Study on the English Translation Errors in the Public Signs of Tourist Attractions of Shaanxi Province

Hu Jingxian¹ and Xue Hongguo²

¹,²School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University

Published: 30 December 2021
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Abstract

Shaanxi Province, as one of the major tourist provinces, has not only rich historical and cultural relics, but also beautiful scenery, attracting a large number of tourists from home and abroad every year. For the convenience of tourists from other countries, some Chinese public signs have been translated into Chinese. Based on the examples of English translation of some Chinese public signs collected from the tourist attractions in Shaanxi Province, it finds that there are some translation mistakes which are mainly due to the inappropriate linguistic forms or cultural differences. This paper also puts forward suggestions for revising the English translation of Chinese public signs and hopes to provide some references for future English translation of Chinese public signs.

Keyword: Shaanxi Province; translation of public signs; linguistic level; cultural level; solutions
1. Introduction

Shaanxi Province is rich in tourism resources. Its profound historical and cultural relics and beautiful scenery enjoy a high reputation both at home and abroad, making it a major province of tourism. With the rapid development of China’s inbound tourism, tourism in Shaanxi Province has also maintained a high growth rate.

In 2013, the strategic conception of jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt proposed by China’s President Xi Jinping promoted the transformation of Shaanxi’s development direction from undertaking the industrial transfer from the east part of China to opening up to the outside world and integrating into the international division of labor. Since the Belt and Road Initiatives has been wrote into the Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reform, the importance of the Belt and Road Initiatives has thus elevated to a national strategy level. Accordingly, Shaanxi’s tourism industry embraced new opportunities. What’s more, as the core area of the Belt and Road and an international metropolis for cooperation and exchanges between Asia and Europe, Xi’an, the capital of Shaanxi Province has attracted more and more foreign tourists. In September, 2021, Xi’an successfully hosted the 14th National Games of the People’s Republic of China, which is the highest level and largest comprehensive sports meeting in China. A large number of athletes, coaches and spectators visited Xi’an. It has promoted the development of tourism industry in Shaanxi Province.

For the convenience of tourists, bilingual public signs are extensively used in tourist attractions in Shaanxi Province. However, the author found that some Chinese to English translation of public signs are improper or wrong translations through on-the-spot investigations and pictures of public signs in some scenic spots. If attention is not paid to existing problems in time, it will not only damage the image of the province, but also cause troubles and inconvenience to tourists. Therefore, standardizing the English translation of public signs has become an urgent issue that needs to be solved as soon as possible. This article analyzes the mistakes, explores the reasons for the mistakes and put forward some suggestions for correcting the mistakes so as to provide reference for future public sign translation.

2. Literature Review

Public signs are the notices, instructions, reminders, displays, warnings and signs that are closely related to people’s lives, production, ecology, and means of livelihood in the form of word and graphic information opening to the public (Wang Ying & Lü Hefa 2006). In practical use, public sign has four prominent application indication functions: indicative, suggestive, restrictive, and mandatory.

Public signs are also practical for standardizing social management. Lü (2005) said public signs play a functional mechanism in standardizing, coordinating, insuring, and stabilizing in the social, cultural, and economic development of all nations.

In the application field, public signs have certain characteristics in common with words like logos, markers, symbols and so on. But public signs are more widely used. The basic publicized
text information related to food, accommodations, means of getting around, travel, entertainment and shopping that displays the behavior and the need of residents, tourists, foreigners etc., are all in the scope of public signs research (Wang Ying & Lü HeFa 2006). As a new field of applied translation, the translation quality of public signs is essential to improve the quality of the urban facility and promote the image of the city. (Huang Youyi 2005)

Subdivided the public signs, there are guiding signs, scenic spot signs, safety warnings, commercial promotion words, and rules or requirements. The public signs studied in this paper refer to the guiding signs, scenic spot signs and safety warnings issued by government agencies and non-governmental organizations in public places, including road signs, bulletin boards and slogans.

Overseas’ research on the translation of public signs started in the 1970s. It was not until the 1980s that some domestic experts and scholars in China began to pay attention to issues related to the translation of public signs and began to explore this new field of translation studies. (Dai Xiaobing 2017)

Retrieving studies related to the translation of public signs in the past five years, certain features can be found. First, the studies on the translation of public signs have always drawn a high degree of attention. Although there are occasional fluctuations, it has always been an important research field of domestic scholars. Second, the research topics mainly focused on following: the errors found in public signs and how to correct them, translation principles and strategies, text analysis and standardization measures.

