

Analysis on the Translation of Public Signs in Nanning's Shops

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Abstract

With the development of ASEAN, the Chinese-English translation of public signs in Nanning's shops become widespread. However, the situation of the Chinese-English translation is not so optimistic. According to some research and analysis, the author finds that there are many errors found in Chinese-English translation of public signs in Nanning's Shops. And most of the English translations on Chinese public signs are not standard, which will seriously affect the international image of Nanning. This thesis will analyze the existing problems and give some available suggestions depending on the functionalist approaches.

Keywords

Public Sign; Functionalist Approaches; Error Type; Suggestions.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background Information

Since there are more and more communications between China and other countries, English is playing a very significant role in cross-cultural communication. As an important part in the daily life of foreign people living in China, translation of public signs has close relationship with the image of China in the world. However, in China, the study of the Chinese-English translation started rather late, lacking systematization and standardization. On the one hand, the non-standard and inappropriate signposts can be seen almost everywhere in our country; And the importance of accurate Chinese-English translation of public signs has not been realized by the society.

This research focuses on several aspects of the translation of public signs in shops from the perspective of functionalist approaches. It discusses the existing problems and possible causes in Chinese-English translation of public signs and offers some probable suggestions to solve the problems in order to help Nanning to set a good image in the international society.

1.2. The Definition and Function of Public Signs

Public sign refers to the language that appears in public places and is used to inform the public some important notes. Public signs have the following main features: (1) according to their function, public signs have the features of warning, instruction and reference. (2) As to their style, the public signs are concise and distinct. (3) Considering about their objectives, public signs call for meaningful action. In other words, a public sign is a special kind of writing style. It can be always seen in public places, calling people's attention by using only several words or just by a sample picture. The public signs in shops are one kind of public signs, which plays an important role in a big city, especially in the metropolis and modern cities. Therefore, the translation of public signs in shops will help to make a good image for a city.

2. Translation Theories

There are many kinds of translation theories existing in the world. It can mainly classify into Skopos theory, Newmark communication translation (Newmark, 2001) cross-cultural

communication translation and functional equivalence theory. All the theories above are used in public signs translation. All these researchers are mainly put the theories refer into public signs translation but they have never talked about which approach should the public signs translation obeys.

2.1. The Functionalist Approaches

2.1.1. Background Situation of German Functionalist Approaches

As the big breakthrough event comparing with the traditional theories, the functionalist approaches believes that the translation strategy must be decided by the predicative aims or function of the translation text. During the whole translation process, the translator should not pay too much attention to the source text which the equivalent theory takes seriously, but the function the translation text can reach under the background of the target language culture. The second generation of functionalist approaches advocators is represented by Christiane Nord. And in the early 1990s, Nord puts up with a translation approach of “function plus loyalty” (Nord, 1997: 123) which is at the basic of Reiss’s Text Theory and Hans J. Vermeer’s Skopos Theory. And then he gives “translation” a definition that translation is a kind of target language text which is created to show a sort of its special function. The relationship it keeps with the source text can be materialized depending on the function the translation text predicated or required. Meanwhile, according to other’s researching method, Nord work around the translation and divides text into four functions—alleged function, expression function, appeal function and greet function. When translators comprehend the function of the original text, he can compare it with the one required and distinguish or remove the useless elements during the translation procession.

2.1.2. The Definition of Functionalist Approaches

The functionalist approaches refer to a kind of translation that analyzes the rhetorical function of sentences and one or more conceptual paragraphs which have clear theme, making the form of the rhetorical function reappear. Meanwhile, the approaches ask for equivalence of form with the same equivalence of function and meaning.

3. The Functional Classifications of Public Signs in Shops

The commercial sites contain shopping centre, supermarkets, commercial malls, stores, etc which are the important parts of our society. The public signs should meet the sale aims of the operating agencies, the demand for consumption of the customers, as well. With the micro environment becomes more and more multiple culture or mainstream culture, the shopping sites show out the feature of the convergence of sub-cultures environment. So, in the translation of public signs in commercial spots, the translation approach of function equivalent and conversion corresponding is testified to being available in the transformation practice of this special text.

Mall public signs are set up according to their special functions in different places for different audience. There are a lot of functional public signs for special usage. The designing and the translation of public signs in shopping spots are mainly served for the two important functions--sale in the commercial spot and the society. For these, the public signs inside or outside the commercial places can divide into several kinds according different customers, consuming requirement and consuming behaviors.

