

Discussion on the Translation Strategies of Public Signs

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Abstract: Signage is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a cultural image. Public signs refer to signage used in public places, such as road signs, warning signs, and park signs. These signs play an important role in ensuring public safety and maintaining social order. However, due to cultural and linguistic differences, public signs are prone to mistranslation during the process of internationalization and cross-cultural communication, which may pose a threat to public safety and health, and even affect cultural dissemination and exchange. Therefore, in translating public signs, the translator should first understand the language habits and cultural characteristics of the target country. Secondly, during the translation process, some translation strategies should be applied to help readers better understand its meaning. This paper analyzes the current situation of public sign translation, collects and discusses some mistranslated cases, and provides corresponding translation strategies to help readers better understand the cultural differences and overcome the language barriers, thus promoting globalization and cross-cultural exchange and providing guidance for future translation practice.

1. Introduction

Lv Hefa noted that public signs are “words and graphic information that are publicly and in the face of the public, such as notices, instructions, prompts, displays, warnings and marks, which are closely related to their life, production, ecology and livelihood”^[1]. Public signage is a type of sign used in public places, public affairs, public facilities or public services. It is usually composed of several short, powerful, easy-to-understand and memorable words or phrases, designed to convey certain information, rules, safety tips, prohibitions or reminders. The main function of public signs is to help people better understand and comply with the rules and requirements of public places, maintain social order and public, ensure the normal use of public facilities, and enhance the quality and efficiency of public services. As an indispensable part of modern social life, public signs are often used in the fields of transportation, safety, environmental protection, culture, education and health. With frequent cross-cultural communication activities, the application of “bilingual” signs in China is increasing day by day, even to the extent of flooding in many coastal cities. The main purpose of setting up “bilingual” signs is to facilitate the daily life of foreign friends, provide convenience for their actions such as clothing, food, housing, transportation, and shopping, and

publicize policies to avoid cultural conflicts. However, unfortunately, the more widely bilingual signage is used, the more frequent language errors occur, many of which have reached an unbearable level. Therefore, it is particularly necessary to analyze the mistranslation of public signs.

Public signage is an important way of conveying public information, and the accuracy and clarity of its translation directly affects the effectiveness of information transmission. Luo Xuanmin and Mi Yaning proposed that public sign translation plays a very important role, which is not only related to the investment environment of a country, but also related to the image of a city ^[2]. From a translation perspective, the study of mistranslations in public signs has several implications. Firstly, it can improve the translation ability and professional quality of translators. Public sign translation requires professional knowledge and relative translation skills. The study of mistranslations in public signs can help translators better grasp translation methods and techniques, thereby improving the quality and efficiency of translation. Secondly, it can enhance the understanding and recognition of language and promote cross-cultural communication. Public signs involve different languages and cultural backgrounds, so it is necessary to have a deep understanding of their correct translation. The study of mistranslation in public signage can help translators to better understand the linguistic expressions and cultural connotations under different cultural backgrounds, so as to improve the accuracy and fluency of translation. This paper analyzes the current situation of public sign translation, enumerates typical error cases, and puts forward the corresponding translation strategies, so as to provide reference for public sign translation in the future and improve cross-cultural communication.

2. The Types of Public Signs

The main characteristics of public signs include the following aspects. First, it is concise and clear. Public signs usually consist of a few short, powerful, easy-to-understand, and memorable words or phrases. Second, it is standardized and uniform. The design of public signs needs to follow certain norms and standards to ensure its uniformity and recognizability. Third, it is easy to identify. The application of public signs needs to consider people's identification abilities and habits to ensure its ease of recognition and understanding. Forth, it is comprehensive and detailed. Public signs need to cover various situations and scenarios to ensure its comprehensiveness and meticulousness in reminding and guiding people. Fifth, it is practical and effective. The design and application of public signs need to consider its practicality and effectiveness to ensure that it can truly play a role in reminding, guiding and warning.

