

A Communicative Translation Approach to Chinese-English Translation of Public Signs

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A Communicative Translation Approach to Chinese-English Translation of Public Signs

Wang Jing-jing

1. Introduction

The unprecedented development of China has made it an important part of the world. In the process of making China known to the world, translation is an essential way to strengthen communication with other countries. In order to develop good relationship with foreign countries, public places of big cities in China have started translating Chinese signs into English to realize internationalization, and assist foreigners¹ from all over the world. However, nowadays, the general situation of sign translation is far from satisfying. The improper and nonstandard translation of public signs has been a serious issue as more and more cities and organizations try to display English signs to be globally connected. Besides, the “errors” in translation may overshadow the international image of China.

As an efficient means to provide convenience for the foreign guests, the translating activities of public signs, whether in the course of dealing with business or tourism, are of increasingly great importance. In 2010, China held the 41st World Expo in Shanghai. About 200 nations and international organizations and 70 million visitors from home and abroad took part in the exhibition, ensuring the largest participation in the history of World Expositions. Moreover, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games also made China globally connected. These grand international activities undoubtedly had become the impetus for translating public signs. Meanwhile, appropriate translation of signs is of great importance for the eating, living, boarding, traveling and working of foreign guests. Improper translation, on the contrary, hinders these purposes, puzzles foreign guests, and may leave a bad impression of China.

Nowadays, more attention has been paid to the Chinese-English (C-E, hereafter) translation of public signs. As an increasing number of public signs are being translated into English, more and more researchers and translators are participating in error-correcting activities as well as theoretical analyses and practical translation studies. Though a large number of articles in translation journals and books are dealing with problems and skills in C-E translation of signs, they have not analyzed them systematically (Zhang En-hua, 2008; Xie Wen-wen, 2008; Yao Guang-hui, 2008). The analyses of errors are sometimes so specific that a small change in the source text may cause a new error (Wang Yin-quan, 2006). What's more, many papers just focus on correcting mistakes and providing general techniques (Wang Bai-tao & Tang Jing-wen, 2007). Improving the current situation of public sign translation is an inevitable responsibility of the translator in China. Against this background, this study aims to adopt a translation theory to guide sign translation and tries to offer some insights for the Chinese translators to translate public signs.

2. Overview of Public Signs

2.1. Definitions of Public Signs

Public signs appear everywhere in our life and are easy for us to recognize. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, as cited in Backhaus, 2007, the word “sign” has the following five meanings:

1 an object, quality, or event whose presence indicates the probable presence or occurrence of something else...

¹ Foreigners here refer to guests or visitors from foreign countries, many of whom are assumed to understand English. The complex reality of multilingual backgrounds of such visitors are not discussed in this article.

2 a gesture or action used to convey information or instruction...

a gesture used in a system of sign language

3 a notice on public display that gives information or instruction in a written or symbolic form

4 (also zodiacal sign) *Astrology* each of the twelve equal sections into which the zodiac is divided...

5 *Mathematics* the positiveness or negativity of a quantity.

For the current study, entry 1 and 3 are important explanations. As Backhaus (2007) states, “the world we live in is a world of signs. Anything we understood about ourselves and what is happening around us is based on emitting and interpreting signs” (p.5) . In such a world of signs, public signs are more physical forms of signs we are exposed to in everyday life. The third entry, which is concerned with the physical form of a public sign, indicates the concrete functions of public signs.

Public signs are widely used in our daily life. They cover many aspects of people’s life, work, travel, and so on. It can be concluded that all these publicly shown or presented notices with words and/or pictures, which are used to tell and direct the public can be regarded as public signs. To be more specific, public signs are most widely applied in public transportation, for example, road directions, street names, airports directions, subways directions, and gas station instructions; in scenic spots like parks, famous mountains, and museums; in traveling services such as consulting, emergency aid and translation service; and in business institutions like shops, restaurants, supermarkets, exhibition and trading. This research understands that signs are verbal texts supposed to give information or direction publicly, which are usually short, concise, attractive, and sometimes presented with nonverbal images.

2.2. Basic Functions of Public Signs

Public signs are closely connected with human life, thus also have certain effects on life. Through provid-

ing the service, information, and direction, public signs meet the public’s demand for convenience in life. Based on Professor Lü He-fa’s classification (2005) , public signs have the following four functions²: informing, prompting, restricting and compelling:

2.2.1. Informing Sign

Informing signs only provide information often about the available service. Thus they usually show the content of the service but do not ask the receiver of the message to take action. For example:

外卖服务 Take Out
 会议中心 Conference Center
 售票处 Ticket Office
 汽车修理站 Car Repair Service

2.2.2. Prompting Sign

Prompting signs are usually applied with the tone of warning or reminding. The displayed text may be only a description of a situation but it also implies some rule or regulation about the situation. Whether to conform to such a rule is, in a sense, up to the message receivers. For example:

