

Pragmatic and Rhetorical Analysis of Translation Construction of Public Signs

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This paper analyzes the relationship between pragmatic rhetoric and the translation of public signs. From the perspectives of language, culture, and aesthetics, this paper explores the translation strategies of public signs, taking into account the differences between Chinese and English. The author believes that understanding the pragmatic and rhetorical habits and differences between Chinese and English ethnic groups and making necessary adjustments or reconstructions to the original text based on specific contexts are the fundamental way to improve the quality of translation of such discourse.

Keywords: pragmatics, rhetoric, public sign, C-E translation

Introduction

Public signs are various forms of written language used in public places (Wang & Lv, 2007). The target audience of English public signs are tourists who come to China for sightseeing, as well as foreign nationals working in China. They are either native English speakers or use English as their second language. English public signs provide information about food, accommodation, transportation, travel, entertainment, shopping, and other information to foreign audiences. The translation of public signs into English is an integral part of China's external publicity translation, and its importance and necessity cannot be underestimated. Accurate and idiomatic translation of public signs helps build a visitor-friendly language environment, which helps enhance China's international image and attract more international tourists to China for sightseeing. Wang Gangyi, Deputy Director of the China Foreign Languages Administration and Secretary General of the China Translation Association, pointed out in his speech at the Third National Symposium on Public Signs that the translation of public signs is a crucial aspect of a country's image and showcases a country's cultural, educational, and international exchange level and thus plays a pivotal role in foreign exchanges (Zhou, 2012). The translation of public signs is of great significance for telling the story of China to the world, conveying the voice of China, and promoting the national strategy of Chinese culture going global.

Public signs have become an integral part of the language and cultural environment in China's metropolises and tourist destinations. English public signs not only inform, persuade foreigners, but they also create a good image in the minds of foreign friends, enabling them to understand China's politics, economy, society, traditions, values, and so on. However, the translation quality of public signs is not satisfactory at present, and inferior translations can be seen everywhere. Not only does it fail to achieve the expected purpose of the translation, but

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it also easily causes confusion and misleading, directly affecting China's image. Therefore, it is necessary to study it from both theoretical and practical perspectives. The discourse construction method of poorly translated public signs does not take into account the acceptance habits of English readers, and violates the pragmatic and rhetorical traditions of Western audiences, thus failing to achieve the expected results. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the translation of such discourse from the perspective of pragmatic rhetoric.

Pragmatic Rhetoric and Translation of Public Signs

Pragmatics and rhetoric are interrelated. Pragmatics refers to the activity of using language to achieve a certain purpose in a specific context. Rhetoric is the use of language to persuade or influence people. The basic requirement is to be suitable for a specific context, choose appropriate forms of expression, and achieve the best expression effect. The fundamental purpose of rhetoric is to improve the effectiveness of verbal communication, help the receiver understand the speaker correctly and fully, and make the response expected by the speaker. Whether it is pragmatics or rhetoric, the core is context, emphasizing that context is an essential condition for expression and understanding and emphasizing the adaptability and appropriateness of discourse to the language environment.

Attention to pragmatic and rhetorical analysis is of particular significance for the translation of public signs. Due to its practical purpose of conveying information and exerting influence, appropriate pragmatic rhetoric is the key to the success of the translation. As is known to all, different languages use different pragmatic rhetorical strategies. Appropriate pragmatic rhetorical devices in the source language context may become difficult and rigid in the target language context due to changes in various contextual factors, leading to inappropriate language and communication failure (Song & Zhang, 2011). From the perspective of public sign translation, the construction of discourse should be determined by the target language environment. Sometimes, it is even necessary to round the original text to ensure that the translation plays the expected function in the target language context and achieves the ideal rhetorical effect of language use. Fully recognizing this is of great benefit to improving the translation quality of public signs. This paper explores the translation construction of public signs from the perspective of pragmatics and rhetoric, using examples as examples.

At the Language Level

Chinese and English public signs have their own relatively fixed discourse forms in their respective contexts. For example, the public signs next to the lawn are often expressed in Chinese as follows:

绕行三五步，留得芳草绿
依依芳草，敬请爱怜
观赏草坪，请勿入内
小草也是生命，请勿践踏
保护绿草，留住绿意
小草有生命，脚下请留情
小草微微笑，请你走便道
小草在休息，大家莫打扰

When translating such public signs into English, it is best to first consider internationally recognized public signs in the same context. The common English expression is "Keep off the Grass" or "Keep off the Flower" in similar situations. We need only imitate when translating the above Chinese public signs with different

expressions, and should not directly translate them word for word. In other words, when translating public signs, translators should first focus on the meaning and spirit of the original text, rather than being confined to the language structure of the original text.