According to the above characteristics, public signs can be divided into four categories: indicative signage, informative signage, restrictive signage, and mandatory signage. Indicative signage provides comprehensive information services to its communicative objects, aiming to provide relevant information or guidance to the public, such as inquiry services or ticket counters. Informative signage serves to prompt or inform its communicative objects, allowing them to make arrangements according to the prompt's content. It has a wide range of uses, such as "Parking Lot Full" or "Reach Out For Water". Restrictive signage limits or constrains the behavior of relevant communicative objects, standardizing their behavior according to its communicative intention. However, its directive tone is weak, leaving more room for communicative objects to choose to obey or refuse. It has a straightforward language application, such as "Customers Stop Here" or "Keep Quiet". Mandatory signage aims to require relevant communicative objects to take or not take certain actions in a mandatory way. Its directive tone is strong, with direct, forceful language that does not allow communicative objects to choose. Examples include "No Smoking" and "No Dangerous Goods Allowed in the Station". Signage is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a cultural image. Zhao Xiang believed that when we use Chinese and English signs, sometimes,

communication difficulties may appear due to cultural differences^[3]. Xue Hongguo pointed out that translators should understand the cultural differences between the source language and the target language, own strong cross-cultural communication ability, so as to avoid misinterpreting the culture reflected in language^[4]. Sun Xiaochun proposed that public signs are a special language genre with its unique pragmatic attributes, and all countries have their own pragmatic habits^[5]. Although some signage is very similar internationally, such as traffic signage, there are still some differences in signage between different countries. Therefore, to translate signage well, it is necessary to understand the differences in language habits and cultural characteristics of the target language.

3. The Present Situation of Public Sign Translation

Currently, due to differences in language and culture, mistranslations often occur in public signs, resulting in inconsistencies or ambiguities between the translated meaning and the original meaning. In severe cases, it may even affect public safety and social order. Common mistranslation phenomenon include vocabulary errors, grammatical errors, semantic errors, and cultural misunderstandings. Solutions include strengthening the professional quality and cautious attitude of translators, assisting translation with technical means, and paying attention to cultural and contextual backgrounds. In addition, signage serves as a guide for foreign visitors, but frequent mistranslations in public signs can easily mislead others and hinder the output of our culture overseas. Chen Xiaowei noted that public sign translation has multi-faceted social value, including the value of social public information service, and the value of social image shaping and cultural dissemination^[6]. Therefore, it is particularly important to grasp relative translation strategies to make the translation standardized and professionalized, thus improving translation quality and efficiency.

During the translation process of public signs, there have been many mismatches, typical of which is misunderstanding. Example 1, the translation of “Hui Zhang Shi” is “It will grow room”, which is a direct translation of “a room that will grow”. Obviously, this translation version does not convey the intended meaning of the original text, which may cause confusion for foreign readers. In addition, “Shi” here refers to “meeting room”. Using “office” would be more formal. Therefore, the correct translation should be “The Chairman’s Office”. Example 2 is “You Dian Wei Xian”, which was translated as “A bit dangerous”. Readers cannot understand the logic behind this translation. It is possible that the translator mistakenly typed the word and did not go through rigorous proofreading. The correct translation should be “DANGER”, which clearly conveys the sense of danger to readers. Translation of domestic hospital signs has always been a hotspot for low-quality translation. Example 3, the translation of “Nei Yi Zhen Qu” is “Within a Jane District”, which seems absurd to readers. It should refer to the “No.1 Consulting Area” in the internal medicine department. Translators can simply translate it as “No.1 Consulting Area”. Example 4, “Gu San Ke” is translated as “Bone is sorted”, which means “bones are sorted and organized”. The correct translation should be “No.3 Orthopedics Department”. Obviously, all of the above are typical misunderstandings of signage. Geng Xiaochao and He Weiwei pointed out that public sign translation must be faithful to the context of the original text, and it must not be translated indiscriminately^[6]. What’s more, Zhao Xiang wrote that English translation of public signs should not only be based on the literal meaning of the Chinese translation^[7]. In conclusion, the translator needs to master and adopt certain translation strategies, and carefully proofread after translation.

4. Translation Strategies of Public Signs

Of course, there are also some high-quality signage translations in China, because translators not only consider cultural differences and other factors but also adopt certain translation strategies, which are worth learning. Bian Zhengdong once said that in order to achieve the translatability of

public signs, translators can adjust the expression of cultural information according to the subject matter and genre of the original work as well as the purpose and function of the translation [8]. Through a contrastive analysis of the functional meanings and linguistic features of Chinese and English public signs, Yuan Weiliang put forward some corresponding communicative translation strategies, such as deletion and simplification, habitual expression, convention and vulgarity, stylized translation, negative writing and non-translation [9]. In addition, Zhang Ge wrote that Skopos theory, domestication and foreignization, ecological translatology and other related theories have also been applied to public sign translation [10]. Jin Jing pointed out that object texts such as public signs may not be untranslatable, but if parallel texts can be replaced with the same functions, it may be a better choice. Because they can better maintain the consistency of the cognitive context with the audience in the target language context, and better meet the demands and cognitive expectations of the audience [11].