油漆未干 Wet Paint
 道路封闭 Road Closed
 置于暗处 Keep in Dark Place
 易爆物 Explosive

2.2.3. Restricting Sign

This type of public signs exerts restrictions or constraints on the related public. The rule is expressed usually in a straightforward way, but does not make the readers feel unpleasant or offended. Once restricting public signs appear the related people are expected to take some actions or to refrain from them. For example:

凭票入场 Ticket Only
 站队等候 Stand in Line
 残疾人通道 Handicapped Only
 60公里/小时 60km/h

2.2.4. Compelling Sign

A tough tone is commonly used in these compelling signs to require the message receiver to perform or not to perform some actions, so there is no room for compromise. Imperative sentences are usually used under this situation. For example:

² There are differences in categorizing the functions of signs, but the current explanation is based on Professor Lü He-fa’s classification, which is popularly used in China.

禁止通行 Don't Walk

儿童严禁入内 No Minors Allowed

禁止超车 No Overtaking

靠左行驶 Keep Left

3. Previous Research on C-E Translation of Public Signs

3.1. Theoretical Research Background of C-E Public Sign Translation

Research on public signs is mainly done from the perspective of “linguistic landscape³”, discussing on language policy issues and multilingualism (e.g., Cenoz & Gorter, 2006; Gorter, 2006; Backhaus, 2007; Shohamy et al., 2010). However, scholars in China have done research on public sign translation from different perspectives primarily using the translation theories of text typology, functional equivalence theory and Skopos theory.

Firstly, a typology theory proposed by German translator Katharina Reiss, is an adaptation of Karl Bühler's model of language functions. The German scholar divided texts into three types: (1) content or information focused, (2) linguistic form focused and (3) effect on reader focused. She held the opinion that the text type decided the approach of translation. Two years after the publication of her article “*Translation Criticism: The Potentials and Limitations*” (Reiss, 2004), British scholar Peter Newmark (1988), also based on Karl Bühler's model of language functions, distinguished some text types and translation techniques. Although there are differences in terms and classification, their theories share many similarities. They both thought texts could be classified according to the language functions, and the translation approach is decided by the text type, and both function and type of the text are fixed. Using text typology to guide sign translation have been done in some previous studies (Li Ling-li et al., 2011; Zhang Qun-Xing et al., 2011, Zhang Mei-fang, 2009).

Secondly, Li Huai-kui & Li Huai-hong (2004), Liu Jian-gang & Yan Jian-hua (2005), and Chen Shuy-

ing (2006) adopted a pragmatic theory to public sign translation and strongly advised to put emphasis on pragmatic equivalence and use a pragmatic translation method. It emphasizes “pragmatic meaning” transfer and centers on the natural equivalence of content expressions and their “pragmatic equivalence”, which focuses on social pragmatic equivalence of culture and language communication. The shift of focus from information itself to cultural and environmental difference brings the translation of public signs into a new height. However, research on the pragmatic equivalence of public sign translation missed a key problem: “If the source text contains pragmatic failure, should the translator still adopt the method of equivalence?” In fact, this is the precondition of pragmatic equivalence research: The speaker/writer uses proper words in a proper time and way; if not, is it the translator's responsibility to correct it? This is a practical question in real life.

Skopos Theory was put forward and developed by German scholars Reiss, Vermeer and Nord. Skopos Theory, based on behavioral theory, indicates translation is a human activity with specific purposes and aims. The whole translation process, including the selection of translation methods, is determined by the purpose of the translation. The most important factor deciding the translation aim is the expected function of the source text. Zhao Qiu-rong & Liu Min-xia (2008) and Jiang Hong (2007) discussed the public sign translation under the influence of functionalism and suggested doing translation according to the purpose of the sign. In addition, Skopos theory points out that “purpose decides means”, which may promote the existence of various translation versions without giving judgment for a better one and may also provide evidence for the existence of bad ones.

The theoretical review shows that the main problems in theoretical research on public signs lie in the weak cognition in basic requirement of public sign translation. Public sign translation is not the duplication of a static text in different languages; the translator should neither ignore the interaction of text and trans-

³ Linguistic Landscape or LL is often used in the study on public signs worldwide, but this article will not review related works here since its main concern is not the practical purposes of translation of public signs from the local language into a globally used language.

lation nor blindly pursue pragmatic equivalence, which is source text-centered, nor misuse the translator's creativity by using the Skopos Theory.

3.2. Research Activities and Achievements

In the late 1980s, Duan Lian-cheng (1998), a leading scholar, the former leader of the Foreign Languages Publishing and Distribution Administration, also a translator, published *How to Help Foreigners Know China*. This book is regarded as the first academic monograph of international communication and established a foundation for the theoretical formation of international communication. In the book he gave a specific summary of the efforts China had made to build its image through different periods, and made it clear that China should improve cross-cultural communication skills to build a better image all over the world. Based on the research of Duan Liancheng and Shen Suru, who also contributed a lot to international communication, scholars have been engaged in the study of publicly-used Chinese expressions, and have produced some books on signs (Lü He-fa & Shan Li-ping, 2004; Lü He-fa & Wang Ying, 2007).

