Errors in Public Sign Translation and Application of Adaptation Theory

GUO Minghe[a]*; LI Jing[a]

[a]School of Foreign Languages, Changchun University of Science and Technology, Changchun, China.
*Corresponding author.

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Abstract
Public signs are considered to be a guide and provide great help to people in daily life. The translation of public signs, therefore, aims at providing the same convenience for foreigners. Changchun, as an economic and cultural center of Jilin province in northeast China, attracts millions of foreigners. However, the frequent problems in the translation of public signs degrade China’s international status as a major role on the global platform. Mistranslation of public signs is an emergent issue that needs immediate attention. It is necessary to find a better method to translate Chinese public signs. This article provides an analysis on the translation of public signs under the theoretical framework of Adaptation Theory, which consists of the linguistic level and extra-linguistic context.

Key words: Public sign; Translation; Error; Adaptation theory

INTRODUCTION

With the introduction and implementation of the policy of reform and opening-up, the past few decades witnessed an ever opening China to the outside world. Each year millions of foreigners pour into China to experience oriental life and culture in our country.

An overseas student in my university once said that when he was preparing for his journey to China, he was advised on one of the major pitfalls of traveling and living in China: The bungled English signs that will confuse, mislead, and frustrate you. For this reason, more and more scholars have been aware of the significance of regulating the translation of public signs from Chinese to English and did substantive research on this subject from various aspects. The study of public signs and their translation becomes an urgent and important task. Since the English public signs are practically an indispensable section of the foreigners’ lives, it certainly needs the translators to comparatively perfectly translate these bilingual public signs and fulfill the functions of them in order to enhance the enthusiasm of the foreigners to travel around China and improve their life quality in China. Public signs, as a special type of text, have great differences between the two languages and their respective cultures. Therefore, the translating strategy—Adaptation Theory becomes necessary in order to fulfill the intended functions or purposes of bilingual public signs.

1. ANALYSIS ON ERRORS IN THE TRANSLATION OF PUBLIC SIGNS

Nord Christiane, a very famous German theorist and a representative of the German functional approach of translation, defines translation errors in this way: If the purpose of a translation is to achieve a particular function for the target addressee, anything that obstructs the achievement of this purpose is a translation error. (Nord, 2001, p. 74)

Standard English version of public signs that may perform intended functions should at least meet the following basic specifications: correct spelling, brief and concise language style, and choice of appropriate words, use of frequent words and the consideration of cultural differences.

Yet, if we look carefully when walking along the streets in the city we live, when we are in stores, parks,
hotels etc., it’s not difficult to find many problematic translations of public signs in many public places. These mistranslated public signs are just extremely embarrassing when a foreigner encounters them. An overseas student in my university once said that when he was preparing for his journey to China, he was advised on one of the major pitfalls of traveling and living in China: The bungled English signs that will confuse, mislead, and frustrate you. The following part dwells on the leading kinds of translation errors that are most frequently seen.

1.1 Embarrassing Spelling Mistakes
When you walk in the public places, 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. Most of the mistakes are due to carelessness and irresponsibility of the translators or the printers. These spelling mistakes will make the original public signs difficulty to understand and leave a negative impression on readers. Following are the examples and explanation:

In another shopping center, the situation is even worse for spelling mistakes can be easily found everywhere. “KTV/网吧” is put as “KTV/Internet ban”. This mistake may cause serious misunderstanding to the foreign readers. Originally, this directing public sign is meant to provide information of internet service for people that they can surf Internet if they need. But the translated information indicates the opposite meaning that Internet surfing is not permitted because “ban” means “prohibit” or “forbid”. In Chinese, it means “禁止, 禁令”. So the English translation of the sign totally failed to perform its function of directing.

When you see these misspelling public signs, you may be very shocked and even puzzled by the existence of these schoolboy mistakes. But they truthfully exist in the city we live. And probably everyday these wrong spelling signs are spotted by more and more foreigners and at the same time these signs leave a poor impression to foreign visitors on the English proficiency of Chinese people. These low-level errors really do great harm to our city’s international image.

1.2 The Inconsistency in the Translation of Naming
Sometimes, the translation of some road signs combines Chinese PINYIN translation and English translation together, which makes it more inconvenient and confusing to the foreign visitors. 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 like “Chong Qing Lu” and “Chongqing Road”, “Jian She Jie” and “Jianshe Street” can be seen everywhere.