3.1. The Marketing Functions of Mall Public Signs

3.1.1. Drawing Interest and Promoting Sales

This kind of public signs aims at stimulating the consumer’s interests in order to attract more customers. For example:

“Special offer” (特价), “save money every day” (天天平价), “Buy one and get anyone free” (买一送一), “50% off” (五折优惠), “Come in and Win”(进门得大奖)。

3.1.2. Giving Information

These public signs are mainly used for offering information, direction. And this kind of public signs are widely used in the shops. For example:

“Beauty Products” (美容化妆品), “Men’s Store” (男人用品), “Fitting Room” (试衣间), “Left baggage” (行李寄存), “Opening times (hours)/ Business hours” (营业时间).

3.1.3. Deepening Comprehension

This kind of public signs make the customers know more about the shops’ running way, so that they will be interested in doing some shopping in the shops. For example:

“More Sale for a Low Profit” (薄利多销), “Popular at Home and Abroad” (畅销海内外), “Fake commodity Free Store” (无假冒产品商场), etc. All these can also have the communicative function in malls.

3.1.4. Consolidating Image

Public signs can not only promote the consumers to do some shopping but also set good image for the shops. An excellent public sign shows good serve for the consumers, meanwhile, it may improve the consumers’ satisfaction as well as the company’s popularity. For example:

“Customers and Credibility First” (顾客第一 信誉至上), “Service Supervision Number” (服务监督电话), “We care! We want your comment!” (我们关注! 欢迎批评!)

3.2. The Social Function of Public Signs in Shops

The public signs setting in the commercial spots should not only meet the need of runners’ sale promotion but the cultural, behavioral, and mental need of travelers and foreign people in China. According to the buying behavior, public signs in commercial spots in practical use have informative, instructive, regulatory and warning functions.

3.2.1. Informative Function

This kind of public signs just provide for the real and particular information serve, they do not have any limited or regulatory mean. What their main functions are showing direction and informing notes, etc. For example:

Information (咨询服务), Business Hours (营业时间), Self-service Bank (自助银行).

3.2.2. Instructive Function

They have no any special meaning, but tell some relative news. And they are wildly used to do some instruction and warning.

Wait here (请在黄线后等候), Beware of Pickpockets(小心扒手), Wet Paint (油漆未干).

3.2.3. Restrictive Function

This kind of public signs are often used to limit or restrain people’s behavior. The words of them are brief and concise but it doesn’t mean make people feel rude and impolite. For example:

Ticket Only (凭票入内), 30 Minutes Parking (限停30分钟), Seat by Number (对号入座).

3.2.4. Regulatory Function

These public signs require the public to take or not to take the certain behaviors. The language used is straight, strong and no negotiable. Usually, it is expressed in imperative sentences. Such public signs play a certain role in constraint the public’s behavior standards, maintaining social order and security. For example:

No Minors Allowed (儿童严禁入内), Hands off/Don’t Touch (请勿触摸), No Smoking (请勿吸烟), Dogs not Allowed (禁止带狗入内).

3.3. The Language Style of Public Signs in Shops

According to the spot investigation and material analysis, the author find that the public signs are mainly expressed by nouns, verbal nouns, the gerund, phrase, phrases, abbreviations, text and the sign combination, the present tense, imperative sentences. The public signs are brief and concise and some of them have distinctive local characteristics.

3.3.1. Noun Used in Large Amounts

When showing the conceptual meaning, the public signs for service, instruction and direction should mainly used nouns to show special information directly and accurately. For example: Soap and Detergent (肥皂与洗涤剂), Nuts (干果), Organic Products (有机食品), Food & Beverage (餐饮部).

3.3.2. The Use of Verbs and Verbal Nouns

The public signs showing restrictive and regulatory meaning are often express by verbal nouns and gerunds, which can attracted the public to notice about the public signs makers' requirement and the following action. For example:

"Come in for a free sample" (请进门免费品尝), "Sampling"(样品试用), "Quality Service to All Customers"(为所有顾客提供优质服务).

3.3.3. The Usage of Phrases and Wide Use of Acronym

One of distinguished features of public signs is concise and clear. So, some public signs are usually use phrases and acronym to show their certain meanings. For example:

"Open Now" (现在营业), "Sold Out"(售完), "Latest Style"(时尚款式), "Duty Free" (免税).
"P" (停车场), "W.C." (厕所), "Kg" (公斤).

3.3.4. Uncommon Vocabulary are Strictly Banned

As we all know, the public signs used in commercial places are served for the public, so the words of public signs should meet the public's culture level obviously. Before choosing the words, we should consider seriously. We must avoid using the uncommon words such as the archaism, slang and terminology. For example:

"Special All Day" (全天特价), "Baggage Depository" (存包处), "Self Service" (自助服务).

3.3.5. Text and the Sign Combination

Sometimes, the public signs will be used with pictures, which can make the instruction easier to be understood. The words under the pictures can be a supplemental instruction or further explanation.