The first sign website, "www.e-signs.info", was established by Lü Hefa, a professor in Beijing International Studies University, in August 2003. This website has systematically promoted research on translation of public signs. It does not only provide the newest information on sign translation, but also presents many heuristic essays related to sign translation. A forum was formed at the website for people to communicate, discuss and exchange opinions on C-E translation of public sign. In 2005, the website "www.language.chinadaily.com.cn/herewego/" launched an activity called "Here We Go", which encourages people to find errors in the bilingual signs and then submit their pictures and re-rendered texts to the website. Experts were also invited by the website to evaluate and make comments on the people's contributions. What's more, on November 15th, 2006, the Translators Association of Shenzhen opened a special column on their website in order to put up a platform to exchange the experience of sign translation. As a consequence, people got interested in seeking and correcting mistakes, and were motivated to further improve the language environment and people's competence in practical English us-

age. Other websites also open columns for public sign translation, like "www.bisu.edu.cn", "www.YFTA.net", "www.china.com", and "www.sinosign.com".

In addition, the First Symposium on C & E Signs in a Global Context, which was co-organized by the Translator's Association of China, the China Daily Website, the China Standardization Institute, and Beijing International Studies University, was held on September 25th - 27th, 2005, in Beijing International Studies University, which attracted more than 100 experts and scholars on translation. It indicated that improving the public sign translation was an urgent task.

What's more, many articles regarding public sign translation have been published, including articles written by well-known scholars and translators like Professor Lü He-fa (2004, 2005), Professor Dai Zong-xian (2005), and Professor Luo Xuan-min (2006). Many scholars do much research work on this subject, and their contributions have been accumulated in books and journal articles. However, many of the articles only discuss one certain aspect of the public signs such as a comprehension and criticism of the original text or giving translation techniques (Ren Jing-sheng, 2001; Wang Yin-quan & Chen Xin-ren, 2004).

4. Problems in C-E Translation of Public Signs and Their Causes

As the translating activity becomes increasingly popular, more mistakes are consequently found. This section is going to summarize the errors in sign translation and analyze the possible reasons of making such mistakes. In fact, problem finding is the first step for putting forward a good and efficient method to solve the problem. Therefore, this section aims to provide a base for finding an appropriate approach for sign translation.

4.1. Errors in Linguistic Aspects

4.1.1. Spelling Mistakes

Due to carelessness either of translators or printers, spelling errors are not uncommon. These mistakes may not cause severe troubles, but leave bad impressions on foreign guests and cannot perform the expected functions.

The sign, "Read End Collision", with the original

meaning “追尾危险” may shock the reader. It is an essential traffic sign on super highways to remind the drivers of danger of collisions. The word “Rear” is wrongly spelt as “Read” here, and loses the desired meaning. (Ren Jing-sheng, 2001)

4.1.2. Grammatical Errors

Mistakes in grammar are usually caused by the language incompetence of the translators, and grammatical mistakes are usually eye-catching, so avoiding such errors is the fundamental prerequisite for translators. Commonly seen grammatical errors are the misuse of the part of speech of words. For example, using a verb as a noun, an example found in a shopping mall in Nanjing, China, “equip” was used to replace “equipment”; in a supermarket, an instruction sign on the public closet says “You will be rendered as the one who have fully understand and accept all the clauses...” (Lu Zhi-hui & Ma Guang-hui, 2008) It’s easy to point out the mistake and it should be revised as “You will be rendered as the one who has fully understood and accepted all the clauses...”

4.1.3. Lexical Errors

When doing translation, we may find that some words in the source language have no counterparts in the target language. Moreover, there are cases that a word may have several equivalents with close meanings. Hence, to select an appropriate word is crucial to evaluate whether the translated version is correct, idiomatic or not. Improper choice of words, misuse of words, and word redundancy are all included in this type of error.

“Forbad randomly reject peel, cigarette butt (禁止乱扔果皮烟蒂等废弃物)” is an example found in one square in Hefei, Anhui, China. Undoubtedly, this version would leave a negative impression on the foreigners. Actually, there is a counterpart in English-speaking countries, concise and accurate, which has the same function — “No Littering”.

