RESEARCH ARTICLE

PUBLIC SIGNS TRANSLATION OF COASTAL CITIES IN SHANDONG PROVINCE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The rapid economic growth has widely motivated the communication between China and other countries. Under such a circumstance, the proliferation of mutual contacts calls for China's readiness to create a livable and convenient environment for its international visitors. Public signs as part of the environment on the one hand provide necessary information for people; on the other, they definitely display the level of civilization of the country.

Along with the strategic implementation of the New Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in 2013, the Development Plan of the Blue Economic Zone in Shandong Peninsula was approved as a national strategy of the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015). And the Five-Year Plan from 2016 to 2020 has witnessed the consistency of this national strategy. As famous port cities in Shandong province, Qingdao, Yantai and Weihai, usually referred to as the "door" of the Silk Road, have attracted overseas investors and visitors. However, there are still inappropriate translations in the bilingual public signs which affect the image of Chinese cities. Hence, it is urgent to improve the translation quality of public signs in these cities so that a nationwide promotion of public signs translation will be tapped. From the perspective of eco-translatology, translators of public signs should adapt to the translational eco-environment to decide the final target text through adaptations and selections. By analyzing the translation errors of public signs in coastal cities of Shandong province, the paper tries to put forward the appropriate target texts from the perspective of eco-translatology. Furthermore, suggestions are given to improve the translation quality of public signs and enhance the overall image of Chinese cities as well as the country.

KEY WORDS: public signs; eco-translatology; coastal cities; translation

1．   **INTRODUCTION**

With a history not very long in China, the research of public signs translation was not initiated until 2005 by "the first symposium on Chinese-English Sings around the Globe" (Huang, 2005:31-33). Since then the relevant studies on public signs translation began to draw attention from more and more scholars who have explored public signs translation from different perspectives, including text type, pragmatic equivalent, communicative translation theory, Skopos theory etc. which have devoted to the total development of translation studies in China.

Chen Shuying (2006), Li Huaikui (2004) and Liu Jiangang (2005), examine the public signs translation from the perspective of pragmatics. They argue that the translation of public signs should be under the guidance of pragmatic equivalent and social pragmatic equivalent principles. However, the pragmatic appropriateness is untouched in the studies.

Wang Caiying (2009) and Yi Xi (2010) prefer to apply the Communicative Translation Theory to public signs translation which puts the target readers at the top priority. However, one point deserving special attention is that the theory of communicative translation may neglect the response differences among receptors. To put it in another way, people from different cultural backgrounds may respond in different ways as a result of the cultural differences.

Another popular theory related to public signs translation is Relevance Theory, which believes that knowledge shared by the speakers and receptors can make the communication easier. Sperber and Wilson (2001) as the representatives of this school illustrate that inferring, as one of the necessary communicative steps, should be mentioned with encoding and decoding. Wang Bo (2010) argues that the adequate relevance should be ensured by the translator to provide the fundamental element of understanding for readers so that the effectiveness of information delivery will be guaranteed.

All the relevant research mentioned above contribute a lot to the public signs translation, but fail to coordinate it with the features and functions of public signs. To summarize, the previous research mainly investigates the following areas---functions of public signs, linguistic features of public signs, errors in the translation of public signs and strategies on the translation of public signs. In another word, a global view of public signs translation is seriously needed which is possible to offer general guidance for the translation of signs. To address this problem, eco-translatology put forth by a Chinese scholar Hu Gengshen on the third symposium of Asian Translators in 2001 provides a multi-dimensional horizon to investigate the translation of public signs. He put forward that there is a translational eco-environment in which language, communication, culture, society, author, reader and translator get interconnected, with the translator as the center to decide the final target text in the process.

2.   Introduction to Public Signs

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines "sign" as "a public notice giving information or instructions in a written or symbolic form". In China, Long Jianghua (2007) gives definition to signs in public as a special literary style that could be easily comprehended by readers and bears communicative functions". Wang Xueqin and Pei Zhengfang (2006) hold that public sign is the certain language employed in public places which are referred to in different Chinese terms like 标志语、标识语etc.

