

Translation of Public Signs Using Three-dimensional Transformation Theory from Eco-Translatology

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Abstract

Based on the translation theory of linguistic dimension, communicative dimension and cultural dimension transformation (“three-dimensional transformation”) from Eco-translatology, this paper discusses the linguistic features and translation strategies of public signs by analyzing a large number of translation examples. Public signs have the characteristics of concise language, expressing meaning first, and both text and graphics on them. Translators can adopt literal translation or omission to achieve the adaptive transformation of linguistic dimension, transliteration to produce the transformation of communicative dimension, and free translation to achieve the transformation effect in cultural dimension. Therefore, translators should pay attention to the use of translation strategies to achieve the “three-dimensional transformation” of public signs so that the target language is more consistent with the translation ecology of the target language. Only when the translated public signs are accepted by the target language readers, can they achieve the same purpose as the original language of the public signs.

Keyword: Ecological translation; Three-dimensional conversion; Characteristics of public signs; Translation strategies

1. Introduction

“Public signs” refers to all kinds of signs in public places, including notices, instructions, hints, displays, warnings and signs, which are closely related to people’s lives, production, ecology and work. Tourism signs are an important part of public signs, and they are used to instruct, remind, warn or inform tourists (Zhang, 2014). In short, public signs are expressive to achieve certain functions. By obtaining effective and rich information in public signs, people can know what they should do and what they should not do in a particular occasion and situation.

The translation quality of public signs reflects the level of civilization and openness of a certain country or region. For foreign visitors, it is a window for them to experience soft power of Chinese culture. The translation of public signs needs to consider a variety of factors, including linguistic transformation, communicative transformation, cultural transformation and the translation ecology between the source text and target text so that the translation can be understood and accepted by the foreigners.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, many scholars have studied public signs from different aspects. Some scholars have summarized the ten-year review on the translation of public signs, which provides a reference for subsequent studies (Zou & Meng, 2011). Other scholars have investigated the current situation of English translation of public signs in military hospitals, aiming to improve the language and culture communication ability of military hospitals and establish the international image of military hospitals (Han & Cheng, 2021). In addition, some scholars have commented on “culture, tourism and translation” with functional translation theory in order to analyze the English

translation research of public signs of tourist attractions (Li, 2022). Although scholars have studied the translation of public signs from various perspectives, there are few studies from Eco-translatology perspective. This paper will discuss the translation methods of Chinese public signs from the perspective of the “three-dimensional” transformation theory of Eco-translatology in order to provide some references for the future translation of public signs.

3. Theoretical background

Eco-translatology is a translation theory which was first put forward by Professor Hu Gengshen in 2001. It has attracted wide attention and exerted great influence on the field of translation. It is an interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary theory, which is in line with the social and academic development of the times. At the same time, it is also the translation studies from a new perspective, reflecting the development trend of translation studies from a single disciplinary perspective to interdisciplinary integration (Hu, 2008). It creatively combines the contemporary translation theories with the ecology theories. Eco-translatology involves many aspects, including translation process, translation principles, translation methods and translation criteria. In the book *The Focus and Theory of Eco-translatology* (Hu, 2011), he discussed the multiple dimensions of adaption and selections during translation, and “three-dimensional transformation” is one of the key theory among them, which focuses on adaptability of linguistic, cultural and communicative dimension transformation (Hu, 2011).

3.1 Linguistic Dimension Transformation

“Adaptive selection transformation of linguistic dimension” refers to the translator’s making adaptation and selection of linguistic forms in the process of translation. It is carried out in different aspects and at different levels (Hu, 2011). In the process of translation, the transformation of language dimension should be realized first.

3.2 Cultural Dimension Transformation

“Adaptive selection transformation of cultural dimension” means that the translator focuses on the transmission and interpretation of bilingual cultural connotation in the process of translation. The adaptive selection transformation of this cultural dimension lies in paying attention to the differences in the nature and content between the source culture and the target culture. To avoid misinterpreting the culture connotation of the original text, the translator should pay attention to adapting to the whole cultural system to which the language belongs while transforming the source culture (Hu, 2011). The cultural dimension pays more attention to the cultural transformation, and proper methods (such as free translation) can be used to translate public signs to achieve the cultural effect.

3.3 Communicative Dimension Transformation

The “communicative dimension transformation” refers to the adaptive selection and selective adaptation of transformation to achieve bilingual communicative intention in the process of translation. It requires translators to focus on whether the communicative intention in the original text is reflected in the target text in addition to linguistic information and the transmission of cultural connotations (Hu, 2011).