1.3 Redundancy
As we have discussed some basic specifications that standardized English 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. Any unnecessary and surplus words or expressions may cause deviations in meaning and difficulties in understanding. For example:

Ji Lin Grand Drugstore (吉林大药房)

In the translation of the signboard of the drugstore, the translator, in order to be faithful to the source information, translated “大药房” literally and rigidly as “Grand Drugstore”. In Chinese, there are some customary expressions like “大饭店”, “大酒楼”, “大药房”, etc. However, in the English translation of these signboards, the words like “big”, “grand” are actually unnecessary and redundant.

1.4 Change or Loss of Information
The basic purpose of translation lies in the actual realization of the effective communicative value of the source language as well as the successful conveyance of utterance information. In terms of the functions of public signs, directing public signs may depend more on the correction and completion of information to fulfill the goals. However, in the real translation process, the translator may omit certain information of the source language. The reasons vary: some cases of information loss are caused by the translators’ carelessness, some others cases may caused by the translator purposely in order to be short and brief in the translation of public signs.

Sometimes, this sort of errors can totally change the message and a distorted intention will emerge. For example:

South Ticket (南售票厅)
North Ticket (北售票厅)

The two signs were found in Changchun Railway Station. According to their Chinese meanings, we can see that the two signs intend to inform people that they can buy tickets in both the two places. Obviously, the translator intends to use the word “Ticket” as a noun to express the meaning of a place for passengers to buy “tickets”. However, the foreign readers may misunderstand the intended meaning of the translations of the public signs. They may think that they can only buy tickets of trains heading for south or north in the two different ticket halls respectively. The correct translation of “售票厅” should be “ticket-hall” or “booking hall”.

1.5 Word-by-word Translation
In order to come up with the idiomatic translation of a public sign, not only does the translator need to 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.

As terrible as this Chinese-English translation is, it is relatively easy to identify most of the translation errors. Take for instance the trouble of translating the direction sign in a hospital:

Among disinfection (消毒间)

“...间” is used liberally in Chinese to indicate a certain room or place for special purpose, which is usually considered synonymous with “room, place or area” in English. In the translation of the sign, it appears that the translator opted to use a word-for-word translation and put it into two separate words “消毒” (disinfection) and “...间” (among) instead of taking into consideration the similar English usage of the words, phrases or idiomatic expressions. In English, there is an idiomatic way to indicate a place or a room for certain movement, like “reading room”, “waiting room” and “dining room” etc. So according to idiomatic usage, the acceptable translation should be “sterilizing room”.

Therefore, in the translation of signs, we have to learn to think in English instead of Chinese. Even if we may find some similar expressions in Chinese, we should not use them rashly since there is a commonly accepted way to express in English. Now, many local governments in many cities in China are trying diversified measures to reduce or evade Chinglish in the Chinese-English translation of public signs. It really is a good piece of news for the sake of readability of bilingual public signs in China.

1.6 Grammatical Mistakes

Whether a translation obeys grammatical rule or not is always the fundamental standard of judging a good one. Therefore, a proper translation should, at least, accord with the grammatical rules or linguistic conventions of the target language. And it is particularly the case in the translation of public signs. Unfortunately, the real situation in our city is that numerous grammatical mistakes in the translation of public signs can be easily found everywhere around us. Most of these grammatical errors are not as noticeable as spelling errors or Chinglish, but they are still disturbing and annoying since they not only show the irresponsible attitude of the translator but also expose the poor proficiency and grasp in the English language of the translator. For example:

Borne outstanding permeated with wise and elegant.

This advertising public sign was found in a big shopping mall, and it means to advertise a brand of cosmetics. There are glaring grammatical mistakes in the translation of the advertising sign: Firstly, there is no such word as “borned” but “born”. “Born” is the past participle of “bear”, so the correct usage of the passive voice of “bear” should be “is born”, “was born” or “were born”. For instance, “He was born in South California.” Secondly, “with” is a preposition, so it should be followed by nouns or noun phrases, but the translator of the sign obviously neglected the grammatical rule and translated the two words “睿” and “雅” directly into their adjective form “wise” and “elegant”. Actually, they should be put into their noun form “wisdom” and “elegance”. The correct translation of the advertising sign which accords with the grammatical rules in English should be “Born outstanding permeated with wisdom and elegance.”