4.2. Errors in Cultural Aspects

Any language is the carrier of the long history of its speakers. People in different cultures differ in social backgrounds, customs, thinking modes, and ways of expression, which are also embodied in public sign translation. The obstacles in translation caused by cultural differences should be fully recognized. Differences in

language carrying cultural connotations become barriers in translation. Culture gaps always exist between different peoples, because of their regional, conventional, religious and social developmental differences, which dig a pit for translation. Mistakes in cultural aspects often appear in the following three forms:

4.2.1. “Chinglish”

In the course of translating the signs with Chinese characteristics into English, great efforts should be made for better understanding of implied cultural meanings. Chinese and British have different models of thinking and correspondingly separate ways to express thoughts. If a sentence is in the form of English but with Chinese logic, it may cause misunderstanding or puzzlement, and thereby “Chinglish” comes to exist. Translators are more or less influenced by their native language. How to overcome the troubles and deduct influential causes is a deciding factor of successful translation.

“游人止步” is a common sign in scenic spots. The translated versions of “Stop”, “Guests, Stop Here” and “Visitor go no further” may make foreigners puzzled, because they are based on a Chinese way of thinking. It may guide some readers to stand by the signboard. The rendering, “Closed to Visitors”, will realize the purpose to stop the visitors efficiently and bring convenience to foreigners as well.

4.2.2. Harsh Mood

Different from many Chinese public signs with the expressions like “禁止” and “严禁” to denote a strong prohibition, English public signs are inclined to be delivered in a mild way. A prompting or restricting public signs translated in a compelling way may make foreigners angry or dissatisfied. Similarly, a sign starting with “don’t” are seldom used in English. Apart from public signs with strongly compelling or restricting meanings, people prefer to adopt a tender expression. For example, “闲人免进” rendered into “Staff Only” is more polite and euphemistic.

4.2.3. Misusing Expressions with Different Cultural Connotations

Many English and Chinese words have seemingly similar superficial meanings, but actually, they have different cultural connotations. A successful translation should not only deliver the surface meaning but also the culture contained in the source language. Accord-

ing to Nida (1993), the purpose of translation is partly to build cultural equivalence between source and target languages. Match in meanings, functions, and feelings for translation equivalence should be realized between the two cultures.

As a matter of fact, it seems that many translators do not pay enough attention to the cultural differences in the process of translation. Thus many misunderstandings and even errors come to exist. For the sign “热烈欢迎来自五大洲的朋友”, someone translated it as “warmly welcome the friends from five great continents”. Here, “五大洲” means the whole world for Chinese, so the literal translation is understandable for them and they can get the right meaning, but for many people from foreign countries, “seven continents” is a more commonly used expression. Thus it does not realize the expected function of expressing welcome to foreigners from all over the world (He Zhi-fan, 1994). However, there is a similar expression in English, e.g. a warm welcome to... A more standard translation for the sign above is: “A warm welcome to our friends of the world.”

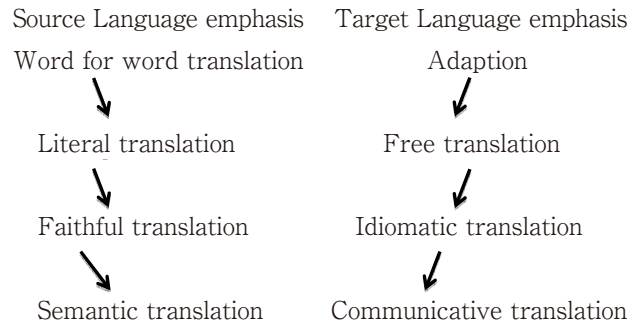
5. Communicative Translation Approach: A Guiding Principle to C-E Translation of Public Signs

5.1. Peter Newmark’s Theory of Communicative Translation and Semantic Translation

Peter Newmark, a famous English translator and translation theorist, who has made great contribution to common translation theories, studies translation theories by combing translation and language functions. Based on the analysis and conclusion of translation theories, Newmark applies stylistics, discourse analysis, semiotics, functional grammar, and cross-cultural communication theory to the research on translation and provided excellent illustration on translation theory, translation teaching, and translation strategies. Newmark’s translation theory, together with a theoretical review of translation methods and some basic concepts relevant to this article will be presented in this section.

According to Peter Newmark (1981, p. 38), “the conflict of loyalties, which is the gap between emphasis on source and target language, will always remain as the overriding problem in translation theory and practice”. However, the gap could perhaps be narrowed if

those terms, i.e. literal, free, faithful or idiomatic translation, are replaced by communicative and semantic translations, which is illustrated by the following diagram from Newmark (Newmark, 2001 b, p. 45).



The conception of communicative translation and semantic translation that are put forward on the basis of text-classification, are Peter Newmark’s main contribution to translation theory. According to him (Newmark, 2001 b, p. 39), “communicative translation attempts to produce on its reader an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original. Semantic translation attempts to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original.” In semantic translation, attention is paid to the source text while in communicative translation more emphasis is laid on the appropriate use for the target language readers’ easier acceptance.