Public sign translation should adhere to the following principles. First, keep it simple: public signs usually consist of several words or phrases that are short, powerful, easy to understand and memorize. Keep the translation concise and clear, and try not to add unnecessary content. Second, keep it accurate: the content of public signs needs to be translated accurately and must not be ambiguous or misleading. Third, maintain standardization: the design and use of public signs need to follow certain norms and standards, and the corresponding translation should also be standardized, thus not deviating from the style of the original text. Fourth, take into account cultural differences: the application of public signs need to take into account local cultural differences, and the translation should be adjusted according to actual situation to make it conform to local culture and customs. Fifth, make the translation short and easy to remember: the main function of public signs is to convey certain messages, rules, safety tips, prohibited items or reminders. Therefore, it should be as short and memorable as possible. According to the four different types of signage, namely indicative, informative, restrictive, and mandatory signage, different translation strategies can be adopted in translation such as domestication and foreignization.

Indicative signage is intended to provide guidance and services to people, such as example 5, the translation of “Jin Ji Chu Kou” is “Emergency Exit”. The translator used literal translation method under the guidance of foreignization, which means that the content and form of the original text are preserved in translation when the language conditions permit. The translation is not only concise and clear but also easy to understand. Example 6, the translation of “Lai Bin Deng Ji” is “Registration”. Instead of translating word by word, the translator handled it flexibly and adopted omission strategy to directly translate it into one word, leaving no doubt on the reader’s mind.

Informative signage is intended to provide people with prompts or information, such as example 7, the translation of “Zheng Zai Wei Xiu” is “Repairs in Progress”. The translator did not adopt a literal translation but transformed the verb “repair” into a noun and used inversion to make it more understandable for foreign friends. Example 8, the translation of “Shen Shou Chu Shui” is “Automatic Tap” instead of a rigid translation of “Reach out of the water”. The translator applied free translation method on the basis of domestication, just like a native speaker, thus helping readers better understand the translation and enhancing the readability and appreciation of it.

Restrictive signage is intended to restrict people’s behaviors, and the imperative tone is relatively weak without offense. Example 9, the translation of “You Ke Zhi Bu” is “No Visitors”. Instead of using literal translation, the translator adopted free translation method under the guidance of domestication and transformed the verb into a negative form, which is in line with English expressions. Example 10, the translation of “Bao Chi An Jing” is “Quiet Please”. The translator also applied free translation method, choosing “Please” instead of translating the verb into “Keep”, making it concise and clear.

Mandatory signage is intended to force people to take certain actions, and the imperative tone is stronger. Example 11, the translation of “Qing Wu Luan Reng Za Wu” is “No Littering”. The translator’s approach here is still based on domestication strategy, focusing on the verb to highlight the action and warning of the signage. Example 12, the translation of “Qing Wu Chu Mo” is “Don’t

Touch”. The translator applied literal translation method under the guidance of foreignization, focusing on the verb to express the seriousness and authority of prohibiting the action.

Public sign translation not only requires accurate understanding of language, but also needs to consider factors such as culture, customs, and social background. Therefore, as for public sign translation, translators should pay attention to the following points. Firstly, maintain simplicity in language to make the translation easy to understand and remember. Secondly, convey the main information of signage accurately during translation, and avoid ambiguity or misleading. Thirdly, adjust the word order appropriately according to local culture and customs to make it consistent with local habits. Furthermore, consider social background and practical needs during translation, making it more practical and effective. Finally, maintain the standardization and conformity of the original design and style. Adhering to these guidelines will promote translation effect and improve the effectiveness and quality of signage comprehension, memory, and application.

5. Conclusion

On the basis of the existing research, this paper expounds the current situation of public sign translation, analyzes the typical cases of mistranslation, discusses the translation norms of public signs, and puts forward the corresponding translation strategies. The social function of public signs determines that the translation must fundamentally follow the basic principle of audience orientation and respect the language habits of English. The study of mistranslations in public signage is of great significance for improving translators’ translation ability and professional quality, strengthening their understanding of language and culture, and promoting cross-cultural communication. The accurate communication of public signs is not a simple conversion translation, but provides accurate, highly sensitive, frequency and density appropriate sign information services according to the internationalization degree of location and subject composition of translation.

Public sign translation must conform to the pragmatic principle of the target language and attach importance to its pragmatic effect. In addition, signage translation is the communication between people of different languages and cultures. The translation should not only reflect the intention of the original author, but also reflect the possible reaction of the recipient, and why the response was made in that context. To achieve the above goals, translators must master enough knowledge of the two languages, understand the differences between the two cultures, and adopt appropriate translation strategies to reduce reader’s difficulties in understanding.

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