4. Translation strategies of public signs from the perspective of Three-Dimensional Transformation

The three dimensions-linguistic dimension, communicative dimension and cultural dimension transformation are interdependent and difficult to separate in the translation process, so the translation of public signs is no exception. Sometimes, translators can choose a dimension as the main starting point of translation and carry out reasonable translation. Translators also hope to achieve the effect of dimension transformation as many as possible while completing a dimension translation, and such translated public signs will be more accurate. This following part will briefly study the translation strategies employed in realizing the transformation of the three dimensions respectively.

4.1 Adaptive Selection and Transformation of Linguistic Dimension

The adaptive selection transformation of linguistic dimension is the translation of idiomatic language at the language level. First of all, translators can use literal translation to achieve the goal of the linguistic dimension of public signs. Literal translation is mostly based on the literal meaning of public signs. The translation can be carried out in combination with specific pictures, which reflects the characteristics of vivid public signs.

Among them, the most typical hospital signs are the translation of “普通门诊”, “专家门诊” and “特需门诊”. They should be translated as “Clinic”, “Expert Clinic”, “Special Need Clinic” rather than “Consulting Clinic”, “Specialist”, “Clinic of VIP/Special respectively Clinic” (Han & Cheng, 2021). This is a direct translation literally. The translation can find the corresponding expression in the English, and there is an established system of relevant language signs in its language system.

In Shaanxi History Museum, the translations of some cultural relics are not proper due to losing some information in the translated ones. The following are two examples.

1. “水晶八曲长杯 ” is translated as “Crystal Cup” (Zhang, 2021).
2. “白玉忍冬纹八曲长杯” is translated as “White Jade Lobed Slabs bowl with Honeysuckles Design” (Zhang, 2021).

These public signs fail to accurately describe specific objects in translation, and achieve the desired effect in language dimension (Zhang, 2021).



Figure 1 “Crystal Lobed Elliptical Cup”

In the process of translation, the translator should make literal translation based on the concrete object of public signs (as shown in Figure 1), rather than relying on the translator’s personal imagination. “Long” refers to an oval shape, so translators have to find the right words to translate “水晶八曲长杯” into “Crystal lobed elliptical cup” and “白玉忍冬纹八曲长杯” into “White jade lobed elliptical bowl with honeysuckles design” (Zhang, 2021).

Some public signs or slogans of meetings can also be translated literally to achieve the transformation of linguistic dimension. For example, “教育优先，共同圆梦” is translated into “Education first, realize our dreams together”. In this way, the translation is concise and can reflect the unique cultural connotation of China.

Translators can also use the translation strategy of omission in public signs to achieve the linguistic transformation. Conciseness is the main feature of public signs, so omitting translating some words or expressions is necessary if the conveyed meaning is understandable in translation. In order to enable tourists to get information as quickly as possible, the translator can omit the secondary information of public signs while translating complex public signs without losing the meaning of the original text, and the translation of the core meaning is the priority to be considered. For example, “垃圾不落地，景区更美丽。” is translated as “If garbage does not fall, the scenic spot will be more beautiful.” Obviously, this translation is redundant and lengthy, so we can translate it into “No littering” to directly express the central idea.

In tourist attractions, we often see signs that “水面危险，请勿靠近”，which is translated into “Risk of water surface, please keep away”. One Briton who saw an English translation of the sign said she thought the park was warning of a “slippery situation with water on the ground”. She said that if there was a warning to avoid falling into the water, the British may choose to warn tourists in English that “the water is dangerous here” (Cao, 2017). The key information is translated while “请勿靠近” is omitted in translation.

4.2 Adaptive Selection and Transformation of Communicative Dimension

The communicative dimension transformation makes the communicative goal a priority in translation, which can be realized through effective translation methods. Transliteration referring to

transforming the Chinese pronunciation of public signs, into English ones can be used to achieve communication goal of Chinese signs. For example, the sign for “蒙古包” is translated as “Mongolger”, which has the similar pronunciation to Chinese one, and the image of “Mongolger” has regional cultural characteristics. If it is simply translated by the word “Yurt”, it will lose its original cultural connotation.

The English Translation Of Guangzhou Public Signs (2018 Edition) adopts Chinese pinyin to translate “Lu(路)”, “Street(街)”, “Da Jie(大街)”, “Da Dao(大道)”, and other location words in the part of “A.4 Road Information”. What these translations reflect is actually the applicability of transliteration (Chen, 2019). We can use transliteration to express the name before the specific road name, which is a good choice. For instance, “滑铁卢国际车站” to “Waterloo International Station”, “斯碧威尔大街” as “Speedwell Street” (Dai & Lu, 2005). The transliteration of “滑铁卢” and “斯碧威尔” are the proper strategy. Thus, the communicative dimension is preferred, and the transliteration is mainly to achieve the effect of the communicative dimension.