2.1.   Features of Public Signs

In terms of linguistic features, public signs are generally believed to be concise, straightforward, clear and easy to be understood. For example, Ding Hengqi considers public signs as "concise, conventional, consistent, conspicuous, convenient" (Ding, 2006: 42) and Luo Xuanming and Li Tuwang point out that the linguistic features of public signs are conciseness and standardization (Luo & Li, 2006: 66-69).

The main features of public signs, whether in Chinese or in English, are specified as follows:

Short expressions are usually used in the signs for simplicity, for example: "请勿践踏草坪/Keep off the Grass". Abbreviations are often applied in public signs, such as "贵宾室/VIP,", "特快专递/ EMS".

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The simple present tense is used most frequently in public signs in order to give real-time direction, suggestion, restriction, or waning to the target readers, for example: "小心碰头/Mind Your Head", "禁止通行/Don't Walk".

Public signs are commonly seen in various forms. The combination of words, pictures or drawings is often used, which is of great help to make the public signs easily understood.

Moreover, specific expressions in public signs vary from country to country due to cultural differentiations though they refer to the same object. For instance, the word "W.C", which originated in U.K. is well acknowledged in China, while other English-speaking countries prefer "Toilet"; American English "Garbage Can" is expressed as "Rubbish Bin" by the British; " First Floor" in U.K. is " Second Floor" in America, etc.

2.2.   Functions of Public Signs

Public signs usually carry four functions (Bei and Shan, 2002) which are informational function, directive function, restrictive function, and mandatory function.

Informational Function: Target readers get necessary information from signs in public places such as "问询服务/INFORMATION", "租车服务/CAR REANTAL".

Directive Function: Public signs offer a suggestion or direction, for example, "小心地滑/ WET FLOOR" , "售完/SOLD OUT".

Restrictive Function: Public signs may restrict people's actions to comply with the social conventions, for instance, "右侧行驶/KEEP RIGHT", "残疾人专用通道/ WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE".

Mandatory Function: Mandatory function is similar to the restrictive function, but the language is more strict and compulsory, for example, "严禁吸烟/ NO SMOKING" "严禁停车/NO PARKING".

Therefore, professional translators should be obliged to take the functions of public signs into account in the translating process.

3.   Eco-Translatology as the Theoretical Guidance of Public Signs Translation

Viewed globally, China, as the second largest economy of the world today has developed a closer relationship with other economic entities. To meet the need of frequent international interactions between China and other nations, it is urgent and necessary to improve the language quality in public places of which public signs translation is an essential part. Based on the author's previous investigation, the translation quality of public signs in China is far from being adequate. And the author tries to discuss the translation of public signs with eco-translatology as the theoretical basis which is expected to offer some practical suggestions for the translation practice of signs in China.

Eco-translatology, as an ecological approach in the field of translation, was proposed by Chinese scholar Hu Gengshen which is an interdisciplinary concept, exploring translation from an ecological perspective. Eco-translatology discusses translation "as a translator's adaptation and selection activities in a translational eco-environment". Translational eco-environment, where language, communication, culture, society, author, reader and translator interconnect, consists of source text and target text (Hu, 2011: 5-9). According to Hu, the process of translating is expressed in Figure1:

Process of Translation= Translator's Adaption (to the translational eco-environment) + Translator's Selection (to select the degree of adaptation to the translational eco-environment+ to select the form of the final text)
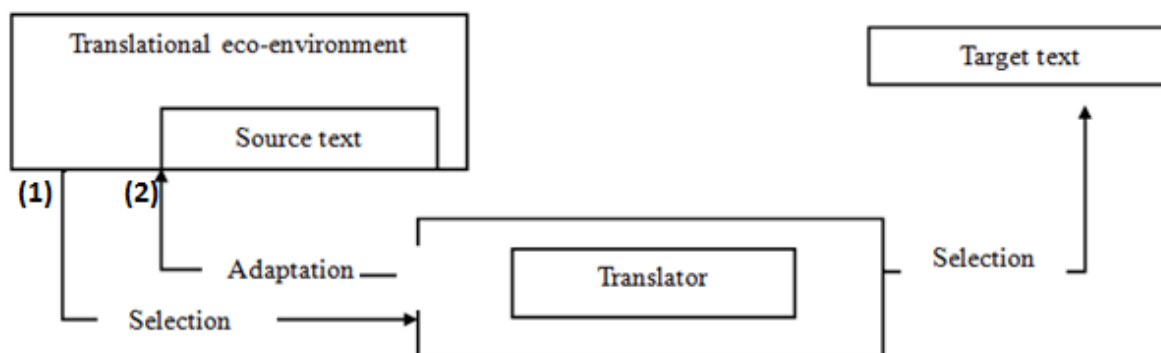
This formula can be simplified to:

Process of Translation= Translator's Adaption+ Translator's Selection

The simplest formula thus turns out to be:

Translation= Adaption+ Selection (Hu, 2004: 226)

And the process of translating consists of two stages which is illustrated in Figure 2 (Hu, 2004: 222),

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According to the theory, the translation process is viewed as "translator-centred, translational Eco-environment adapted and cyclical alternations of the translator's adaptation and selection". (Hu, 2004). The basic principle of translation is multi-dimensional selective adaptation and adaptive selection (Hu, 2004). In the first stage, the translator has to be selected by the eco-environment (source text); after that, the selected translator will do his utmost to choose and determine the final text. As language is always considered as the conveyer of culture and the tool of communicative activities, the multi-dimensional transformations in the theory of eco-translatology are mainly referred to as linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions which are more practical for a translator to take into account.

3.1   Dimension of Linguistics

According to what has been mentioned previously, the language in public signs varies in English-speaking countries, let alone the differences between Chinese and English. Therefore, the translator has to adapt to the eco-environment by taking the unique linguistic features of public signs into consideration and accept the restrictions in a specific language, so that he can select and decide proper texts to cater the linguistic rules (Hu, 2008).

Generally speaking, as a result of the different thinking modes between English and Chinese, the public signs translator often has to make structural and organizational adaptations to get an appropriate target text. For example, the translator may split some long and complicated sentences written in Chinese into shorter and more concise expressions in English.

3.2   Dimension of Culture

As is argued by Nida, the use of language is influenced by culture so deeply that the translator can unlikely make an accurate interpretation of the text without a culturally precise comprehension of the background (Nida, 1993). The comprehension of the differences between source culture and target culture usually determines the translating process in various aspects, such as the translator's selection of the form as well as the style of the final text. Thus, the translator, with the awareness of the transformation of cultural connotations embodied in the languages, has to get utterly adapted to the cultural systems that the source language and target language belong to. (Hu, 2008)

The adaptive transformation of cultural connotations is critical to enhance multi-dimensional transformations, which means the utility of different translation strategies. That is, the awareness of the cultural differences between two languages is always the requirement for the translator in the process of transformation.

3.3   Dimension of Communication

Information without the communicative function is useless (Nida, 1993). This is especially true for the public signs which bear the functions including informational function, directive function, restrictive function, and mandatory function.

Hence, the adaptive transformation to achieve the communicative purposes of the source text means that to transform the linguistic information and cultural messages could not compose the whole process of translation; besides, the transformation of communicative intentions is also of great significance (Hu, 2008). To

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put it in a simple way, the realization of the communicative function is one of the main tasks of public signs translators.

In summary, translating is viewed as the translator's adaptation and selection in a translational eco-environment. The translator must select the appropriate target texts to transform the source public signs under the guidance of the three dimensions as a whole to adapt to the translational eco-environment.

