

Proposals to Improve the Accuracy of Bilingual Public Signs

LES PROPOSITIONS VISANT A AMELIORER LA PRECISION D’AFFICHAGE DES SIGNES BILINGUE EN PUBLIC

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Abstract

Accurate translation of bilingual public signs not only provides foreign visitors necessary information in life but also is an essential symbol of internationalization of the city. However, because of the lack of competence of the translator, cultural differences and other factors, it is not an easy job to translate the public signs correctly. As a consequence, there are still many noticeable problems in public signs translation. This paper attempts to summarize some frequent errors found in sign translation and the possible causes of these mistranslations and comes up with some strategies for the proper translation for bilingual public signs.

Key words: Public sign; Translation; Mistranslation; Strategies

Résumé

Une traduction fidèle d’affichage public bilingue fournit non seulement aux visiteurs étrangers les informations nécessaires dans la vie mais c’est aussi un symbole essentiel de l’internationalisation de la ville. Toutefois, en raison du manque de compétence du traducteur, les différences culturelles et d’autres facteurs, il n’est pas une tâche facile à traduire les signes publics correctement. En conséquence, il y a encore de nombreux problèmes notablement dans la traduction des signes public. Ce document tente de résumer quelques erreurs fréquentes trouvées dans la traduction des signes et des causes possibles de ces erreurs de traduction et arrive avec quelques stratégies pour la traduction correcte des signes

bilingues publics.

Mots clés: Signe public; Traduction; Contresens; Stratégies

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INTRODUCTION

With more people from overseas travelling, working or studying in China, English, which is always regarded as a widely-spoken language, can be seen and read in almost everywhere in China and the significance of providing English public signs in big cities of China has become increasingly prominent. These signs are not only a great help for the foreigners who cannot understand Chinese to get the information they need but also they are regarded as a symbol of a city’s internationalization degree. As a matter of fact, what the translation of public signs represents is a city or a country’s style, image, as well as cultural and educational level. However, many errors still exist in the present bilingual public signs. Some improper or wrong English translations of the public signs arising from linguistic, pragmatic failures or culture differences will cause great inconvenience to the foreign readers, leaving with them an unfavorable impression of the city or the whole nation.

SOME FREQUENT ERRORS IN THE TRANSLATION OF PUBLIC SIGNS AND COMMON CAUSES

If you are attentive enough when walking along the

streets in the city we live, when in stores, parks, hotels etc., it's not difficult to find many improper or incorrect translations of public signs in many public places. These mistranslated public signs are just extremely embarrassing when a foreigner encounters them.

Some public signs are presented in both Chinese and English, but these "English" signs are meaningless and empty to the foreigners because they are actually Chinese Pinyin; sometimes, the translations of naming of roads, buildings, companies are inconsistent, which makes it more inconvenient and confusing to the foreign visitors; numerous spelling mistakes of public signs, which involve wrong spelling of a word or missing of one or more letters in a word, can be easily found; unnecessary and surplus words or expressions cause redundancy in translation and deviations in meaning and difficulties in understanding; some translation errors can totally change the message and then distorted intention will emerge; Chinglish, a phenomenon existing commonly in every city in China, offers a humorous and insightful look at the misuses of the English language in Chinese public signs, instruction of products, and advertising; a mass of grammatical mistakes in the translation of public signs can be easily found everywhere around us, which are not as noticeable as spelling errors or Chinglish, but they are still disturbing and annoying; in some cases, the word that is improperly chosen by translators while deciding on the wording and making their considered choices in the process of translation usually causes confusion, ambiguity or misunderstanding because a Chinese word may have several counterparts with quite similar meanings in English; last but not least, translation mistakes on the cultural level may on the one hand make foreigners feel they are offended in terms of their customs, beliefs and faith; on the other hand, some other signs baring characteristics of Chinese culture are translated literally without taking account of the cultural differences, which may cause misunderstanding and barricade the foreigners from understanding Chinese culture.

The root causes for these mistranslations are various. Above all, the translator is the essential mediator between the source language and the target language, so they are the decisive factor that can determine whether a translation is good or not. Actually, it is estimated that most of the mistranslations of public signs are caused by the lack in the sense of responsibility or the incompetence on the part of translators.