1.7 Inappropriate Choice of Word

In some cases, a Chinese word may have several counterparts with quite similar meanings in English. Then it is up to the translators to decide on the wording and make their considered choices in the process of translation. The word that is improperly chosen usually causes confusion, ambiguity or misunderstanding.

Sightseeing Ladder (观光梯)

This is a bilingual public sign found in a megastore in Changchun, which attracts many foreign customers every day. The Chinese meaning “梯” has several interpretations in English like “ladder”, “elevator”, “lift” or “escalator”. So in the translation of “观光梯”, what is the key point for the translator is to decide which word to choose to indicate the real object. Then the translator needs to know the specific indication and the fundamental difference between these words. From Wikipedia, a “ladder” is a vertical or inclined set of rungs or steps. There are two types: rigid ladders that can be leaned against a vertical surface such as a wall, and rope ladders that are hung from the top. The vertical members of a rigid ladder are called stringers (US) or stiles (UK). An “elevator” (US) or “lift” (UK) is a type of vertical transport equipment that efficiently moves people or goods between floors (levels, decks) of a building, vessel or other structures. Elevators are generally powered by electric motors that either drive traction cables or counterweight systems like a hoist, or pump hydraulic fluid to raise a cylindrical piston like a jack. An “escalator” is a moving staircase – a conveyor transport device for carrying people between floors of a building. The device consists of a motor-driven chain of individual, linked steps that move up or down on tracks, allowing the step treads to remain horizontal. As we can contrast the real object with these meanings, “ladder” is the wrong translation of “观光梯” in the sign and the proper choice of the word should be “elevator” or “lift”.

1.8 Mistranslation on the Cultural Level

Apart from mistranslations on the linguistic level, translating problems from the cultural perspective also needs attentive study.

Language is universally regarded as a reflection and carrier of culture, varies greatly from nation to nation.
Hence, as totally two different languages, English and Chinese present themselves with distinctive cultural features as well as corresponding language styles due to the striking differences of the east and the west. Public signs cannot be denied as one of the main carriers of ethnomological culture, and the meaning of the signs should not only implicate the entity but also connote the notion of the culture. Therefore, public sign translation from Chinese to English is not only a bilingual activity, but also a bicultural activity. It is closely related and even confined to the range of culture.

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 concerning culture emerge.

Customers are God. (顾客是上帝)

This sign in a small supermarket is a case in point to show the translator’s ignorance of western culture. “God” occupies the sacred position in the westerners’ mind. So in the eyes of westerners, customers can never be compared to God even though they should be specially respected. “Customers First” can commendably indicate the intended meaning and avoid offending the target readers.

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.

Spring Transportation arrange extra trains (春运加开列车)

This public sign was found in the railway station in Changchun before the Spring Festival. The word “春运” can never be simply translated as “Spring Transportation” because it is related to a traditional festival in China—the Spring Festival. So “春运” actually means the peak season when travel is most active during the Spring Festival in China annually. The translation “Spring Transportation” fails to manifest the connotation of the source word in Chinese cultural and may not be truly understood by the foreigners.

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.

Studies on translation from the cultural perspective break away from the traditional linguistically aimed and literarily oriented schools, and switch to a cultural orientation, which discovers a new way for translation studies and helps to build translation studies as an independent discipline.

2. ADAPTATION THEORY BY VERSCHUEREN

Verschueren’s Adaptation Theory provides a new theoretical framework for translation study from the pragmatic perspective. Influenced by various contexts and the structural objects, the process of translation indeed represents dynamic adaptation and involves constant choices.

It has to be pointed out that the term of “adaptation” in traditional translation studies is used in contrast to “alienation”, and both of them are actually translating strategies in translation practice. However, Verschueren’s adaptation is not confined to the long-established term in translation studies. Here, adaptation refers to Verschueren’s study of pragmatics in terms of “the linguistic phenomena from the point of view of their usage properties and process” (Verschueren, 1999). Verschueren’s concept refers to the interrelationship of inter adaptation and acts as a perspective on our language use at the macro-level. In fact, adaptation as a strategy in translation practice is a result of the adaptation process in terms of making linguistic choice.