5.1.1. Communicative Translation

Newmark (2001 b) considers translating as an activity that serves as a means of communication and a transmitter of culture. “Communicative translation attempts to render the exact contextual meaning of the original in such a way that both content and language are readily acceptable and comprehensible.” (Newmark 2001 a, p. 47). Newmark’s communicative translation focuses on interpreting the information of source language, stressing that meaning takes priority on form. He divided the text into three forms: ‘expressive text’, ‘informative text’, and ‘vocative text’ (Newmark, 2001 a). Communicative translation is used for ‘informative’ and ‘vocative’ text. Because of their different functions, the meaning and form should have different focus. Informative text focuses on information out of language, while vocative text is reader-centered, since even the figure of speech is used to arouse reader’

s emotional resonance. In Communicative translation the 'message' is important, and the essential thing is to make the reader think, feel and/or act. "Communicative communication pays more attention on the expressiveness of source text instead of the mere content." (Newmark, 2001 a, p. 39).

Communicative translation is functional and usually used for translating non-authoritative texts like booklets, tourist brochures, product instructions and advertisements. This approach focuses on factors such as readability and naturalness, and suggests that the translated text should be suitable and comprehensive for the reader. People of different countries share more similarities than differences in communication. According to Newmark, communicative translation requires a brave attempt to clarify and recognize the meaning, even including the correction of some errors in the source text.

5.1.2. Semantic Translation

Newmark (1993) stated that semantic translation is usually used for translating authoritative text or expressive text, that is, texts in which the content and the style, the idea and the words, also the structure are important in the same way. As he indicated, "the expressive components of 'expressive' texts (unusual syntactic structures, collocations, metaphors, words peculiarly used, neologism) are rendered closely" (Newmark, 1993, p. 47). This kind of translation only translates what is mentioned; nothing is added or lessened. That is why the resulted translation is usually more awkward, more detailed, more complex, more concentrated, and pursues the thought-process rather than the intention of the transmitter.

Semantic translation gives highest priority to the meaning and form of the source text, and is suitable for texts that have high status, such as religious texts, legal texts, an literature. It tries to represent the style and tone of the source text precisely. Semantic translation is out of the restriction of time and local space and does not require cultural adaptation.

5.2. Communicative Translation Approach to C-E Translation of Public Signs

5.2.1. Using the Theory of Text Typology

Based on linguist, K. Bühler's Functional Linguistic Theory, by referring to R. Jakobson's text classifica-

tion, Newmark (1981) divided the text into six types; among them three main types are expressive, informative and vocative texts. The first text type highlights the author and the source text itself, whose functions are mainly displayed in texts like autobiography, private letters, novels, poems, drama and so on. The second one aims to convey information, knowledge, suggestions and the like; the focus of a text is on content and theme; and the text may cover knowledge in any fields, including textbook, technical report, newspapers and periodicals, thesis, and memos. The third type of text is trying to persuade the target reader to take some actions or give a response, like instructions and commercial advertisement. On the basis of Newmark's text typology, public signs should be included into the third type, i.e., vocative. However, Newmark also states that "few texts are purely expressive, informative or vocative; most include all three functions, with an emphasis on one of the three" (Newmark, 1981, p. 42). As a consequence, the major function of the sign should be analyzed carefully before translators start to work so that the corresponding strategies of translation can be designed to achieve successful communication. By combing all these three functions summarized by Newmark in his text typology, we can discuss public sign translation from these three aspects respectively. Zhang Mei-fang (2009) stated that firstly text typology helps analyze the function of the text objectively; secondly it helps translators identify the language features of the text with different functions; and thirdly it assists translators to find appropriate translation approach.

5.2.1.1. Expressive Signs

This kind of signs follows "Author-First" principle, centering on the author of the source text by being faithful to both the original thoughts and linguistic features. The content of the sign is mostly the expression of the source text without paying much attention to the reaction of the reader. Thus the focus moves to the authority of the author or the organization that displayed such a sign. Public signs of this type are as follows:

颐和园又成为逊帝溥仪的私家园林。

The Summer Palace became the last Emperor Puyi's Private garden.

本收银机临时关闭, 因此给您带来的不便我们深表歉意。

This cash register is temporarily closed. Please accept out apologies regarding this inconvenience.

5.2.1.2. Informative Signs

Signs of this type constitute a large part of public signs, and are usually “Authenticity First” and try to realize the informing function, which are the most widely used signs in public places. They aim to provide information or services, usually with succinct words, not asking readers to take action all the time. They help foreigners identify their location, find way of doing something, and confirm their expected purpose of their behavior under the direction of the information. Here are some examples:

总服务台 Reception Desk
 残疾人设施 Facilities for Disabled Persons
 电器城 Electric Appliances
 献血处 Blood Donation

Examples of informative signs are abundant, and usually can be categorized into place names, road signs, shop names, and names of organizations, services and institutions.