4.   Investigation on Public Signs Translation in Coastal Cites of Shandong Province under the Guidance of Eco-Translatology

Error analysis is an approach in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) which also has been widely used in translation studies. This paper probes into the errors in public signs translation which are commonly seen in the coastal cities including Qingdao, Yantai and Weihai. As a common way, the errors are categorized into three types: lexical, syntactic and pragmatic errors.

4.1.   Lexical Errors

Lexical errors consist of the wrong spellings and improper wordings, which fail to realize the communicative goal of public signs. Therefore, translators have to see to it that in the translation the communicative intentions of the source text have been transformed (Hu, 2008).

Misspelling Errors

(1) SL: 小件快递   TL: SMALL APRCEL EXPRESS

Revised Translation: Light Casting Railex

Example (1) was found in Qingdao North Station. In this example, "包裹" is misspelled as " aprcel". Moreover, among common target texts for "小件快递" such as " fast small freight transport", " light casting railex", " small-lot goods express", the second one is the most popular.

(2) SL: 地下出站口 TL: TRESTLE BRIDGE

 SL: 公交车站   TL: UNDERPASS

Example (2) was found in Qingdao Train Station. Although it is not typically misspelled, it is a good example of errors caused by carelessness in spelling.

Inappropriate Wording:

(3) SL: 市区   TL: city

Revised Translation: Downtown

Example (3) was found in Yantai Train Station. In this example, "downtown", which is the commercial center of a city, is clearly more acceptable than "city".

(4) SL: 行李开包间 TL: Luggage compartment

Revised Translation: Luggage Control

Example (4) was found in Qingdao Liuting International Airport. As is defined by *Collins Learner' s English-Chinese Dictionary*, a compartment is one of the separate parts of an object that is used for keeping things, for example, a separate space that a railway carriage is divided into. Luggage compartment refers to a compartment in an automobile that carries luggage or shopping or tools. Actually, luggage control is the most common translation according to the international norms.

(5) SL: 禁止通行 TL: CLOSED TO TRAFFIC

Revised Translation: No Entry

Example (5) was found in Yantai Coach Terminal. According to *Collins Learner' s English-Chinese Dictionary*, " traffic" refers to all the vehicles that are moving along the roads in a particular area and the movement of these vehicles and people that are being transported. Moreover, "No Entry" is an international agreed expression.

(6) SL: 1-12号检票口 TL: TICKET ENTRANCE

Revised Translation: Ticket Gate 1-12

Example (6) was found in Yantai Coach Terminal. "检票口" is a common public sign bus station, train station or airport. However, the translation of "检票口" is various. According to Wang Yinquan(2006), translation of "检票口" should be " ticket gate" in bus station and train station, and " check-in" in airport.

To improve the quality of public signs translation by the avoidance of lexical errors, translators must take the linguistic dimension into account so that they will decide the target text in an appropriate way to meet the expressive and aesthetic needs of the target language which might differentiate from those in the source language.

4.2   Syntactic Errors

This paper refers to syntactic errors as the ungrammatical sentence structures and wrong word sequences, which mainly go against the linguistic norms and may finally fail to realize the communicative function of public signs as well.

Ungrammatical Sentence Structure:

(7) SL: 本窗口售全线客票   TL: Sale All Of The Ticket

Revised Translation: All Tickets for Sale

Example (7) was found in Qingdao North Station, where "sale" is misused as a verb which should be revised as "All Tickets for Sale".

(8) SL: 行李托运   TL: Luggage consign

Revised Translation: Baggage Check-in

Example (8) was found in Yantai Train Station. In this example, "consign" is a verb, which is a syntax error. In comparison, "Baggage Check-in" in Qingdao Train Station is more accessible.

(9) SL: 寄存室   TL: LEFT OF BAGGAGE

Revised Translation: Left Baggage

Example (9) was found in Yantai Coach Terminal, where the preposition " of" should be deleted.

