

English Translation of Public Signs in Chinese from a Pragmatic Perspective

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This paper applies Newmark's communicative translation and semantic translation theory to analyzing the English translation of Chinese public signs and its pragmatic functions. It finds that communicative translation is typically used to fulfill the communicative function of public signs. Both communicative and semantic translation are employed to adapt to different situational contexts, in order to preserve the pragmatic functions of the Chinese public signs. The differences between Chinese and English lead to pragmatic errors in translation, making the translator's bilingual proficiency and familiarity with English culture necessary. The fundamental principle of public sign translation is to be concise and clear, which often requires modifying some complex rhetorical devices from Chinese in translation.

Keywords: public sign, Chinese-English translation, pragmatic analysis

Introduction

Chinese and English public signs are both common in people's daily life. They can provide information and directions to people, but the differences in language and culture make the contents and forms of these two kinds of public signs different. With the globalization and closer communication between foreign countries and China, many of businessmen and visitors from other countries have paid a visit to China. However, in China, the translation of public signs started a bit late. A certain unified standard and system about how to translate the different types of public signs remains to be established (Chen & Wang, 2024), so there are many wrong and irregular English public notices can be frequently found in China, which brings a lot of inconvenience to non-native Chinese speakers and has negative effects on the image of China worldwide. Bilingual public signs mainly serve as the reminder, explanation, indication, or warning of a certain topic in various places (Wang & Zhou, 2011). They are characterized as concise, short, and clear in meaning.

Peter Newmark (2001) presented the theory of communicative translation and semantic translation, which can be applied to explore the pragmatic functions of Chinese public signs and their translation. In this paper, the pragmatic functions of Chinese public signs will be discussed. The author will take some Chinese-English translation of public signs as examples as well.

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The purpose of communicative translation is to enable the reader of the translated text to get as close as possible to the effect (gain, information) obtained by the reader of the original text, and the purpose of semantic translation is to get as close as possible to the semantic and syntactic structure of the target language and to retain the exact meaning of the original text. Communicative translation tends to transform the culturally distinctive original text into a text with the culture of the target language reader, using more colloquial language to make it less difficult to read, more straightforward and clearer. Communicative translation tends to translate concisely, which is so-called under-translation sometimes and can be an ideal method to translate public signs. Semantic translation, on the other hand, preserves the culture of the original text, with more complex and detailed language, focusing on the translator's thought processes rather than the translator's intentions. Semantic translation tends to translate exhaustively, and focuses on the nuances in the meaning of each word, which is so-called over-translation sometimes. However, it can also be applied to public signs translation. Semantic translation is not equal to literal translation, and semantic translation focuses more on the context. Newmark argues that the texts of semantic translations tend to be inferior to the original because there is a loss of pragmatic meaning in the translation process. Whereas in communicative translation, the translator can optimize and streamline the logic and vocabulary of the original text to make it more functional, which is not allowed in semantic translation.

Generally, communicative translation emphasizes conveying the message in a way that is natural and easy for the target language readers to understand, while semantic translation focuses more on preserving the original meaning of the source text. It should be emphasized that the application of communicative translation and semantic translation is not an either-or situation, and the two can sometimes be used interchangeably.

Literature Review

Public signs translation is a relatively novel topic within the translation field. One of the earliest pieces of literature is by Cenoz and Gorter (2006), who researched the public signs of two minority language (Basque and Frisian), two local state language (Spanish and Dutch), and English. They pointed out that the use of different languages in the linguistic landscape serves both information functions and symbolic functions.

In recent years, many scholars have turned to research the translation of public signs. For example, Amenador and Wang (2020) applied functional theory to analyzing the Chinese-English translation of public signs, noting that cultural translation errors, linguistics translation errors, inconsistencies are the most common errors. Zhao (2021) examined the subject from the perspective of face theory and concluded that the cultural differences between countries may cause misunderstandings. Additionally, many scholars adopted eco-translatology theory to discuss Chinese-English translation of the public signs, often using a tourist destination as a case study. For example, Song (2020) chose Hongtong Big Locust Tree, a place of interest in Shanxi, and argued that the public signs translation should be considered from linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions according to the eco-translatology theory.

As reviewed above, though various studies approach Chinese-English translation of public signs from different perspectives, few have used Newmark's communicative translation and semantic translation to explore the pragmatic analysis of Chinese-English translation of public signs. Therefore, research from this viewpoint would be both significant and innovative.

English Translation of Public Signs in Chinese from a Pragmatic Perspective

Pragmatic function focuses on how the speaker use language to achieve communicative purposes. Pragmatic, on the other hand, has the same meaning as ‘practical’, which imply that pragmatic function studies the practical use of language in communication (Leech, 1983; Verschueren, 1999). Public signs are practical in conveying information or directing people to act according to their instructions. In this section, based on some typical examples, the pragmatic functions and errors of Chinese public signs’ English translation are discussed.