5.2.1.3. Vocative Signs

A great number of public signs are included in this group, which may include all the signs of prompting, restricting or compelling functions. Most importantly, signs of this type are “Reader-First”, since their main concern is to make the reader think, feel or to stimulate the reader to take or not to take certain actions, thus the information is usually dynamic. Here are some examples:

警戒线 勿超越 Police Line Do Not Cross
 桥上严禁超车 No Overtaking On Bridge
 限高 Maximum Height
 小心地滑 Caution: Wet Floor

5.2.2. Concentrating on Nature of the Readership

According to Newmark (2001a, P. 41), “the core of the vocative function of language is the readership, the addressee”. The term “vocative” is used in the sense of ‘calling upon’ the readership to react, think, or feel, in fact to ‘react’ in the way intended by the text.

For instance, the sign “老年人优先上车”, often appears at the bus station. The translated version “Old people waiting and getting on first” obviously destroys the cultural habits of English speaking counties by ignoring the usage of euphemism. Usually this sign is delivered as “Senior Citizen First”. Similarly, in the buses,

there are seats marked as “老弱病残孕专座”, which was often translated as “Seat for the elderly, weak, sick and disabled as well as for pregnant woman” in China. Although this sentence is complete in content and clear in meaning, it does not accord with the features of public signs of conciseness and comprehensibility. Meanwhile, the word “elderly”, which westerners dislike, may make them unhappy. As a matter of fact, this kind of seat also exists in England and America, rendered as “Courtesy Seats”.

Translating with proper mood is necessary, because some Chinese signs are expressed with imperatives or negative imperatives like “禁止”, “严禁” and “切勿”, which may sound harsh to foreigners. Thus translators should avoid creating such a feeling on the foreign readers, and should try to achieve the equivalent effect. Examples are: “禁止摘花 Keep Away From The Flowers”; “禁止吐痰 No Spitting”; “车辆禁止通行 Closed to Traffic”.

Newmark (1988) thinks translation is science, art and technique. Based on his opinion, it’s not difficult to find that seeking a proper way of translating is like drawing pictures. We learn basic knowledge, put them into works of ourselves, and lastly, evaluate and enjoy the beauty in them. Public sign translation follows the same steps, by concentrating on nature of readership, the translator is explaining, showing and displaying to and discussing with the public in a polite method.

5.2.3. Focusing on the Purpose of Translation

Communicative translation approach clearly states the purpose of translation that is delivering information and making the reader think, feel, and act. Newmark (1988) also points out that the purpose of communicative translation approach is to make the reader in the target language get the same feeling towards the translated text as the reader in the source language, to create the same effect.

Communicative translation approach regards translation as a communication process in certain social situations (Basil & Ian, 1990, p. 3). This translation method is Reader (in the target language) -Centered or Receiver-Centered. In this way, in translating, the translator aims to deliver message or information rather than reduplicate lines of linguistic units. What it cares is how to preserve the function in the original text and to create same effect on the new reader. It

takes the structure or formation of the original text as a factor partly influencing translation method. The stress of communicative translation approach is based on the language, culture, and ways of communication of the target language to convey the information, instead of being faithful to the words of the source text as much as possible.

The failure in transmitting the vocative function the source texts expected to perform is a root for the error in C-E translation of public signs. For example, in the sign “110, one touch is available” (110, 一拨就灵), how “110” is referred to is very likely to puzzle the foreign readers. If translated into “For Police Call 110”, it will not only offer help simply and clearly but also perform the vocative function well. (Li Yu-liang & Yu Qiao-feng, 2008)

By using the communicative translation approach, the translator has much freedom in the way of explaining source text, in adjusting writing style, in eliminating ambiguity or even correcting the original author’s mistakes in order to realize the purpose of communicating. In this way, the translated text will necessarily break the restrictions for the fixed target reader, who is the focus of this approach. The translator may remove obstacles and difficulties as much as possible for the readers to assure smooth communication. Newmark illustrates the semantic translation method is more suitable for expressive text, while the communicative translation approach is more widely used in translating informative and communicative approach. The English version of public signs is neither just used to serve the native speakers of English, nor just to show how we connect globally, but to bring convenience and help for the foreign guests in their eating, living, studying, travelling, and shopping in China. So it’s obvious that the communicative translation approach should be regarded as the appropriate method in public sign translation, which focuses on the reader, taking their cultural background and capability into consideration. What’s more, they make the reader clear about the true intention of communication of public signs, and sign readers will be able to do what the signs require them to do.

As a guideline and general principle for C-E translation of public signs, the communicative translation approach combines consideration of the text typology, the nature of readership and the purpose of transla-

tion. It is the right method for public sign translation, as seen in the whole process of translation. It acts on text types that carefully categorize signs and require the translator to better comprehend the function of the signs. It concentrates on the nature of the readership, which helps display, their cultural connotations correctly, and it focuses on the purpose of translation to accomplish the task.