Verschueren furthers his research and specifies the pragmatics as “a general cognitive, social and cultural perspective on linguistic phenomena and in relation to their usage in forms of behavior.” As has been mentioned above, the language use is the process and result of continuously making choice, which has been regarded as the fundamental concept of pragmatics. From this point of view, we can tell that the translation is not just the process of linguistic choice, but a complicated bilingual conversion in manifold levels. We can have a better comprehension of the nature of translating process with the help of the pragmatic perspective theory. Verschueren’s Adaptation Theory covers social, cultural and cognitive aspects which concern about the constructing meaning in language use from the pragmatic perspective.

Verschueren summarizes seven features In order to give further explanation of the notion of choice-making in language use: Firstly, choices are made at every possible level of linguistic form, from the voice, tone to the choice of grammatical structures, from the language code to the choice of discourse. Secondly, the language user not only chooses the linguistic forms, but also the communicative strategies. For example, they can express their certain ideas through various linguistic forms, but they only choose one that can realize their communicative goal in a specific social situation. Thirdly, the choices that the language user makes may be at different degree of consciousness. Fourthly, the choices are made both
in language production and language understanding, namely, the both sides must make a choice in a specific course of communication. Fifthly, the language user has no free choice about choosing or not, except at the level where he can decide either to use language or to remain silent. Sixthly, as a rule, for language user, the choices of language means and strategies are not equivalent, it’s because that language means and materials are subject to cognitive, social and cultural factors. Seventhly, the language user’s different choices of language means and strategies will lead to the change of other related linguistic or non-linguistic factors.

According to Verschueren’s Adaptation Theory, the language has three properties, variability, negotiability and adaptability, which provides the new perspective on the research of translation theory and practice by enabling the language user to make appropriate choice and interpret various language phenomena.

As soon as the Adaptation Theory is introduced into the field of language studies, it is widely regarded as a promising theory with expositive power. We can derive from the theory many implications. Some researchers have made many attempts to study translation. However, seldom have they tried to apply the Adaptation Theory to study the translation of public signs. Therefore, comparatively speaking, it is a new insight of the theory into the study of the Chinese-English translation of public signs.

### 3. PUBLIC SIGN TRANSLATION FROM PERSPECTIVE OF ADAPTATION THEORY

As two independent languages, Chinese public signs do differ from English ones in spite of the fact they also have many similarities in the comparative study of them. The linguistic differences between them make it possible that public signs translation is undoubtedly a conscientious process of adjusting and refining. The different cultural elements contained in public signs and the large numbers of pragmatic failures in the translated bilingual public signs verify that the translation of public sign is not just a simple process of code transferring. It is also a process of cross-cultural one, involved in many extra-linguistic factors, such as social, cultural, and cognitive ones. Therefore, the translators are required to take these linguistic and extra-linguistic factors into consideration while they are translating Chinese public signs into English.

#### 3.1 Adaptation at the Linguistic Level

Linguistic reality is taken to refer to the real existence and nature of a certain language. As we all know, Chinese and English belong to different language families, and different language families have different linguistic norms or conventions. It involves the linguistic elements and linguistic structures of that language, as well as their features and properties. Therefore, in the process of translation of public signs, the translators must make every effort to adapt to these norms or conventions, and then the translating version in the target language will be with high acceptability and readability.

Firstly, to adapt to the linguistic context at the word level and make the readers better understand the intended meaning of the public signs, the translator should spell the words correctly and capitalize the letters abide by the rules, which is an essential prerequisite for a successful translation.

Secondly, when the linguistic context exists at the phrase level, the structure and collocation need to be dealt with so as to find the equivalence in the target language. As a phrasal feature of the special type of text, there are a large number of nominal and verbal phrases in the expression of public signs. As to the nominal phrase, the translators have to analyze the inherent relations lying in the phrase. Chinese tends to combine phrases without any connecting words to indicate the relations between them. Therefore, the translators should not follow the Chinese characteristic in phrasal combination by rote and deal with every phrase as if they all have equal weight. Instead, they should make necessary adjustments in order to conform to the English rules. Concerning the choice of verbal phrases, the expressions of public signs is characterized by the massive usage of verbs and verbal phrases. Hence, a successful translation of public signs comes from the translators’ painstaking consideration and selection of verbs or verbal phrases. The English expressions chosen as an equivalent for the Chinese ones must collocate well with other words in the phrase and do not violate the idiomatic usage in English language. In brief, in the translation of public signs from Chinese to English, translators should follow the English collocation and pay enough attention to the features of the English language so as to avoid improper English versions.

