: “晚到总比完蛋好”（Traffic Warning Sign）
Translation text: Better late than the late
Analysis: The translation achieves its aesthetical value by imitating the well-known proverb ‘better late than never’ and using the semantic puns of ‘late’ to warn drivers, which leaves it more humorous and easier to remember.

4. Conclusion

The language competence of a country has become an important part of national soft power in the modern society, and the foreign language service ability of urban public signs embodies critically the image a nation. In view of the aesthetic value of public signs, the translation of public signs should not merely be confined to the transmission of communicative content. Translators should break through the focus in traditional study on the dialogism of public signs and use iconicity principle, creation principle and optimization principle and other concrete countermeasures so as to make China's language, culture and national image better displayed and understood in the world.

References


