

# Exploring the Chinese-English Translation of Shanghai Road Signs From the Perspective of Skopos Theory\*

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This paper applies the Skopos theory to discussing the principles of Chinese-English translation of road signs, namely conforming to international conventions and English expression norms, providing information, and showing local culture at the same time.

*Keywords:* Road sign; translation; Skopos theory

## Introduction

Road signs are frequently and widely used tools in social communication, with functions of positioning and pointing. With the increasing internationalization, more and more foreigners come to China for tourism and business activities, which makes bilingual road signs in Chinese and English inevitable. The English translation of road signs provides convenience for international friends and becomes a way for cities to develop tourism and foreign publicity. We did an advanced search on China Journal Network with the keywords of public signs and translation. Finally, we got 25 papers published in key journals, among which the research perspectives on the translation of public signs mainly include the following three: Yang Huiqun (2013) studied the translation of public signs under the aesthetic perspective; ChengYun (2013) studied the error of Chinese-English translation of public signs from the perspective of association theory; Luo Jiansheng (2015) studied the translation of public signs of tourist attractions under the guidance of translation variation theory. In summary, the previous literature has studied the characteristics and techniques of the translation of public signs from the perspectives of aesthetics, association theory, and translation variation theory, but there is still room for further research in Skopos theory or functional translation theory, which I will explore in the following. At the same time, after careful investigation and examination, I summarized some rules of road sign translation based on the core of functional translation theory “skopos theory”, starting from the purpose of bilingual translation of road signs to guide and instruct, to some rules of road sign translation summarized for existing problems combined with case analysis.

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### Example Analysis of Chinese-English Translation of Road Signs

At present, there are mainly three forms of bilingual road signs: One is Chinese above and Chinese Pinyin below, such as 南京路 above and “Nanjing Lu” below; the second is Chinese above and English below, as the inner ring road, some fast arteries, and expressways are mostly indicated in this way, but the translation is not uniform, for example, “expressway”, “expwy”, or “highway” for fast arteries; third, Chinese above, Chinese Pinyin and English below. This kind of sign is most common; for example, a certain road sign on East Yan’an Road is marked in Pinyin and English as “Yan’an Interchange”. After doing theoretical research and case analysis, I believe that the translation of language landscape should comply with the following principles.

#### Standardization of Writing

The standardization of writing is the first principle to be followed in translating language landscapes. For example, in Shanghai, the former residence of Shen Yinmo on Toronto Road should be correctly translated as “shenyinmo” to avoid misspelling the name of the person in the translation; the sign of “Hongkou Junshi Guanli Qu” should be written in English as the military administrative zone to facilitate foreign visitors’ understanding, instead of simply using pinyin to indicate it; the “Nan Men” in Qingpu should be translated as “South Gate”. It is better not to translate it as “South Men” because “Men” is Chinese Pinyin for gate, but in English is the plural form of “people”, so it is likely to mislead foreign visitors. To sum up, we should keep in mind that the first principle of road sign translation is to observe the formality of writing.

#### Consistency of Signs

In the same place, we should avoid the problem that some use Chinese Pinyin, some use English, and some use mixture of English and Chinese. Otherwise, it will give people the feeling of confusion. The second principle that should be followed in the translation of road signs is being consistent. For another example, in order to celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the Founding of the Communist Party of China, Shanghai Metro designed thematic stations. “Huangpi South Road Station” and “Xintiandi Station” have been renamed “Site of the First CPC National Congress—South Huangpi Road Station” and “Site of the First CPC National Congress—Xintiandi Station”. All the signs have been replaced. English translations of these stations are highly consistent, enabling better spread of Chinese history and culture, making Shanghai a model of road sign translation. For example, the Warehouse Battle Memorial in Jing’an District should be translated as “Shanghai Sihang Warehouse Battle Memorial” in English, in line with other thematic venues. In recent years, with the development of the memorial landscape and the prosperity of tourism, the landscape of the celebrities’ memorial park and the former residences is attached importance to. The correct translation of the former residences of the celebrities helps foreign visitors understand the stories of Chinese history. For example, the translation of the entrance and interior placement of the former residence of Luxun should be consistently translated as Luxun’s former residence.

#### Attention to Cultural Differences

Cultural differences refer to the differences in language, knowledge, beliefs, outlook on life, ways of thinking, customs, and habits formed by people in different ecological and social environments. Cultural differences between Chinese and Western cultures lead to different understandings and interpretations of the same thing or rational concepts. The English and Chinese languages not only have great differences in language systems and structures but are also often governed by cultural factors in the use of language. When translating

Chinese public signs, we should consider cultural differences which may lead to communication difficulties and misunderstandings. Therefore, cultural differences deserve attention when translating road signs. In some public places, we can see the words “Welcome again!”, which are intended to express hospitality, but they do not take into account the cultural differences of Chinese and English.