From the perspective of the author, the translators' lack in the knowledge of public signs should also be taken into account. Public sign is a special type of text, and they have different contents and objects, so they may have some unique characteristics in common which are different from other types of text. The special and comprehensive functions give public signs their distinctive and unique features. Therefore, it will be necessary to have a good

grasp of proper features of public signs before dealing with the job of translating them.

Besides the part of the translator, outdated Chinese-English dictionaries and incorrect English textbooks are the causes of some mistranslations, including misspelling, sloppy translation and Chinglish. Some translators apply dictionary translation and translate Chinese to English word for word. Sometimes, the application of machine translation without post-editing results in a lot of improper even ridiculous translations of public signs. In addition, today's English-language publishers and teachers in China are passing on obsolete translations and incorrect rules of language to students. In turn, Chinglish gets duplicated across society, particularly now during today's period of rapid opening to the outside world and the widespread use of English. The resultant flood of Chinglish will perpetuate unless it is corrected now.

Translating cannot be simply regarded as the process of decoding information from the source language to the target language. It requires the translator to take cultural elements into consideration. However, people who come from different cultural backgrounds may have different conceptions on the aesthetics of language. Chinese writers prefer to write abstractly with gorgeous expressions, whereas, the conception on aesthetics is quite different in terms of English language. In English, people tend to express what they intend to say in a concrete and objective way. Therefore, in the English expression of the same public sign, the translator should utilize simpler form and be more objective or direct in language style.

Different cultural values can also lead to problems in the translation of public signs. For translators, translation is a complicated and painstaking activity which involves the comparison of the two languages and two cultures, and they sometimes may encounter great cultural barriers and difficulties. Likewise, without intensive understanding of the cultural information connoted in words or concepts, the translator would find it tough or even impossible to accomplish the translation task. Consequently, the mistranslations by non-native translators concerning lack of inclusion of native English culture in the translation or editing process emerge.

These above-mentioned points are the main problems found in the translation of public signs in the city the author lives. But in other cities, such translation problems are not uncommon to be found and reported. Therefore, these problematic bilingual signs ought to have aroused the public attention, especially for those related authorities who should actively take certain actions to solve the related problems.

SOME PROPOSALS TO IMPROVE THE ACCURACY OF BILINGUAL PUBLIC SIGNS

After a brief introduction of the frequent mistranslations and some causes, now we have a better awareness of the present situation of English translation of public signs. To translate Chinese public signs into English, this is the fundamental step towards solving the problem. The translation of public signs is a practical process. It is difficult to find a thorough solution that can completely solve the translation problems of public signs from source language to target language. But there exist some translation strategies often used in the translation of public sign expressions. We can find some as follows:

1) Avoid the Improper Utilization of “Pinyin”

The utilization of “Pinyin” is quite commonly seen in the translation, especially the translation of road signs. However, because of the abuse of “Pinyin”, the translation of road signs is the most problematic of all. For example, one who walks along the streets in Changchun may find the sign of “西康胡同” on a building is translated as “Xi Kang Hu Tong”. But on the road sign board, it is translated as “Xikang Alley”. It would be easy to imagine that foreign visitors may easily get lost because they may consider “Xi Kang Hu Tong” and “Xikang Alley” to be probably two different places. Other examples are “Dongbei Dianli Binguan”, “Ouya Chaoshi Liansuo Jishun Dian”, etc. The improper utilization of “pinyin” is an extremely lazy and irresponsible translation behavior. Foreigners cannot read Chinese Pinyin, so these public signs are actually not translated for them and of no help to them at all.

2) Use Standardized Words and Avoid Chinglish

Chinglish, described as “English with Chinese characteristics”, is one of the major problems in translation field which adversely affect the quality of bilingual public signs translation and the existence of these Chinglish signs have negative influences on China’s international image to the outside world. It is necessary to avoid Chinglish gradually and produce idiomatic English in the translation of public signs.

English is an independent language that does not depend on any other language, like Chinese, to exist. After it has been put into use for centuries, some of the words or the way of expression has become standardized and fixed. We cannot change or even create them in the way we want. At the same time, we have to avoid word-by-word translation which makes our translation like Chinese. Therefore, we have to find out the counterpart of English usage of the words, phrases or sometimes idiomatic expressions. Even if we may find some other similar expressions in Chinese, we should not use them arbitrarily since there is a commonly accepted way to express certain opinion in English.

