Chinese-English Translation Study in Public Signs

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century witnesses the blooming development of China's economy, and successive grand events show that the ties between China and other countries strengthened considerably. Thus, bilingual public signs, which perform great social functions, have become a necessity in line with a growing number of foreigners’ arrival and subsequent international practice. Nevertheless, there is a variety of “chinglish” phenomenon in the C-E translation for various reasons, which has not only seriously damaged the image of China, but also failed to efficiently achieve the function and create a favorable language environment. Therefore, it's of great significance to classify the mistranslation, analyze the causes and finally puts forward some principles and strategies for C-E translation of public signs.

THE DEFINITIONG AND FUNCTION OF PUBLIC SIGNS

In Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary (2002), sign refers to a board, notice, etc. that directs somebody towards something, gives a warming, advertises a business, etc. In China, Professor Ding Henqi (2006) defined them as "words and expressions giving information in the public and they are street signs, tourism brochures, roadside boards and billboards at scenic spots, placards, etc."[8]

Generally, public signs perform 4 functions. Namely, directing, prompting, restricting and compelling function. [1] The first one is to offer some useful information without bearing the meaning of request and forbidden, for example, “Ticket &Travel Center”; the second is to remind of paying attention, such as “Out of service”; the third is functioned as restrictions with tough and direct language, such as “No feeding”; and the last aims at forcing readers to take or not to take some actions because of maintaining a civilized order, and the sign “No fatigue driving” is of that style.

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THE EXISTING CHINGLISH PHENOMENON AND CAUSES
ANALYSIS

Chinglish is the improper use of English in grammar and culture and nowadays it has become the major problems that affect the quality of C-E public signs translation\(^7\). The main sources of chinglish are cultural factors, modes of thinking, translation strategies and so on.\(^6\)

**Chinglish from Linguistic Perspectives**

Linguistic mistranslations are caused by structural differences in vocabulary, syntax and pragmatic features of the second languages.\(^9\) Because of polysemy and synonym, the translators should have a good command of words. For example, “Bridge “may be the first to come to translator’s mind, but actually, “overpass “or “flyover” is frequently seen in modern transportation, \(^3\) so, it’s “commercial pedestrian’s overpass” that are more concise. Additionally, in English language, part of speech is strictly defined. Specifically, nouns and noun phrases are usually employed and offering services because of perspicuity and simplicity characteristics while verbs and gerunds are usually used in the restricting and compelling functions of dynamic public signs because of its directness and power. Thus, “Wet floor” is a better than “Carefully slide” and “Press for assistance” is more powerful than “If you need any help, then press the button”. In Some cases, the translation of public signs fail in accordance with the expressive convention of the target language due to word redundancy, the very examples are listed below: “Staff only” posted in private space and “Flush after use” in W.C are obviously more expressive than the literal ones “No admittance for outsiders” and “come in hurriedly, go in hurriedly”.

**Chinglish from Cultural Perspectives**

Just like Eugene A. Nida pointed out: to be bilingual, one has to be bicultural.\(^3\) To foster bilingual ability, one should primarily develop different modes of thinking. For example, in the westerners’ modes of thinking, the translation “Keep off the grass” is more logical and acceptable, showing our willingness to be harmonious with the nature, but the chinglish versions “we’re sleeping, please don’t disturb us” is less restrictive. Moreover, it is a good virtue for the Chinese to show care and respects towards patients, so the most typical mistranslated slogan “treating the patient as God” can be seen. But in the west, God is the most divine and sacred, the act is disrespectful and unforgivable. The suggested version is “the patient is our first priority”. Coincidentally, the translation “seats for the old, weak, sick and pregnant” in public transportation should be revised as “Courteous seat”, for in English culture, “old” means feebleness and uselessness.

**STRATEGIES OF TRANSLATING PUBLIC SIGNS**

**Equivalent Translation**

The strategy of substituting corresponding expression in the target language
which carries equivalent referential or pragmatic meaning as that in the source language can be defined as equivalent translation \([1]\). “24 hours business “and “Old people first “are the very examples. Absolutely, The Suggested version “24-Hour Service” and “Senior citizens first” are more equivalent, universally accepted and culture-oriented.

**Formulated Translation**

The translation of some restricting and compelling public signs can employ structures of the well-established international convention. There are mainly 4 patterns can be dealt with

Pattern 1 No + Noun/Gerunds. Those with forbidding function can be translated in this direct and powerful way. The 2 signs blew can be transacted into “No Flash” and “No Outside Food”

![Picture 1.](image1) ![Picture 2.](image2)

Pattern 2 Caution!/Danger!+ Noun/Verb. This structure is employed to warn readers of danger or risk and to draw people’s attention.

![Picture 3.](image3) ![Picture 4.](image4)

The signs listed above can be translated into “Danger! Falling objects “and “Caution! No thoroughfare” respectively

Pattern 3 Noun + only. The structure is to generalize facilities that specially used for somebody or something. The Signs in the pictures can be translated into “Members only” and “Emergency use only”.

![Picture 5.](image5) ![Picture 6.](image6)
Pattern 4 Do not/Please + verb. This pattern is used in imperative sentences in order to give direction information. The exact examples are “Please queue up” and “Do not leave your belonging unattended”.

CONCLUSIONS

In view of the great significance of public signs and their frequent occurrence in daily practice, any mistranslation as a result of ignorance of culture differences between the east and the west will exert far-reaching negative impact. The C-E translation of public signs names only a few on cross-culture communications and there is still a long way to go to better know the essence and put them into practice.

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