(10) SL: 旅客止步 TL: Passenger stop

Revised Translation: Staff Only

Example (10) was found in Qingdao Liuting International Airport. First of all, according to the principle of "subject-verb agreement", "stop" in this example should be "stops". Moreover, the English equivalent of "旅客止步" is " Staff Only". Another example in this airport is that "机场电话卡销售处" is translated into " Airport Sell phone cards" which is also unacceptable in English language neither in meaning nor in grammar.

(11) SL: 不可回收垃圾 TL: NOT-RECYCLABLE

Revised Translation: Non-Recyclable

Example (11) was found in Yantai Train Station, where "not" is misused as a prefix. The right answer should be "non-recyclable".

(12) SL: 持头等舱客票的旅客，每人可随身携带**2件物品** 持公务舱或经济舱的旅客，每人只能随身携带一件物品。

TL: Each First Class passenger may carry-on two pieces and each Business on Economy Class passenger is limited to one piece only.

Revised Translation: Each first-class passenger may carry two pieces and each business-class or economy-class passenger is allowed to carry only one piece.

Example (12) was found in Qingdao Liuting International Airport. Apart from the misspelling errors, the definition of " carry-on" was described by *Collins Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* as follows, when you travel by air, your carry-on luggage or carry-on bag is the luggage or bag you have with you in the plane, rather that the luggage that is carried in the hold. According to this definition, it is a syntactic error to use "carry-on" here.

Wrong Word Sequence:

(13) SL: 餐厅安检内   TL: Restaurant Security Check Inside

Revised Translation: Restaurant

Example (13) was found in Qingdao Liuting International Airport. The preposition "inside" should have been used as "inside the security check" to guide the target readers to the destination.

To avoid errors mentioned above, translators should refer to the linguistic dimension, and take the differences between Chinese and English into consideration.

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4.3 Pragmatic Errors

This paper defines pragmatic errors as inappropriate expressions, word redundancy and false cultural references. The cultural conflicts between source text and target text are the key cause of errors of this type. The failure of the translator to understand the cultural variations will definitely bring about the missing of cultural connotations implied in the languages so that the communicative function of translation to enhance cultural exchanges will hardly be achieved in the process.

Redundant Words:

(14) SL: 广场出口 TL: SQUARE EXIT/ EXIT OF PLAZA

Revised Translation: EXIT

Example (14) was found in Qingdao Train Station. Since public sign is characteristic of its communicative function, "EXIT/ ENTRANCE" is best choice to demonstrate

(15) SL: 自助值机 TL: CUSS Self Check-in

Revised Translation: CUSS/ Automatic Check-in Facility

Example (15) was found in Qingdao Liuting International Airport. CUSS is the abbreviation of Common Use Self-service, which is frequently used in airport. So "Self Check-in" in this example is redundant.

(16) SL: 注意安全 TL: Caution Danger

Revised Translation: CAUTION

Example (16) was found in Qingdao Liuting International Airport. By *Collins Learner' s English-Chinese Dictionary,* "caution" can be used as both a noun and a verb when there is possible danger. Thus, "Danger" in this example is redundant.

(17) SL: 出租车待客区 TL: Taxi Hospitality Area

Revised Translation: Taxi Station

Example (17) was found in Jinan train station. Hospitality refers to the friendly and welcoming behavior toward guests or visitors. In order to demonstrate the feature of public signs, the target text should have been concise.

Inappropriate Expressions:

In this part, word-to-word translation and machine translation are included.

(18) SL: 重点旅客进站（老幼病残孕专用通道） TL: Focus On The Passenger Entrance

Revised Translation: Entrance Reserved for the Aged, Handicapped or Pregnant

Example (18) was found in Yantai train station which might be an on-line translation. Meanwhile, it is worth being pointed out that if the translator pays close attention to cultural differences between China and western countries, the impoliteness generated by the words "disabled" and "old" to express "老" and "残" will be avoided.