In order to come up with the idiomatic translation of a public sign, not only should the translators think about its form and meaning, but also they should pay attention

to the acceptability of the translation. They cannot put them into the way we want and at the same time, they have to avoid word-by-word translation which makes the translation obscure and inconsistent with English linguistic rules or idiomatic expression, which cannot be accepted by English native speakers.

3) Pay Attention to the Features and Functions of Public Signs

Public sign is an applied text. As a particular type of pragmatic material, it manifests clear communicative features and functions. The translations of public signs into English not only require translators to know the generally used translation principles but also demand them to know the specific principles of translating public signs according to their characteristics and functions.

As we may have found some basic specifications that standardized Chinese version of public signs that may perform intended functions should at least meet, a good public sign should be clear and concise in its form and expression so as to achieve the most effective feedback at the shortest notice. The rule is applicable to both the creation and translation of public signs. English translations of public signs are also public signs in the target language. All the English public signs are provided to the foreigners who can acquire the necessary information they need. If the signs were complicated, some foreign visitors might misunderstand the intention or even not understand what they say. So the English version of public signs also should be simple, clear and direct so as to remove the target readers’ difficulties in reading and understanding them.

Therefore, we have to make sure that there is no rarely used word with which the target readers may not be familiar when we translate a Chinese public sign expression into English. Most of the public signs are expressed in a brief way and sometimes only a few words will be sufficient. We should not make the translation too complicated or redundant because public signs are just the texts that are supposed to offer the public with necessary and direct information.

4) Promote Cross-cultural Awareness

Some problems found in public sign translation result from the translators’ lack of cross-cultural awareness and bicultural knowledge. Compared with linguistic mistranslation, mistranslation on the cultural level, to some extent, is more intolerable to target readers. Linguistic mistranslation is usually the consequence of translators’ linguistic incompetence. However, translation mistakes on the cultural level may on the one hand make foreigners feel they are offended in terms of their customs, beliefs and faith; on the other hand, some other signs baring characteristics of Chinese culture are translated literally without taking account of the cultural differences, which may cause misunderstanding and barricade the

foreigners from understanding Chinese culture.

Therefore, mistranslation resulting from cultural ignorance is a problem that needs urgent attention and solution, or China will be regarded as a nation which is in the lack of cultural respect to other nations and at the same time these mistranslations may form a big impediment for other nations in the world to know Chinese culture better.

One of the most decisive factors determining the purpose and the effect of a translation is the target reader—the anticipant receiver in the target language and cultural background with communicative expectations and needs. Language, as we all know, is not an isolated phenomenon but an integral part of culture. Therefore, the necessity of considering the cultural values and customs of target language speaker should be taken into account. Hence, translators should keep the readers in mind and adopt the reader-centered principle so as to enable the foreigners to fully understand the translated public signs. The public sign will be a very good translation when it converts the source language and target language in this process which is to keep the information of the source language and cultural differences.

5) More Government Efforts are Required

It is not easy for some groups of linguistic scholars to solve the problem of the widespread wrong expressions in public signs by setting piles of rules. The translation of public signs should call more attention from the government as well because the quality of bilingual public signs is not only related to the lives of foreigners who come to visit or live in China, but it also concerns with the international image of the nation. It can be regarded as one of the important symbols indicating the political, economic, and cultural development of China. The government should actively undertake the social responsibility and set necessary rules and regulations to standardize the English translation of public signs.

At the same time, the public, especially those who engage in foreign languages, linguists, experts, scholars, English teachers or students should be aware of the situation and always take active part to find errors in the translations of public signs and correct them in time. The joint efforts of the government and all the educated citizens can effectively supervise the language environment in bilingual public signs.

SUMMARY

Due to the bilingual public signs' increasingly vital roles in tourism and public life, any misspelling, vagueness, ambiguity, or misconception will lead to negative consequences. At present, unfortunately, mistranslated public signs can be seen everywhere. Therefore the study of public signs and their translation becomes an urgent and important task. Public signs may just contain a few words. However, the Chinese-English translation of them is far from easy and more attention should be paid to it. It is thus rather urgent for the whole nation, including the government, professionals and the public to further joint efforts in bilingual sign translation by revising those problematic English public signs and purifying the language environment. There is still a long way to go. Only when public signs translation achieves the intended purpose can English signs truly play a positive role in deepening the opening-up policy and enhancing the level of our cities' civilization and the international image of China on the global stage.

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