5.3. Suggestions for C-E Translation of Public Signs

5.3.1. Suggestions in Linguistic Aspects

Linguistic mistakes are often due to deficiencies in the target language competence of translators (Nord, 2001). In He Zi-ran’s book (1998): *Pragmatics and English Language*, he indicates that mistakes in language are caused by translators’ failing to observe the target language structures, which is caused by mistakenly using their native language structures. It’s not difficult to find spelling or grammatical errors; for public signs are concise and short in form. Therefore, with a rigorous attitude, these mistakes can be avoided.

A public sign reading “Dangerous Birds (濒危珍禽)” is found in a park in Nanjing, (Wang Yin-quan & Chen Xin-ren, 2004). Seeing such a sign and getting the meaning that the birds are fierce and might hurt visitors, foreigners will become confused and frightened. However, the exact meaning is to inform the public that these birds are on the edge of extinction and worth having a look. Then, the proper version will be “Endangered birds”. “危难时刻, 迅速报警 (Being Urgent Call 110 Quickly)” is an understandable sign but does not follow the conventional English usage. “Emergency Call 110” is more widely used. In some restaurants, “前台” is translated as “Front Desk”; “收银台” and “入口” are translated into “Cashier Desk” and “Entrance Gate”. More conventional versions—“Reception”, “Cashier” and “Entrance”, however, can achieve the purpose concisely (Wang Bai-tao & Tang Jing-wen, 2007).

The instances above tell translators that they should keep in mind that translation work requires rigorous attitude, professional language competence, ample knowledge and high sense of responsibility. Effective cross-cultural communication is ensured by qualified interpretation, thus translators are supposed to make their translated versions examined to guarantee the quality. Only by preserving a high sense

of responsibility and constantly acquiring plentiful knowledge in every field as much as possible, can the translator complete translation work better. This is an elementary requirement for a professional translator.

5.3.2. Suggestions in Cultural Aspects

“Translation theorists’ main concern is selecting a proper general approach for translation” (Newmark, 2001b, p. 22). Translation strategies are proposed to keep accord with translation principles. As stated in Section 4, our principles for public sign translation are text type-based, more communicative than semantic and trying to achieve cross-cultural pragmatic equivalence. The following suggestions are selected according to these principles.

5.3.2.1. Respecting Conventionalized Expression in English-speaking Countries

As for some signs, we can employ the ready-made versions in English-speaking countries, because most of them may carry the same function although they exist in different countries. A typical example of this phenomenon is “闲人免进”. For its translation, we will not hesitate to employ the expression “Staff Only” in English.

Another example, “禁止吸烟” can often be seen in many public places in China, since smoking is forbidden for the sake of the public health, and a non-smoking sign also appears in English speaking countries, with the same function – compelling. Nowadays, since people are quite familiar with this sign “No Smoking” in English, people know its meaning precisely even if some of them may not know English. With the picture added to this sign, everyone gets its intention, and the sign performs its function easily, correctly and successfully. Professor Lü Hefa has said that English public signs have their own standards, so translators can employ those that have already existed in English-speaking countries. The signs of “老、弱、病、残、孕专座” in the bus is noticed often. Yet its standard translation hasn’t been strictly set up. But in the similar location of the bus in America, the sign “Courtesy Seats” appears.

5.3.2.2. Attaching Importance on Pragmatic Function

It is inappropriate to just translate the source text by giving a general and superficial idea. Good translators should constantly develop the skills to make the target reader feels what the source reader feels about

the same text in order to avoid a pragmatic failure. As Thomas (1983) suggests, pragmatic failures refer to pragmatic cultural mistakes, like improper expressions in content or form, or unsuccessful communication that does not accord with the habitual way of expression in the target language.

On April 14, 2005, the government of Guilin (a city in Yunnan province in China) and Translators Association of China held a press conference, attempting to find the best translation for the well-known slogan in China, “桂林山水甲天下”, with the requirement of translating elegantly and faithfully, expressing the meaning of this sentence accurately, and conforming to the readers’ way of appreciating in order to make it widely read. A translator of Guangdong Foreign Affair Bureau, Wu Weixiong, analyzed the cultural habits of the target reader, and then a widely known proverb “East or West, home is best” occurred to him. He changed the sentence a little, and got the translated version: “East or West, Guilin landscape is best”, which won the first award for outstanding translation. This is a successful example for communicative translation of signs, which transfers the meaning of source text completely and beautifully.