The search was further narrowed down to the area “Shaanxi Province”, and until August 2021, only 13 papers published at different journals and magazines were found. Analyzing these papers, the weak foundation of the English translation of public signs in Shaanxi Province gets revealed. Statistics also show that there are few research data and short research history. Among the papers, the earliest one is the report by Qi Jizhan & Wang Mei (2011) in China Quality Daily entitled “Let the ‘silent tour guide’ deliver accurate information”, in which the report proposed that the Shaanxi Provincial Bureau of Quality Supervision officially released Standards for English Translation and Writing of Public Signs in Public Places series of local standards. In the same year, Yang Hongying (2011) also published “A study on the standardization of scenic spot translation—Enlightenment from the compilation of Shaanxi provincial local standard Standards for English Translation and Writing of Public Signs in Public Places: Tourism”. This paper speaking from the innovation of the standardization to the details of standard. However, neither of these two papers talked about the specific translation of public signs, but discussed the Standards. In addition, there are three other papers about the construction of the corpus and the significance of the English public signs in spreading the Silk Road tourism culture. For example, Zhuo Wen & Wang Yong & Li Zhizhuo (2020) talked about the role English public signs play on the tourism and cultural communication. Therefore, only 8 articles specifically talked about the translation of public signs, and most of them were conducted under the guidance of the Eco-translatology theory, and the research was published mainly in 2012 and 2013.
To sum up, in recent years, although experts and scholars have been studying the translation of public signs in Shaanxi Province, still there’s more to do. And there is still much room for improvement in the translation of public signs.

3. Errors in the Public Signs of Tourist Attractions of Shaanxi Province

At present, although some progress has been made in the translation of public signs, there are still some mistakes. These mistakes can be roughly divided into two levels: linguistic level and cultural level. And much attention has been paid to the former one. Because in most cases, they’re easy to spot and correct without high English literacy. Errors in linguistic level include spelling mistakes, case insensitivity, using pinyin as translation, misuse or lack of punctuation, improper use of words, discrepancies between Chinese and English, inconsistent translations, grammatical errors, and errors in conveying information.

3.1 Errors in Linguistic Level

When translating public signs, mistakes at linguistic level are very common. However, as long as the translator pays more attention, it can often be avoided.

Example 1:

In the translation of the above picture, the word “Square” is spelled as “aquare” incorrectly. In addition, the meaning of the public sign does not match the original text. When translating into English, we should point out the location “South Gate” and understand what the Etiquette Cultural Square is? Only after we truly understand the connotation can we translate it better.

Example 2:

This picture is taking in the Xi’an subway and it’s a guiding sign, that is, an information reminder that guides people to conduct activities in public places. It is an important part of urban construction and it plays a very important role in people’s everyday commuting life. Only accurate, standardized, and systematic bilingual marking of guiding signs can effectively meet the needs of overseas tourists, diplomats, and business personnel.
“Let other riders exit before boarding” is a common public signs in transportation vehicles, which can also be seen in elevators. Usually it was translated to “Please let the passenger(s) off first”, but here the translation is “Please yield to alighting passengers”. In this translation, errors are easy to spot. On one hand, according to the meaning of “yield”, If you yield to someone or something, you stop resisting them. It apparently doesn’t fit in the context. On the other hand, “alighting” is a verb, not an adjective, so the part of speech is misused here.

Example 3:

Warning signs often contain words such as “Caution, Warning, Emergency, Danger, Beware”. They are usually displayed in public places with orange-yellow geometric signs to remind the public to pay attention to potential hazards and take precautions to avoid unnecessary loss of property or life.

There are subtle differences in these expressions. “Caution” means to be careful. Usually, the danger is right ahead. For example, “Caution Mind the step”. “Warning” have the same meaning of “Caution”, but the situation is more dangerous and the tone is stronger. “Beware” usually used with the preposition “of”, or coupled with “Caution” or “Warning” to indict the serious situation. When used alone, remember to add the the object or target that needs to be “beware of”. “Emergency” refers to a situation that needs to solve immediately.

Although warning signs can be expressed in different ways, in most cases, there are conventional expressions in English, like “Caution Slippery” or “Caution Wet Floor”.

Example 4:

In some places, certain areas are not open to the public for various reasons. To express this message, “Authorized Personnel Only”, “Unauthorized access prohibited”, “Access forbidden to all
unauthorized persons” or “Staff Only” often appeared on the signs.

In the above picture, it used “NON-STAFFMEMBERS OUT OF BOUNDS”. There is no blank space between staff and members. What’s more, out of bounds are usually used in the field of sports competitions, indicating that the (ball) is out instead of do not enter.

These kind of mistakes are not hard to find. For example, in the picture, “Step Forward” is translated to “Step Over” and there is no differences between leave and get in, “keep hands clear” to express “watch your hand” and “Compliant Call” instead of “Complaints Hotline” and so on.

It’s also found that as long as people are not allowed to do something, public signs are starting with “No”, like “NO SMOKING”. Although there is no error, sometimes the stance is too tough and lacks of transformation, which makes the public uncomfortable. It can be translated into “Smoke-free Area”.