(19) SL: 客运值班室 TL: Passenger Transport

Revised Translation: Watchroom

Example (19) was found in Yantai Train Station. "客运值班室" is mistranslated into " Passenger Transport", which is word-to-word translation.

(20) SL: 直升电梯 TL: Helicopter elevator

Revised Translation: Elevator

Example (20) was found in Qingdao Liuting International Airport. The target text "Helicopter elevator" is a typical example of word-to-word translation. The English equivalent of "直升电梯" is " Elevator/ Lift".

(21) SL: 单向出口 TL: ONE-WAY EXPORT

Revised Translation: One-way Exit

Example (21) was found in Yantai Coach Terminal. This example is a typical representative of machine translation. According to *Collins Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary*, to export products means to sell them to another country, and it means "出口" in Chinese. However, "出口" in this sign should be "exit".

Wrong Culture-specific References:

(22) SL: 出口 TL: WAY OUT

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Revised Translation: EXIT

Example (22) was found in Yantai Coach Terminal. "Way in" by *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* is British English meaning that Americans may misunderstand it. As what has been discussed in the former chapter, there are dramatic differences among English-speaking countries. Another example is that "小心撞上" is translated into "watch out" in Qingdao Liuting International Airport. With the reference of *The 21st Century Unabridged English-Chinese Dictionary*, "watch out" is used in oral American English to warn someone to be careful, because something unpleasant might happen or he might get into difficulties. In order to avoid misunderstanding or confusion, it's better to adopt the international norm. Thus the revised translation of "出口" is " Exit/ EXIT" and that of "小心撞上" is " Mind Your Head".

(23) SL: 长途气车站   TL: Long-distance bus station/ Long Distance Bus

Revised Translation: Coach Terminal

Example (23) was found in Yantai Train Station. "Long-distance bus station" in this example is very common in public signs translation which is obviously a Chinglish expression. A more native expression should be "coach terminal", in which "terminal" means a place where vehicles, passengers, or goods begin or end in a journey (Wang, 2006).

In a word, the translator should always take linguistic and cultural differences into consideration in the translating process, which was described as the adaptive selection to fulfill the goal of successful communication.

According to Vermeer (1984), each translation has a specific purpose, in accordance with which a successful translation will be proposed. Due to the errors mentioned above, the translation quality of the public signs in Shandong Province is quite far from being satisfactory which fail to convey the accurate information or achieve the communicative purpose.

To improve the translation of public signs, the strategies can be specified under the guidance of Eco-translatology---on the one hand, translators should adapt to the translational eco-environment in order to be the qualified selectee who is to decide the final target text. Hence, the translator's bilingual ability, intercultural awareness, background knowledge, positive working attitude and so on all determine the translation quality of public signs, that is the translator's quality does matter; on the other hand, the accomplishment of public signs translation calls for the close attention from the authority who should spare no efforts to improve the local public signs translation by offering reasonable payment to translators and strict review to check the translations so that only the appropriate versions will be publicized.

5. Conclusion

The investigation of errors illustrated in this paper could be seen as a case study of public signs translation under the guidance of eco-translatology which brings the concept of translational eco-environment into the focus of theorists and practitioners. Besides, the theory defines translation as "a translator's adaptation and selection activities", which makes the translator's role more salient in the translating process this certainly complies with the development of translation research involving the roles of author, translator and reader.

However, what has been done in the field of public signs translation from the perspective of eco-translatology is far from enough, with only a few papers discussing relevant issues. Thus, it is recommended that public signs translation in Shandong province should draw more and more attention that different types of public signs should be classified according to the sites where they are read. Therefore, researchers will be provided with cases particularly and precisely.

The author sincerely hopes that the present study can shed a dim light on an increasing awareness inside and outside the academia over the translation of public signs and that there will be the timely improvement of public signs translation to better serve the potential target readers which is also evaluated as an index of a nation's soft power.

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