Public signs also constitute an essential role in preserving public order by performing all of the four functions: informing, prompting, restricting and compelling. As a consequence, they are diverse in form. Under this situation, translators should give careful consideration to some expressions like “禁止” and “严禁”. Those signs that begin with such a compelling tone are familiar and acceptable for Chinese but English speakers that stress on equality among people may not be accustomed to them. What’s more, English is often expressed in a mild and polite way, which can be inferred from the fact that they usually use “please” and “Thank you” even when they communicate with their family members. Thus translators are expected to avoid harsh tone as much as possible if not necessary in translating public signs. In some parks, “禁止摘花” is rendered as “Don’t Pick the Flowers”. Its harsh tone may be unpleasant to the foreign readers. As a matter of fact, expressions beginning with “Don’t” are seldom used publicly in English. Instead, sentences in a mild manner are selected since it seems more polite. Especially, the park is a place for people to relax and have fun. So it can be rendered into “Keep away from the flowers,

please”, which shows the same meaning while making the reader feel happy to take care of the flowers. In this way the function of this sign is also implemented successfully.

5.3.2.3. Exploring Aesthetic Features

Among the subjects of humanities, Aesthetics is the first one that is supposed to be connected with translation. The aesthetic activity should be conducted throughout the whole process of translation (Mao Rong-gui, 2003). Translation aesthetics are established as the basic bilingual skills, any one of which is indispensable.

Figures of speech like metaphor, personification, parallelism, or antithesis are often used in Chinese to make the article varied in style. In C-E translation of signs, simply to be faithful to individual words and structures is a mistake. A better version is supposed to keep accordance with the original text first in meaning and then in structure as a whole. Some figures of speech can be adopted in the target text sometimes, but it's usually very difficult to handle due to the differences both in linguistic aspects and cultural aspects. There are also cases where we can translate some of them into English with certain figures of speech, even if they do not appear in Chinese expressions. Here is an instance: “安全环境齐手创, 各行各业乐安康”. Based on the meaning of this expression, we can adopt the palindrome: Work for a safe place for work (Wu Weixiong, 1998).

6. Conclusion

6.1. Findings

This study has reached the following conclusions:

To begin with, the two categories of mistakes usually occurring in sign translation should be paid more attention, especially the mistakes rooting from culture. What's more, translators should preserve a high sense of responsibility and treat the translation work seriously. It should be noticed that public sign translating is as hard as translation in other subjects, and sometimes it can be even more difficult. Under this situation, it is the translators' responsibility to improve their proficiency in both target language and source language in order to convey the anticipated function of public signs.

In the second place, by providing the English

translation for Chinese public signs, the translator intends to offer convenience and necessary information for foreign visitors. Therefore, a proper theoretical guideline, like the communicative translation approach, should be applied to sign translation for the translator to better achieve the purpose.

Thirdly, translators should flexibly adopt or employ different approaches in public sign translation. Though short in form and simple in structure, public signs deliver much information and cultural message as a special text. For those signs existing in English speaking countries with nearly the same functions, we may just follow their standards or principles to make them idiomatic. For those signs with Chinese characteristics, specific strategies should be adopted to achieve their functions respectively.

As an applied translation, public sign translation needs theoretical support urgently, and by relying on the theory, translation quality can be ensured. Through analysis from different theoretical perspectives, public sign translation can be improved enormously. However, public sign translation depends on the context so much that research on it should be conducted from a perspective of cross-cultural communication, by taking the source text, the readership, and the environment into consideration. In this way, difficulties in sign translation can be eliminated.

6.2. Limitation of the Study

Any research has inadequacy and limitations. Firstly, due to the lack of first hand materials of signs, samples for the research have been limited. Secondly, some English translation versions this article provided still need further revising and polishing because of the limited translation experience and insufficient competence of the author; there may be some problems in diction or idiomatic expressions. The author welcomes suggestions for better versions of those public signs.

6.3. Further Study

In the discussion from the perspectives of communicative translation approach in translating Chinese public signs into English, the author is aware that deeper and broader research need to be conducted and a larger range of materials need to be collected. Under the direction of other different theories in translation,

public signs will have better and clearer translation versions in the future.

Improving the translation quality of public signs is a time and effort-consuming task that requires accumulated experience. In the research on C-E translation of public signs, there still exist many problems that need to be solved. In order to present a good image of China to the outside world, greater attention must be given to the translation of public signs. It is an inescapable duty for researchers, educators and translators to do more research on public sign translation and to improve its quality, so as to create a better bilingual environment in China.

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A Communicative Translation Approach to Chinese-English Translation of Public Signs

Wang Jing-jing

This article aims to adopt a communicative translation approach of Peter Newmark into public sign translation and provide some insights for translators to do sign translation, particularly through using the translation theory as a guide in the whole process of translating. It begins with a general introduction on the current situation of Chinese-English translation of public signs followed by the definition and functions of public signs. After reviewing the recent academic research on signs and research activities, common problems in public sign translation are illustrated from two perspectives: linguistic aspects and cultural aspects. Newmark's translation theory is then introduced and discussed in the second half of the article, which explains how the communicative translation approach is adopted and how it can guide public sign translation. In the end, some suggestions are given to public sign translation.