Thirdly, some settled structures or forms in English public sign expressions make it easier for the translators to make adaptation in their translating process to put the Chinese public signs into English ones with the same function. However, some translators who are unaware of these unique structural features in English public sign expression may fail to make adaptation in their translations. Consequently, they will produce some non-standard or Chinglish signs in the target language. To meet the requirements of public sign translation and to be close to the source text and conform to the ways of expression in English, the translator should avoid literal translation and restructure the sentence or make some necessary adjustments. English language is hierarchical and compact in syntax. Because of the syntactic peculiarity of the two languages, the translator should adjust the sentence structure, order words carefully and adapt to the conventions of the target language in their translation.

#### 3.2 Adaptation at the Extra-linguistic Level

The translation of public signs from Chinese to English should adapt to different factors. Translators do not
merely engage in the transplantation of words, phrases and sentences and adaptation occurring only at linguistic level is not sufficient to get a successful and acceptable translation of Chinese public signs. The translator’s extra-linguistic adaptive efforts need to be made to successfully translate the pragmatic meanings. In Verschueren’s contextual correlates of adaptability, the extra-linguistic factors include social world, mental world and physical world. In the following part, explanation will be made on the extra-linguistic adaptation from socio-cultural aspect, psychological aspects and physical aspects. 

As an essential part of the social world, culture has been one of the most potentially misleading notions in intercultural communication (Verschueren, 2000). Not only should the translators take into account the linguistic differences but also they should consider the cultural differences between the two languages. Social-cultural adaptation means the translated version of public signs must adapt to the readers’ social and historical background, beliefs, customs, values, principles of social organization as well as other cultural factors. Therefore, the translation of public signs from Chinese to English is not merely linguistic translation, but also cultural translation. The factor of culture must be taken into account in the process of translation. Cultural awareness is a necessary part of the translators’ adaptive strategy in translation across cultures. A proper adaptation to the target social-cultural convention is essential for the translation of public signs.

In the translation of public signs, the translators need to take into consideration the Psychological need and desires of the target readers. There is no denying that people from every nation want to be respected, valued and treated equally. With the progress of the society and the growing pursuit of people’s spiritual world, the tone of equality and friendliness should be emphasized in order that the targeted readers can accept the translated public signs more easily. Therefore, the adaptation to the target psychological desires is of no doubt a matter of strategic importance.

The physical world mainly refers to spatial deixis and temporal deixis. Spatial reference is usually relative to a perspective, which can be either utterer space or reference space (Verschueren, 1999). In the expression of public signs, the creator of the signs will consider the inherent orientation of the signs. Public signs have special communicative contexts, which means once a public sign is located on a certain spot, its special communicative context is fixed. The context is extended to include all the immediate surroundings and whoever happens to be present. Additionally, the reader is actually communicating with a “dumb” board. This special feature of communicative context of public signs requires the translators to make appropriate linguistic choices in the target language which is adaptable to the physical world of the signs.

Public sign translation is a process of continuously making adaptive choices of the language. The Adaptation Theory provides the translator with a rounded view on the activity of public sign translation. At the micro level, this theory provides the translators with flexibility in choosing appropriate translation strategies or skills to serve the translation purposes. At the macro level, this theory supplies for the translators various parameters to beexamined so as to produce effective and practical public signs in the target language.

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**CONCLUSION**

After the analysis, it comes to the conclusion that the Chinese-English translation of public signs should be adapted to the linguistic reality and extra-linguistic convention. The translator, in their translating process, is required to make adaptation in various degrees. They have to make their choices of linguistic elements including that of lexicons and sentence structures and at the same time the translators should also consider about the adaptation in extra-linguistic context. From the translator's personal quality perspective, in order to avoid the translation errors, translators of public signs are required to improve their own quality. First, they should take the responsibility and treat the translation seriously and carefully; second, they are required to be aware that comparing with any other kind of translation, public signs is no easier, and it maybe even harder; third, besides mastering translation theories and strategies, they should pay attention to collect as many as possible English signs and from them to generalize as many as possible translation techniques.

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