Fig 1. The public signs used with pictures

3.3.6. The Use of Present Tense

The public signs appear in commercial places are mainly used to show their informative, instructive, limited and regulatory functions on the public's behaviors. So it must be used in present tense. For example:

No food is to be consumed in this area. (此处不准饮食)

If this lift is out of order, please call 020-736397 for assistance, we apologize for any inconvenience caused. (如果电梯出现故障, 请拨打.....求助。我们为此造成的任何不便深表歉意)

3.3.7. The Use of Imperative Sentences

Because most of the public and customers travelling or staying outside are go hastily, the public signs aim at the certain public. It should be used in imperative sentences. Such as: “handle with Care” (小心轻放), “Keep Off the Grass” (勿踏草地), “Queue Starts Here” (在此排队).

3.3.8. Normative and Standard Vocabulary

As public signs play an important role in the public and customers' life, any ambiguity and misunderstanding may lead to bad effect. Keeping closed relation with the dairy life, the English public signs usually use formal and standard words to show available mean. such as: “Lost Children”(走失儿童认领), “Not for Sale”(非卖品), “No Pets Allowed”(禁携宠物入内), etc.

4. The Current Situation of Public Signs in Nanning

Although public signs have been used widely in our daily life, the nonstandard or inappropriate translations of public signs can be seen almost everywhere. And the other problem is that there is lacking of reasonable English translation for some important Chinese public signs. According to the research I do in Nanning's shops, I find that there are some errors existing in the Chinese-English translation of public signs. What's worse, the English translation of public signs mainly appear in the relative big and new shops such as the Xin Chao Yang Shopping Centre, Parkson, Wal-mart and so on. But the old or cheap shops such as Chao Yang Department Building, Nanning Trading Market, etc, which even have no Chinese public signs, let alone English public signs. According to the research, the work of Nanning's public signs translation still has a long way to go.

4.1. Existing Errors in Chinese-English Translation of Public Signs in Nanning's Shops

According to language and cultural differences, there are a number of problems in the translation of public signs such as spelling mistakes, lexical and diction problems, grammar mistakes, unconventional expressions and improper tones.

4.1.1. Wrong Translation on Words

For example:



Fig 2. Taken from Nanning Parkson Plaza, 2011-3-20

①请勿带宠物进入NO TAKDVG OIIY OR CAUSTIC LIOLID. This translation is obviously wrong. The most common translation should be “No pets Allowed”. According to the functionalist approaches, the translation of public signs should be concise and clear.

②**通讯广场 MOBILE-PHONE SQUARE. Here the “广场” is translated into “square”, which is not reasonable. And this translation belongs to literal translation without any distinction. Such a translation is regarded as word misusing. The word “square” refers to a broad open place and the meeting of streets (a place where the street intersect). Such as, TIAN AN MEN SQUARE“天安门广场”. So the “广场” here is more reasonable to be translated into “centre” or “shop”.

4.1.2. Wrong Grammar

Because of lacking of standardized management, the public signs’ translation on wrong grammar is a common phenomenon. For example:

consults the telephone (咨询电话), suit telephone (投诉电话), rescues the telephone (救援电话). When foreigners see such translations, they may feel puzzled. They may wonder that why should people consults the telephone or rescues the telephone. Neither the telephone can speak nor ask for help itself. It seems ridiculous to make translation like that. So, the more reasonable translations of these three Chinese public signs should be “hotline”, “complaint telephones” and “rescue phone” respectively.

4.1.3. Chinglish Used in Public Signs

Nowadays, more and more Chinese learn English, consequently, it appears some Chinglish which you can find anywhere in shops. For example:

(1) In a shop, a public sign--- “谨防扒手” is translated into “Take Very Good Caution”. The correct translation should be “Watch Out for Pickpockets”.

(2) In a mall, the public sign--- “保管好私人物品” is translated into “Take care of Your Private Things”. The correct translation should be “Take Care of Your Personal Belongings”.

(3) In a shopping centre toilet, there is a sign that “节约用水”, which is translated into “the Economic usage of Water”. The correct translation should be “Save Water” (Zhao Xiaopei, 2003).

(4) In some cinemas you may find the signs that “Double Numbers Entrance” (双号入口), “Single Numbers Entrance”(单号入口). Which is obviously unreasonable the correct one should be “Even Numbers Entrance, Odd Numbers Entrance” (Gu Huijuan, 2010).

4.1.4. Disunity Translation

As we all know, most of the foreigners are not so familiar with Chinese, what’s worse, some may even know little about Chinese. So, the existing problem of disunity translation may make foreigners feel hard to understand the public signs well. For example:

In a mall researched, you can find several different Chinese-English translations for one Chinese public signs---- “小心台阶”. Such as “watch your step”, “careful stairs”, “be careful of the steps”, “Be aware of the slope”, which may make people feel confused. They may think that the Chinese-English translations of the public sign are not telling the same thing, which obviously violate the public signs’ informative function.