Some Chinese restaurant menus have some special food names, but cannot find the corresponding expression in English. We can also adopt transliteration. For example, “馄饨” can be translated as “huntun” or “wonton”. With the improvement of China’s comprehensive strength, “豆腐” can be translated as “doufu” instead of “beancurd”. When we translate these names in Chinese pinyin for foreigners, they can gradually understand and accept the translation too. Then the purpose of communication can be achieved. For example, “杨凌蘸水面” is translated as “Yang Ling style noodles in tomato sauce” (Guo, 2015). Although foreigners may not know exactly what Yang Ling style noodles look like. Over time, they will know that they are noodles with Shaanxi flavor. Its shape or length are not needed to translate. There is also a Shaanxi snack called “腊汁肉夹馍”. If the translator stiffly translates the state of “eating the steamed bun with meat”, foreigners will surely be confused because it is also a kind of fast food with Shaanxi style. It is often translated into “Shaanxi Sandwich”, which is more acceptable for foreigners.

4.3 Adaptive Selection and Transformation of Cultural Dimension

The transformation of adaptive selection in cultural dimension is relatively complicated because of the cultural differences associated with the source language and target language. It is a better choice for translators to use free translation, which can make public signs mainly achieve the goal of cultural dimension. Free translation is a good solution to the characteristics of expressing ideas first. For example, “老幼病残孕专座” is translated as “Seats for Those in Need”. It is euphemistic, but foreigners may find it slightly cumbersome. “Priority Seats” and “Courtesy Seats” are commonly accepted translation (Chen, 2019). Translators need to fully understand the culture of the target language in order to accurately translate public signs. The translation of “禁酒区” into “Alcohol Free Zone” can better reflect the cultural connotation of the target language (Dai & Lu, 2005). Another example is the public sign on some special occasions. It is “旅客止步”, which is often translated as “Staff Only”. This translation is a polite way to ask the visitors not to enter a

certain place and focuses on conveying the main idea of the public sign. If we translate it into “Visitors stop”, it is a stiff translation and seems impolite for foreigners.

In some traffic intersections there is a public signs “车辆出入，留意会车”. The correct translation of it is “diverted traffic” by using free translation. The translation can adapt to the culture of target readers. If the text is translated literally, foreigners will be confused.

Some public signs contain local culture. The translator needs to understand the culture so that these signs can be translated accurately. For instance, the sign “添份红和绿，生活更美好” is placed to refer to the better life brought by the plants and flowers in a park. If we translate it literally, it will be “Add red and green, life will be better”, which might confuse foreigners. If we adopt free translation, it can be translated into “More plants, better life”, which is concise and easy to be accepted by foreign visitors. In the park, we also often see the sign “观赏花果，请勿采摘”. From the perspective of cultural dimension, it can be translated as “No Picking” directly through free translation.

In addition, the translation of public signs in scenic spots with Chinese cultural characteristics should be fully considered to complete the translation of public signs in relevant scenic spots. Take the translation of public signs in Louguantai Scenic spot in Zhouzhi County, Xi’an city, Shaanxi Province as an example, Louguantai is the holy land of Taoism in China. “皇帝问道” here is a Chinese allusion. When translating, we need to pay attention to the adaptability choice of cultural dimension here. Here “Dao(道)” refers to the tao of Taoism, rather than the meaning of “street” (Zhao, 2021). So it’s appropriately translated as “The Yellow Emperor inquiring about Taoism”.

There is no doubt that free translation is a better way of cultural dimension transformation in the translation of public signs. There are also some park names containing culture connotation. For example, “神剑园” in Dazhou City, Sichuan Province, would not be appropriate if translated as “Excalibur Garden” because of cultural differences. There is no King Arthur in China and certainly no Excalibur. If the translator translates “Excalibur Garden” into “Excalibur Garden”, foreigners will not understand it. In order to realize the transformation of cultural dimension, we can use transliteration method to translate it into “Shenjian Garden”. Therefore, We should try our best to adapt to the cultural environment related to the source text.

5. Conclusions

The translation of public signs can help foreign visitors’ work and life more convenient in China. It can also reflect the language, culture and images of China. Therefore, accurate translation of public signs plays a very important in publicizing Chinese culture and improving Chinese image among the foreign visitors. Translators need to study the features of public signs in multiple dimensions before translating them. In the process of translation, translators may adopt transliteration, free translation, literal translation, omission and other appropriate translation methods to appropriately complete the linguistic, communicative and cultural dimension transformation between Chinese and English and convey the connotations of public signs. These are only several translation strategies of applying three-dimensional transformation theory in the

translation of public signs. More attempts need to be made to improve the translation quality of public signs so as to attract more visitors to come to China to work, study or do business and improve the communication and cultural exchange between China and other countries.

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