Communicative Function

Pragmatic function plays a specific role in a certain communicative context. A discourse with good pragmatic function can make the dialogue go smoothly or achieve the goal of conversation simply. According to Newmark (2001), translation is usually done to meet the needs of readers, enable them to obtain information, or make language more expressive. As the public sign is a kind of interaction between those who set the sign and the sign recipients, and pragmatic function typically reflects the speaker (sign setter)’s communicative intention. In addition, some of the Chinese public signs tend to take euphemisms, but there are no corresponding expressions in English. If they are translated literally, it will lead to misunderstandings. As a result, the translator is recommended to use communicative translation to convey specific information and make the recipients from other countries understand the original texts and sign setters’ intention much more easily. For example:

Example (1)

Chinese: 小草有生命，脚下有深情。

Literal translation: Grass has life, and something underfoot has deep affection.

Adaption: Please keep off the grass.

Analysis: This Chinese sentence on the public sign is symmetrical and the sign can be found on the grass, intending to persuade people not to step on the grass. Though Chinese ‘有’ can be simply refer to ‘have’ in English, the literal translation text is apparently confusing because it just does a word-for-word translation without any understandings. Both two clauses show weird style called ‘Chinglish’. Clause ‘脚下有深情’ means that the sign setter appeal the pedestrians to show mercy to the grass instead of stepping on it. ‘情’ stands for ‘mercy’ in this context. However, the subject, or the ‘owner’ of ‘情’ is not ‘something underfoot’ but ‘the pedestrian’. In brief, in this sentence, the sign setter’s actual intention is not directly expressed in the linguistic form. Being too persistent of its semantic meaning leads to the failure of cross-cultural communication because the sign recipients from other countries can’t understand the communicative intention of the sign (Thomas, 1983).

Example (2)

Chinese: 请不要让垃圾无家可归。

Literal translation: Please don’t make rubbish homeless.

Adaption: Please don’t litter.

Analysis: Personification is used in this public sign. ‘让垃圾无家可归’ refers to ‘make rubbish homeless’. The dropped rubbish is personified as homeless people. The sign setter’s communicative intention is to tell people not to litter here. It is not suitable to translate directly, though it may be understandable, it is not clear

enough and directive. To reach the goal of communication, the communicative translation method is applied. The adaption sentence is much more concise and easier to understand.

Example (3)

Chinese: 河水清清，却亦无情，水深而急，切莫戏水。

Literal translation: The river is clear but ruthless. The river is deep and flows swiftly, so don't play in the water.

Adaption: Danger! Deep water!

Analysis: This Chinese public sign is to warn the people not to jump into or swim in the river because the river flows swiftly and violently. The Chinese sentence uses four quadrisyllabic words and personification, making the public sign vivid. However, it's difficult to retain the style in English through semantic translation. A better approach is to convey the underlying meaning of the sentence to achieve the communication goal. In this case, communicative translation is better than semantic translation. By using 'danger' and two exclamation marks, it emphasizes the risk of playing in the water and warns people of the risk.

Situational Translation

Halliday (1978, p. 22) points out that it is the demands posed by the service of these functions which have shaped language and fixed the course of its evolution. The language we use is to meet the actual need of communication. For the pragmatic functions of the public signs, similar public signs in different places may lead to different effects, so situational translation is required. For example:

Example (4)

Chinese: 请勿吸烟。[1] / 严禁吸烟。[2]

English: Please don't smoke. [1] / Smoking is strictly prohibited. [2]

Analysis: Though both sentences have the same topic, i.e. smoking is not allowed, according to the place or situation, the expressions are different. In sentence [1], '请勿' is same as '请不要' in the former example (2), which means 'please do not', to urge people not to smoke in a mild tone. This public sign can be found in some public outdoor places. As smoking in public outdoor places may only lead to minor impacts, this public sign is just a kind of moral suasion. By contrast, the tone of sentence [2] is much more serious. It shows the absolute prohibition of smoking because smoking in such a place can cause severe results. This public sign can be found mostly on a plane or in a library. When translating these two sentences, semantic translation is applied while communicative translation is also involved. Using English text [2] to correspond with Chinese text [1] is not appropriate, vice versa, because the tone should be decided according to the context and situation.

In addition, different Chinese public signs may have the same meaning, which can be seen in their English translation. It is because that different utterances can have the same communicative function. For example:

Example (5)

Chinese: 请保持安静。[1] / 请勿喧哗。[2] / 切勿大声喧哗，以免打扰他人。[3]

Literal translation: Please keep quiet. [1] / Don't speak loudly. [2] / Don't speak loudly in case disturbing others. [3]

Adaption: Quiet please.

Analysis: The wording and intonation of the sentences on these three public signs differ, but the communicative functions of them are the same. In example [1], Chinese ‘保持安静’ directly asks people not to make any noise, in order to keep quiet, while in examples [2] and [3], though ‘请勿喧哗’ or ‘切勿大声喧哗’ just means ‘not to speak loudly’, it connotes the significance of maintaining quiet. Especially, example [3] explains the result of speaking loudly is ‘打扰他人’ (disturbing others). It is a symmetrical and aesthetic sentence in Chinese, however, in English public signs, concise sentences are much more common and easier to understand, so it isn’t necessary to translate the result. Translating these similar Chinese public signs as ‘quiet please’ can make it concise and clear, which is in line with the characteristics of English public signs.

