ON THE TRANSLATIONS OF PUBLIC SIGNS

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Abstract - Public signs at parks, streets are for help, yet some of the translations have aroused confusions among visitors who may not realize English is a foreign language to the translators. People from both China and the other cultures have shown concerns over the issue. This paper, based on collecting and analyzing the sign translations at parks, streets, attempts to work out reasons why the translated version is misleading and to propose some cautions to avoid those problems.

Index Terms - Translation, public signs, communication

I. INTRODUCTION

The reason why this topic was chosen was because of the "learning for some practical value" tradition in China. And translation shall be practical: help for comprehension. Another reason is a misunderstanding: quite a few people, at least in China, think that it is simply easy to translate. They hold the idea that if one has learned English for some time and has a dictionary, then one can translate. This kind of thinking can be misleading. Therefore, starting from the English translation of the sign language can have people realize that translation is not as easy as they thought. Writing poetry could "shorten one's gray hair"(Du, 757), translation may have the hair even shorter.

II. DEFINITION

The so-called public reminder, as the name suggests, generally refers to the reminder, initiative, logo, or ban on the public's behavior in public places. For example, pedestrians are given priority, are careful to slip, boys are not allowed to enter, do not spitting, and so on.



Public prompts are concise and easy to be comprehended. Such as: 非公莫入feigong moru, Authorized only）,男士止步（ Nanshi zhibu,Wome only）.











Actually, strong social and political information can be seen from those public signs. In the 1970 and 1980s when family planning was strict, prompts and signs of one-child policy could be spotted.





Those public sigs sounded rather warning and threating.

Not until recently however, public signs tend to assume more gentle and even humorous messages. For example, 把花朵留在枝头把美丽留在心头(ba huaduo liu zai zhitou ba meili liu zai xintou. Leave the flowers in the branches so as to leave the beauty in your heart. It is a gentle reminder not to take flowers away from the branch so that people can all appreciate the beautiful flowers.)



In recent years, with the gradual development of tourism, public signs and posters received more attention, the number of public signs has increased. There are also some public cues with icons, even with icon-based and text-assisted signs. Do not Litter, and Do not Smoke, for instance, are sometimes even stressed with broadcasted messages.



IV. CURRENT SITUATION OF PUBLIC SIGNS IN ENGLISH

Public signs are particularly valued in tourist cities. However, the problem of translation of those signs into English was also exposed. Some studies even believe that improper translation of English labels can be considered as "psoriasis" (Pang & Xie 2009). Even though some public signs are gentle or even romantic in Chinese, their English version, however, sound rude and/or terrifying.





"Be cautious NOT to fall down" were turned into "Fall down Carefully" !

The writer witness a sign posted on the bank of a river running through the west part of Beijing telling the public: Fall into the water carefully, which obviously shall be a remind of NOT falling into the water.

The writer was curious about the necessity of translation of those signs: now that those signs are telling with sketches or pictures, are texts necessary? One of the answer was amazing: we pay more attention to the bilingualism—with languages of English Chinese, the signs looks more balanced!

Perhaps the key point to city offices lie mainly on the structure, not on the message itself.

Some of the English prompt signs are so misleading that they have caught the attention of world presses. The folloing examples were posted by New York Times:





It can be assumed that, in fact, construction is in progress, please bypass. The English translation on driving delivers a message which is just against the Chinese one.

Sometimes, language style is changed in translation. The styles of the Chinese and English cues are inconsistent: the Chinese one is polite and even sentimental, while the English version is blunt.







Public signs shall be brief since they appear on limited spaces. Yet quite a few of the translated signs are found redundant.

The sign at Hangzhou Railway Station is sure to indicate the departure for trains and not for others. The logos by the sign make it even more clearer.



Improper English prompts are not limited to Beijing, they were also found in other cities like Taiwan. The following prompts at the entrance to a big hotel at Taipei were posted at the internet by Wiki in November 2006.





As Nofar (2018) puts that “it is important to have multi-language signs in airports, since people from all over the world use them, but maybe next time try to use a better translator.”

IV. REASONS WHY THE ENGLISH VERSION BECOMES TROUBLESOME

Since translation has been considered an easy task, some people tend to translate literally. While in fact, literal translation may mean a large difference. A common example may be that Have you had your breakfast is simply a daily greeting among the local people in Beijing while in other cultures it is more proper to say How do you do or Good morning or simply Hi!

In some men’s public restrooms at parks or highway rest areas, some prompts are translated as：

A Small Step Forward, A Great Step Towards Civilization.

Civilization may be too serious.

Secondly, the translators may take some time to realize that proper language forms may have to be re-considered in the target culture.

CONCLUSION

A conclusion section is not required. Although a co he code for public sign translations is expected. Now that it concerns translation, it shall be connected with languages and cultures.

That is, the work shall start from school education on translations: to work out what is trying to be shown and then have it translated into English properly.
It sounds simple. In fact it is not. Different ways to express exist between the two languages of Chinese and English (Liu, 2004).

The striking difference can be found at the movie names while Waterloo Bridge was translated into《魂断蓝桥》, (hunduan Lanqiao) and North and South was translated as《南北乱世情》 (Nanbei Luanshi qing); Gone with the wind（ Margaret Mitchell ） became 《飘》(piao) or even 《乱世佳人》(luanshi jiaren-literally a pretty in a troubled time).

Some researcher（ Tong，2009：190 ） proposed a " briefness, conciseness and standardization" principle for the sign translation at public places.

Besides language difference, translation has to consider cultural factors such as trees, animals, stones may have different connotations. Some animals and plants such as cranes, the three friends enduring cold winter weather (pines, bamboos and plumb blossoms) Is it possible to transliterate? For example, may the古韵xx (ancient xx) be translated into Guyun xx? Or 古月xx（ ancient moon xx ）could be translated as old or ancient moon? In a famous park at Beijing, where visitors appear to be mostly seniors, many of the cue words reflect the Chinese culture tradition, such as "Rhythm Court" and "Sounds of Drunken Moon". The park's Sino-British signs are now transliterated and it is estimated that tourists from other cultures who know little Chinese may be confused.





The translation community actually has ready-made examples for our reference. Yutang Lin translates Li Qingzhao's poetry "凄凄惨惨戚戚" (qiqi cncan qiqi) in "Shengshengman" to "so dim, so dark, so dense, so dull, so damp, so dank, so dead!" (Hao & Shen , 2001).

Language is in the process of evolution, which shall be considered by the translators. That is, the same language form may have taken some new meaning or connotation. The term Steek on a post at Taipei surprised tourists for the reason that the word is a legitimate English word, yet fell from common use hundreds of years ago.
Wonderful English translations of pubic sighs exist, such as "八荣八耻"(barong bachi) was translated as"Eight Honors and Eight Disgraces." This t ranslation was regarded as a successful example of the former leader of China, obviously with the influence of "dos and don'ts" in English (Pan，2009：468).
In fact, wonderful translations even though rare, can be found:
Breast Feeding. Best Bet for Babies.
It conveys the meaning easily accepted by the target language with proper form , in that alliteration is an often employed way of figure of speech in English (Pan, Xie 2009:469).

Translation may not be so easy, as it involves two languages and cultures, which can be seen from the above analysis of the English version of signs shown at public places. Translation tends to be helpful. Unfortunately sometimes it adds to the confusions. Translators shall be cautious while transforming one language into another.
The next suggestion is that city utility offices shall be cautious as well in selecting those signs for posting. The researcher realized that some of these signs were purchased with English translations done by the sign manufacturers. Some of those business may ignore the intelligibility of the English translation.

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