The pragmatic and rhetorical issues in the translation of public signs at the linguistic level mainly include two aspects: wording and syntax. Appropriate wording is crucial for effectively achieving the expected translation function of public signs. There are significant differences in the wording of English and Chinese public signs. Chinese likes to use big words, while English often uses simple and expressive everyday speech (Wang & Lv, 2007). In addition, when selecting words, translators must also understand the pragmatic connotations or rhetorical colors of the translated words and pay attention to the requirements and differences between context and semantics. Otherwise, it may lead to pragmatic errors and fail to achieve the best rhetorical effect.

Example 1: 全城最便宜

Translation: Enjoy the Best Deal in Town!

This public sign is the store's promotional slogan. If translated as "Cheapest in town", there may be a wording error. Because the word "cheap" carries a negative pragmatic rhetorical meaning of "poor quality and at a low price", while the wording "best deal" carries a positive connotation of "good quality but at a low price", so it can play a promotional role in the target language context and is therefore an appropriate rhetorical device.

The pragmatic and rhetorical issues at the syntactic level also require translators' attention. Both English and Chinese public signs have their own unique ways of expression and writing styles, resulting in vastly different syntactic and rhetorical habits. The most significant difference is that English extensively uses declarative sentences, imperative sentences, as well as noun phrases, adjective phrases, infinitive phrases, and prepositional phrases. In contrast, due to the influence of parallel prose in history and the classical Chinese style, Chinese tends to use four character structures or parallel structures with the same number of characters in syntax, emphasizing the symmetry and harmony of parallel items (Lv & Shan, 2015). Having understood this difference, it is advisable to use English syntactic structures as much as possible when translating Chinese public signs, and if necessary, make deletions and rewrites to them.

Example 2: 携手合作，共创平安

Translation: Working Together to Keep Our Neighborhood Safe

This Chinese public sign is a four-character parallel structure, reflecting the syntactic and rhetorical characteristics of this type of Chinese discourse that emphasizes symmetry. When translating this Chinese public sign, it is necessary to reconstruct the original text according to the requirements and habits of the English context, thereby enhancing the rhetorical effect of the public sign in the target language context.

Example 3: 创文明行业，建满意窗口

Translation: Our Goal Is Customer Satisfaction

This is a common public sign in the service industry, expected to be read by a wide range of consumers. Based on the contextual information, we reorganize the original text structure of this couplet and translate it into plain English in a simple and natural rhetorical way, rendering its meaning clearer to the English audience.

Example 4: 保持水质清洁，请勿乱扔杂物

Translation: Please Keep the Water Clean

This Chinese public sign is a parallel structure with the same number of characters. If translated directly, it not only violates the traditional rhetorical structure of English public signs (parallel imperative sentences are not

the usual mode of composition in English), but also overlaps and burdens the content. We should grasp the main information in translating the public sign and make appropriate deletions.

Many Chinese public signs themselves have problems. For example, some are cumbersome, some are vague, and some have a haughty tone. When translating such public signs, the translator needs to first grasp their meaning, and then reorganize or rewrite them according to the stylistic characteristics of English public signs. In short, we must not be confined to the original text.

Example 5: 警方提示: 一分安检, 十分安全, 和谐安检, 共建平安

Translation: All Persons and Packages Subject to Inspection

This Chinese public sign is verbose, and its core meaning is to remind passengers to undergo security checks. When translating this public sign into English, we should not be too constrained by the source language, but should translate it according to the thinking habits and expression of Western audiences.

At the Cultural Level

The issue of pragmatic rhetoric is not only reflected at the linguistic level, but also closely related to social culture. Specifically, the same rhetorical or pragmatic strategy may have different evaluations in different cultural value systems. In addition, different cultures have their own conventions regarding what to say and what not to say. Understanding this is particularly important for the translation of public signs. Due to cultural differences and the resulting different acceptance habits, Chinese and English public signs often have profound cultural imprints in their respective pragmatic and rhetorical aspects. Behind language, there are often unique social and cultural traditions that reflect different ways of thinking, behavioral habits, and values to some extent. Therefore, when dealing with public signs related to China's unique conditions and culture, attention should be paid to the acceptability of the translation in the target language context. Rhetorically, it should be close to the acceptance habits of English audiences, and if necessary, some contents should be deleted or rewritten according to English cultural traditions.

Example 6: 用您的爱心保护公园环境

Translation: Pitch in! Protect the Environment

The expression “用您的爱心” appeals to emotions, which is very in line with the values and acceptance psychology of Chinese audiences. But in the English context, it may appear too exaggerated and emotional, violating the acceptance habits of English readers. So, it was deleted during translation.