In another case, some of the Chinese public signs are only for Chinese people and not necessarily to be translated. It depends on the situational contexts. For example:

Example (6)

Chinese: 军车免费通行。[1] / 仅限军车入内。[2]

Literal translation: Free pass for military vehicles. [1] / Entry by military vehicles only. [2]

Adaption: (Do not translate) [1] / Military vehicles only. [2]

Analysis: Both sentences on the Chinese public signs mention ‘军车’ (military vehicle). According to the situational contexts, example [1] is preferred not to be translated, because there are no foreign military vehicles in China and no foreigners are required to acquire the information of this. On the contrary, example [2] is most likely to appear near military zones, where access is strictly restricted, so it is a necessity to tell the foreigners to stay away from the restricted areas instead of driving into.

Pragmatic Errors Caused by Cultural Differences

Due to the differences in information structure, culture and expression, English translation of Chinese public signs may lead to pragmatic errors. The translator should be familiar with the cultural customs of English-speaking countries and consider the cultural differences between Chinese and English. To respect the culture of other countries, first of all, the translator has to understand the characteristics of the target language, chooses reasonable vocabulary according to the characteristics of the target language, and achieves the linguistic equivalence of communication (Yang, 2005). The differences between Chinese and English cause challenge of translation. A proper way should be found to both preserve the original Chinese meaning and adapt to the English culture. Communicative translation strategy can be employed to ensure that the English translation function pragmatically. In this part, several examples of pragmatic errors caused by cultural difference will be given.

Example (7)

Chinese: 全场商品9折优惠，两件8折优惠。

Wrong translation: All merchandise in shop has 90% discount, and two of them has 80% discount.

Adaption: Buy 1 for a 10% off; buy 2 for a 20% off.

Analysis: First of all, in the wrong translation, ‘merchandise’ is a collective noun and is not suitable for this context. In addition, ‘9折’ in Chinese means the actual price of something is 90% of its original price, rather than ‘90% discount’. Similarly, ‘8折’ means a 20% off. That’s an apparent cultural difference between Chinese and English. Furthermore, there is an ambiguity in ‘two of them has 80% discount’, as the customers may interpret it

as ‘only two items in the shop has 80% discount’. The wrong translation sentence is too long and is likely to make the customers from different cultures confused. To optimize, the adaption sentence is symmetrical and conform to the English convention of usage.

Example (8)

Chinese: 欢迎您再来上海!

Wrong translation: Welcome to Shanghai again!

Adaption: Hope to see you in Shanghai again!

Analysis: This Chinese public sign can be found at the expressway when leaving Shanghai. It aims to express enthusiasm and invites people to pay another visit to Shanghai. However, the wrong translation ‘welcome to Shanghai again’ actually implies ‘you are back to Shanghai’. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘welcome’ is to say hello to somebody in a friendly way when they ‘arrive’ somewhere, which contradicts this context, leading to pragmatic errors. It shows the difference between Chinese and English culture. Wrong translation can be misleading and requires correction. The adaption sentence correctly reflects that ‘you are currently leaving Shanghai’.

Example (9)

Chinese: 请先下后上。

Wrong translation: Please get off first then get on.

Adaption: Please clear a path for the passengers alighting.

Analysis: This Chinese public sign can be found on public transportation, such as buses and subways. Using subway as an example, it instructs people to let those who have arrived exit the subway first, before boarding themselves. Wrong translation fails to distinguish between two subjects (those who want to board and those who have arrived), leading to confusing instructions and pragmatic errors. The adaption sentence is an English public sign in Singapore MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) station, though it doesn’t clearly state the order of alighting and boarding, it conveys a sense of politeness and it’s a natural and authentic expression. From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, Chinese culture is a high-context culture while English culture is a low-context culture. Using four Chinese characters ‘先下后上’ can clearly conveys the order of alighting and boarding, but it is much more complex in English.

Conclusion

Through above analyses, it can be concluded that the Chinese public signs can be translated into English while retaining their pragmatic functions with the help of communicative translation and semantic translation. Some of public signs should be translated according to their situational contexts. Cultural differences between Chinese and English sometimes cause pragmatic errors and require to be optimized, in order to ensure that the people from other countries can understand. Both Chinese and English public signs are characterized by conciseness, clarity and directions. However, some rhetorical devices in Chinese, such as personification, can hardly be translated into English naturally, so conversion must be done by translator to make it easier to understand. During conversion, Newmark’s communicative translation and semantic translation theory can be applied. These two approaches can work jointly to ensure both clarity and cultural appropriateness. The translator can also take the public signs in English-speaking countries as reference, improving the translation quality and

pragmatic functions. Generally speaking, this study is practical and helpful to develop the English translation of public signs in China. It also helps enlighten the research on public signs translation.

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