5. The Cause of Errors

5.1. Communication Barriers Due to Language and Cultural Differences

The translators should know the language style of both Chinese and English public signs well. “There are five important features about English public signs: firstly, most of the public signs are written in capitals without full stop; secondly, the public signs are always short even one word; thirdly, the public signs are in simple writing style, such as noun, verbal noun or phrase;

fourthly, imperative sentence is used sometimes; fifthly, formal writing style is used sometimes” (Hu Wenzhong, 1987:1). As for Chinese public signs, the main feature is that being brief and concise. If a public sign is too long, it would be difficult for people to catch the main meaning of the content and remember it. For example, “随地吐痰引人恨 罚款一千有可能 传播肺病因此起 卫生法例要遵行”. Obviously, this sign was written in ragged verse in order to warn citizens not to spit everywhere. If it was translated into English word-for-word, it may have no effect on foreigners who may take it as a joke. The proper translation should be “No spitting. Maximum penalty¥1000”.

5.2. The Translators’ Neglect of the Certain Translation Principle

According to the functionalist approaches, one of the most important principles is that the pragmatic value comes first and the conceptual meaning second. And the most important function of public signs is that they can express the valuable notes to ordinary people. But, actually, some translators are paying too much attention to the literal meaning, which may lead to no equivalence on the content between Chinese public signs and target text. (Zhou Xuelan, 2010, 11). Linguistic translation errors are often due to the deficiencies in the translator’s source or target language competence (Nord, 2001).

5.3. No Enough Attention for Public Signs Translation

As the local government doesn’t pay enough attention to the public signs, there is no uniform translation organization, so the same Chinese public signs have different kinds of English translation, which makes the foreign visitors hard to understand the real meaning. The so-called English translators may be someone who has learnt one or more years of English. But, actually, his or her English level is not enough to be competent to the English translation work. Because of his lacking of knowledge on English and his limited experience, he can just translation the Chinese public signs word-for-word or copy some translations which is not so available for the real mean from the internet.

6. Suggestions and Conclusion

6.1. Suggestions

6.1.1. Use the Common International Means of Expression Directly

As we know, if there are many different kinds of English translations to the same Chinese word, it may be difficult for the English speaker to understand and it may lead to some troubles. Using the common expressive way in Chinese-English translation is necessary. As the functionalist approaches emphasize, the translation of public signs should be served for English speakers and the intentions of the public signs call for that every translation should be known well by the target language readers. So, the Chinese-English translation uses the common international way directly would help to make the public signs translations become unity and acceptable.

6.1.2. Use the Means of Expression Like the Target Language’s Indirectly

It means that when many Chinese may be difficult to find the sound English translation, at this time we can’t use the common means of expression directly and we can try to use the way indirectly. We can try to translate the given Chinese word into English depend on the English people’s thinking way and culture custom. In this way, on one hand it can keep the original meaning of the Chinese word, on the other hand it can make the target language readers comprehend the word well.

6.1.3. More Attention to the Culture Differences between Chinese and English

Functionalist approaches put emphasis on the choice of appropriate translation strategies according to the intended purpose and the function of the target text. So when translating public signs in shopping spots, translators should be familiar with the functions of the signs as well as

their language features, comprehend the cultural differences between English and Chinese signs, keep the target language reader the first place and choose appropriate translation strategies.

6.1.4. The Chinese Government Should Establish a Translation Organization

As the translation of public signs has close relationship with the image of China in the world, the translation of public signs plays an important role in the society. As to its current situation, it calls for more attention from our Chinese government. The government can do some policy demands on it and the translation experts at home and abroad should work together to put the Chinese-English translation of Public signs into standard, which, to some extent, can help translators to avoid making more errors.

6.1.5. Some Special Requirements for Translators

Firstly, a qualified translator should keep developing his language competence in both languages and having a clear concept of the cultural differences as well as similarities. Secondly, a qualified translator should develop his language intuition to pick up idioms and specific expressions and his power of observation and insight of English. Moreover, it is important to be sensitive to social-cultural and cross-cultural information. Last but not least, a qualified translator should always have a sense of responsibility for his own translation.

6.2. Conclusion

Through the analysis of various problems and their improvements in the translation of public signs, the author has provided some practical translation strategies on the basis of functionalist approaches. So this paper discussed several aspects of the Chinese-English translation problems of public signs in Nanning's shops, especially the cultural phenomena in translation. Based on some genuine examples, the author offered some suggestions to establish standard translation of public signs such as more attention should be paid to target text receivers, more regulations on translators and management of translation of public signs, more cooperation between experts at home and abroad, and more combination of translation theory and practice should be made. Translation of public signs should be paid more attention to and the various problems should be solved by the efforts of all the society.

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