Chinese public signs often add some decorative text to enhance the atmosphere while providing the main information. Little did they know that this rhetorical device, which is naturally appropriate and popular among Chinese readers in the Chinese context, violates the reception habits of the target language readers in the English context, and appears comical and pretentious in the target language context. For the expected purpose of the translation and in light of the habitual rhetoric of such English discourse, it is important to make necessary revisions to these public signs.

Politeness is also an integral part of culture. Polite public signs with human touch can make people more willing to comply. Many Chinese public signs cannot be translated literally, one important reason being the different levels of politeness between English and Chinese. When translating a public sign into English, it is necessary to determine its level of politeness in English. For example, in Chinese, public signs often say “严禁——”, “不得——” with a strong tone and no room for negotiation. If translated directly, the tone appears stiff and unsympathetic.

Example 7: 不得乱扔烟蒂，护林防火人人有责

Translation: Please Dispose of Cigarette Ends Properly to Prevent Wildfire

Considering the politeness of public signs, this public sign in scenic spots cannot be simply translated as “Don’t throw cigarette ends at random” or “No throwing cigarette ends at random”. Firstly, in the English context, prohibited language with an imposing tone is only used in limited situations, and people generally prefer indirect and implicit expressions. Don’t— or No— may appear too rigid. And “乱扔” is a colloquial expression in Chinese, referring to “casually discarding”, while “throw—at random” in English is “aimlessly waving one’s arm and throwing something in one’s hand”, which not only distorts the original information, but also appears bizarre and ridiculous in the English context.

There is still a question of whether or not to translate a public sign. As we know, the purpose of translating public signs into English is not to show off, but to provide information on various aspects, such as clothing, food, housing, transportation, and entertainment to foreigners traveling and working in China. So, whether to translate a public sign or not depends on the information needs of foreigners. Some public signs targeting Chinese audiences do not need to be translated into English. For example, Professor Ding Hengqi believes that the phrase “军车免费” in a parking lot in Beijing does not need to be translated into English (Lv & Shan, 2015). Professor Lv Hefa believes that public signs, such as “禁止赌博”, “禁止卖淫嫖娼”, “禁止卖艺”, “禁止乞讨”, and “只生一个好” do not need to be translated into English (Wang & Lv, 2007). In addition, some slogans that provide ideological education and moral guidance to domestic audiences do not need to be translated into English.

At the Esthetic Level

In the translation of public signs, the pragmatic rhetorical issues at the aesthetic level mainly include two aspects. Firstly, for the original text that has not used rhetorical devices, appropriate rhetorical devices can be used according to the context of the target language to enhance the communication effect. The second is to reconstruct or use other rhetorical devices in the original text that do not conform to the context of the target language. Indeed, due to linguistic and cultural differences, Chinese and English languages each have their own aesthetic rhetorical habits that are in line with their respective contexts. Many rhetorical devices that are used appropriately and have ideal effects in Chinese often lose their appeal or become obscure and difficult to understand when translated directly into English, leaving readers confused. Therefore, it is necessary to make adjustments when translating Chinese public signs into English, or use other rhetorical devices instead. If the context does not allow, sometimes it may be necessary to abandon the original rhetorical image and interpret it. The use of rhetorical devices can make public signs highly attractive and enhance their effectiveness. But the use of rhetorical devices also needs to consider context.

Example 8: 我为人人，人人为我

Translation: One for All, All for One

The connotation of this Chinese public sign is that in social life, many people serve me, so the author should also try his best to serve others. The Chinese public sign adopts the rhetorical device of palindrome. When we translate it into English, we can also use the same palindrome rhetorical device to achieve the same rhetorical effects in the target language context, which is conducive to realizing the expected function of the public sign.

Example 9:

请您:

保护树木，爱护花草

还地球一片绿

留人类一片荫

Translation: Please Help Us Protect Trees and Flowers

This Chinese public sign adopts the technique of exposition to enhance emotions, which is in line with the aesthetics of Chinese language. However, if its image and meaning are fully translated, it will appear artificial in the English context, and the limited discourse of the public sign does not allow containing so many words. In this case, the method of interpretation is used to convey the core meaning of the public sign.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, we can conclude that the discussion on improving the translation quality of public signs cannot only focus on correcting low-level errors such as spelling and grammar, as they are not the crux of the problem. The deeper issue in translating public signs is to have a thorough understanding of the differences in pragmatic rhetoric between the Chinese and English languages. Only in this way can necessary adjustments and even reconstructions be made in a proper manner based on specific contexts. This is an effective way to fundamentally solve the problem of translation quality of such discourse.

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