### **Appropriateness of Phrasing**

The phrasing in Chinese English translation of road signs is the choice of words. Accurate phrasing can reflect reality, express thoughts and feelings accurately, and achieve the purpose of communication. There are many public sign languages that use inaccurate expressions, resulting in wrong or misleading information and the information conveyed cannot achieve the desired effect. For example, public toilets were once translated as “W.C.”, whose full English name is “Water-Closet”, referring to the country toilets with the simplest facilities and the worst equipment, which has long been abolished in the West, and in the rapidly developing China, especially in the international city of Shanghai, it is obvious that such translation is out of place, so it is now appropriate to translate the sign of public toilets as “Washroom”, “Restroom”, “Toilet”.

### **Strategies for Chinese-English Translation of Road Signs**

The following section will apply the skopos theory of functional translation to guide the translation of linguistic landscape. Purpose theory, a claim of Vermeer, is the core theory of functionalism, which is a broad term for various theories focusing on the function of a text. According to purpose theory, the main principle that determines any translation process is the overall planning of the purposive action. Therefore, the most important principle in any translation is the “purpose principle”, i.e., the act of translation is determined by its purpose: the “final meaning”. Vermeer’s purposive framework is as follows: Any form of translation action, including translation itself, may be conceived as an action, and by definition, any action has a goal. The goal or purpose of an action leads to a result, a new situation or event, which may be for a “new” object. An act of translation may involve a variety of purposes, which may be related to the hierarchical order of the other party. We can distinguish three possible kinds of translation in various fields of use: the basic purpose of the translator in the translation process; the communicative purpose aimed at the adoption of the target text in the target situation; the purpose aimed at the adoption of a specific translation strategy or process.

### **Conformity to International Practice**

In order to be in line with the world, international uniform standards should be adopted as far as possible. For example, street names generally consist of proper names and common names. According to the resolution of “a single Romanization system” made in the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, the country published the “Hanyu Pinyin Scheme” as the unified standard, that is, written in Hanyu Pinyin with all capitalization; the common names of avenue, road, street, lane, etc., are translated into corresponding English words. The first letter of the English word is capitalized and the rest is in lowercase.

### **Conformity With English Expression Norms**

According to the skopos theory, translation methods and strategies should be determined by the intended purpose or function of the translated text. Translators have to make the choice of translation language and use the translation strategy, which triggers the diversity of language structures and expressions due to the differences between two cultures in terms of values and thinking patterns. According to the skopos theory, in terms of some Chinese unique public symbols, translators need to create appropriate expressions according to

the purpose of the target text. English translation's purpose is to provide easy and accurate information for foreigners who understand English. For them to understand and avoid ambiguity, it is necessary to use correct and standardized English. For example, when there is a need to express the order of road traffic signs, English ordinal words are used, and their writing is in the form of letter superscripts, such as "1st, 2nd, 3rd", etc.; the English translations of place names do not use coronary words and prepositions, such as "Yu Garden", with the exception of some conventions and fixed usage, such as "Temple of Heaven".

### **Be Flexible and Avoid Rigid Translation**

Skopos theory provides the theoretical basis for creative translation. Each translation is for each target audience, and the purpose-based translation approach aims to facilitate the establishment of a cultural comfort zone, and the Chinese-English translation of road signs in Shanghai should strive to meet the acceptance level of the target audience. According to the principles of Chinese-English translation of Chinese place names, when a place name appears as a proper name on a road, Chinese Pinyin is used; for example, 南京西路 is translated as "Nanjing West Rd". However, English is used when the road signs (or tourist area signs) point to specific cultural sites or relics (rather than the surrounding roads). When the directional word has a strong pointing purpose, it should be translated into English, and when the directional word is solidified as part of the place name, Chinese pinyin is used, such as "Beiwei Rd" and "Beichitou Village". Similarly, the Chinese character 机场 is translated as "airport", while 机场路 as a road name or place name can only be indicated as "Ji Chang Road".

### **Suggestions**

This paper proposes the following suggestions for the Chinese to English translation of language landscapes through the study of road and tourist attraction language landscapes. Firstly, do not think that the more English in the translation of street names, the more foreign tourists can read and understand, but should be translated flexibly according to the specific situation; secondly, the language landscape should be guarded by professionals from translation to the production of signs to avoid spelling mistakes and truly realize standardization. Furthermore, road sign language has special structure and expression requirements, which should be based on relevant norms. Finally, in the translation of road signs, especially the translation of prohibited signs and reminder signs, while conveying information, the subjective emotion of the audience should be taken into account, and the unfriendly situation of the translated text should be avoided. The purpose of the Chinese-English translation of road signs is to let the world understand China, Chinese history, and culture, and the place names are the symbols of national territorial sovereignty. The street names are written in Pinyin in order to maintain our territorial sovereignty and national dignity.

In conclusion, English translation of road signs should be based on relevant norms and English expression habits to effectively establish a good "road sign" of China's land in the hearts of foreign friends, help them continuously understand China, and then help promote the building of a Community of Shared Future for Mankind.

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