3.2 Errors in Cultural Level

Compared with errors in linguistic level, errors in cultural level are more difficult to spot. Mistakes in cultural level include Chinglish, cultural differences, improper occasions, wrong circumstances, ambiguity in semantics, distortion of communication information, poor publicity, and over-literal transaltion (Li Zenggen 2014). Such mistakes are most reflected in the advertising signs and tourist attractions commentary.
Example 1:

The translation in the above picture has no spelling or grammatical errors. The syntax is also in line with English habits. But when reading it, we might get confused, left without a deep impression. How come opening a gate can guard a city? Which is the gate and the city here refers to? Therefore, to translate such public signs, we need to inquire more information, communicate with the client, and understand the meaning behind the slogan.

Careful investigation find that this slogan was mainly used to promote the scenic spots of “Xi’an City Wall”. There is a similar sentence “open a door, know a city” at the entrance of the Xi’an History and Culture Exhibition Hall. Accordingly, we further interpreted this slogan as opening up and welcoming tourists from afar to Xi’an, let them know more about the history and culture of Xi’an, appreciate the profound history heritage, inherit and carry forward the spirit of the ancient city. But in the translation, deep meanings behind it are missed.
Three aspects can be improved here. First of all, the meaning of “civilization” in Chinese is relatively rich and may cause confusion here. Secondly, the meaning of “more” and the relationship between the two short sentences are not translated. Thirdly, the appealing functions didn’t reveal here. The suggestive translation could be “Make the city more civilized; make the games more wonderful”.

The design of public restrooms in Xi’an is user-friendly. Not only basic men’s and women’s restrooms are set up, but also accessible toilet and unisex restrooms are set up separately. Some even have nursing rooms. But the effect of the public signs is greatly reduced for improper translation. Accessible toilet for wheelchair accessible lavatory will do; Unisex toilet for the third toilet remains controversial. The concept of the third public toilet comes from western countries. In the public signs above, “Unisex toilet” refers to “All Gender Restroom” and it first appeared in Thailand. At first, it was exclusively for men with transgender tendencies. Later, it turned to focus on serving the elderly, young, and disabled, so that they could enter the bathroom accompanied by family members of the opposite sex. Therefore, Family Restroom is more appropriate, and this translation is verified in CCTV news, which makes it more credible.
The public sign in the above picture tries to convey the message: Do not smoke here. Even a small cigarette can cause many harms. But the translation used smoke instead of cigarette. “Smoke” when used as a noun, usually means the gray, white or black gas that is produced by something burning. As a result, it’s better to improve the translation to convey the message clearly.

In addition to the above problems, there are many more such problems, as shown in the figure below.

In the picture, “Huandao Road” is translated as “Island Ring Road”, it translated every word respectively and bluntly combined them together. The translation of a certain road or a certain street can be directly translated into Chinese Pinyin followed road or street, here it can be translated as “Huandao Road” or “Ring Road”. “Do not enter” is translated as “NO ADMITTANCE”. Two mistakes can be found here. First, the letters are all capitalized. Second, the tone is too stiff.

Compared with the linguistic level, the problems in cultural level involve the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, which are more difficult to deal with, and require a high level of language literacy.

We listed the problems in the translation of some public signs above, divided and analyzed them according to the linguistic level and cultural level. However, through field investigations, it is
found that in addition to these two aspects of problems, some public signs are still not translated. And these issues should arouse our attention.

4. Suggestions for improving the English translation of public signs

The deepening of globalization, modernization, urbanization, and informatization has also put forward pressing need and strict requirements for the translation of public signs.

In this regard, improvements can be made from the following aspects.

First, look up to as much relevant data as possible before translation. Referring to the Guidelines for the use of English in public service areas issued by Standardization Administration to make the translation accurate and clear. Also, as mentioned above, some experts and scholars has established C-E parallel corpus targeted at the public signs in Shaanxi, such as Ma Caimei & Zhu Yiping (2013), Dong Lipeng, Gao Donghuai, Zhu Yiping & Zhang Zhiyuan (2012), these corpus can do a great favor. Do not translate without deep considerations and solid reasons.

Secondly, avoid machine translation. Most errors we find in public signs are caused by machine translation. Post-edition is of same importance as translation. Getting professional advice and strengthen the supervision and rectification of public signs.

Finally, encourage the public to actively participate in the translation and rectification of public signs. Activities like open call for translation of public signs and prizes for reporting errors can be hold.

5. Conclusions

Public signs play a vital role in serving or helping the public, so is the translation of it. To establish a tourism-friendly province, the translation of public signs should attach great importance and in need of multi-party unity and cooperation. At present, the translation of public signs in Shaanxi Province has made great progress, but there is still room for improvement. In order to seize development opportunities, build a tourist city, it is urgent to improve the translation of public signs.

Note: This research project was sponsored by Shaanxi Provincial Social Science Foundation (Grant No. 2017K027).

Reference


