

Text Type and C-E Translation of Public Signs

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This paper contends that the public sign is a kind of text with such vocative functions as indicating, instructing, restricting, prohibiting, persuading, and publicizing, so it falls into the type of vocative texts. The paper suggests that conveying the vocative function of the public sign is the essential task of the translator, so as to achieve the intended effect of the public sign.

Keywords: vocative function, text type, public sign

Introduction

In recent years, there has been increasing attention paid to the translation of public signs in China, and related research articles have frequently appeared in various journals. However, most articles focus on pointing out errors and correcting them, and their understanding of basic issues, such as the nature, language function, and text type of public signs, is still relatively vague. In order to improve the quality of public sign translation, it is necessary to strengthen the theoretical research on public sign translation. This paper intends to start from Newmark's text type theory and attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What language functions do public signs have?
2. What type of text do public signs belong to?
3. What are the methods of translating public signs?

Language Function and Text Type

The type of text is closely related to its language function, which determines the type of text. Newmark (1982, p. 21) classified the functions of language into three main types: expressive, informative, and vocative. Expressive type is centered round the author, emphasizing the expression of the author's thoughts and emotions. Informative type focuses on the content expressed in language, emphasizing the description of facts and the transmission of information. Vocative type focuses on the reader, emphasizing the readers' reactions and actions.

On this basis, Newmark classified texts into three main types: expressive texts, informative texts, and vocative texts, and further elaborated on text types in his book *A Textbook of Translation*, clarifying the different properties of each type of text.

Expressive texts include three major categories of works:

1. serious literary works, such as lyrical poetry, short stories, novels, and dramas;
2. authoritative statements, such as political speeches and documents by government and party leaders, as

well as scientific, philosophical, and academic works written by recognized authorities;

3. autobiography, prose, and personal letters. In expressive texts, scholars often use language that reflects their personal style, such as uncommon collocations, novel metaphors, unconventional syntax, self-created new words, unique vocabulary, etc. Due to the fact that the core of expressive function lies in the scholar's thoughts, the scholar's position in expressive texts is "sacred".

Informative texts include textbooks, technical reports, articles in newspapers and magazines, research papers, graduation theses, etc. Informative texts are usually in standard text form, using modern language without regional dialects, personal styles, or social class imprints. Among them, the language style of academic papers is formal, rational, and professional. The language style of textbooks is neutral and impartial. The language of popular science articles is easy to understand. The language style of ordinary news stories is lively and popular. Due to the fact that the core of informative function is objective facts, the scholar's position in informative texts is usually "hidden" and unimportant.

There are two types of vocative texts: One is the guiding type, which includes notices, instructions, various rules and regulations, etc. The second type is persuasive, including advertisements, promotional materials, argumentative works, etc. Vocative texts aim to encourage readers to think and take action, that is, to respond according to the expected intention of the text, and therefore have the purpose of influencing readers' behavior. The core of the vocative function is the reader. So, the scholar's position in vocative texts is also "hidden" and unimportant.

The Language Function and Text Type of Public Signs

The type of the text is determined by the language function of the text. So, the text type of the public sign should also be determined by the language function of the public sign. After analyzing a large amount of corpus of public signs, we found that public signs, as a textual form that directly engages the general public, have the following six language functions:

Indicative Function

The indicative function is to provide indicative information to the public, used to show the audience directions, locations, content, etc. It is commonly found in streets, stations, airports, shopping malls, hotels, restaurants, hospitals, theaters, tourist attractions, and other places, for example, "问询服务 (Information)", "租车服务 (Car Rental)", "化妆品部 (Cosmetics)", "餐饮部 (Food & Beverage)", "门诊部 (Out-Patient Department)", "紧急出口 (Emergency Exit)", etc. Although the indicative function may seem static, it actually focuses on the actions of the audience, aiming to provide them with clear indication, so that they can take corresponding actions when needed. For example, in the event of an emergency in an office building, if the normal passage cannot be used, people will evacuate in the direction indicated by the "Emergency Exit".

Instructive Function

An instructive public sign serves as a reminder to the public, for example, "预留席位 (Reserved)", "已消毒 (Sterilized)", "油漆未干 (Wet Paint)", "客满 (Fully Booked)", "售完 (Sold Out)", "小心地面湿滑 (Caution Wet Floor)", and "前方施工 (Roadwork Ahead)". Compared with indicative public signs, instructive ones not only provide information but also remind the public of the next steps to take, for example, "预留席位 Reserved (aiming to remind you not to occupy it)", "已消毒 Sterilized (implying that you can use it with confidence)", "油漆未干 Wet Paint (implying that you cannot touch it)", "客满 Fully Booked (suggesting that

you should go to another hotel)”, “售完 Sold Out (suggesting that you could try other stores)”, “小心地面湿滑 Caution Wet Floor (reminding you to watch your step)”, and “前方施工 Roadwork Ahead (reminding you to detour)”.

Restrictive Function

The restrictive function is to guide and regulate the behavior of the public, telling them what they should and should not do. The wording is usually polite and the tone is gentle, for example, “小心轻放 (Handle With Care)”, “凭票入场 (Admission By Ticket Only)”, “慢速驶出 (Slow Out)”, “残疾人通道 (Handicapped Only)”, “注意非机动车 (Watch For Non-Motor Vehicles)”, “请礼让行人 (Yield to Peds)”, etc.

Prohibitive Function

The prohibitive function is to constrain and restrict the behavior of the public, prohibiting them from doing certain things. Such public signs are usually strongly worded, with a stern tone and no room for negotiation. They are commonly used in traffic signs and other situations involving safety. In English, such public signs commonly begin with “No” or “Do Not”, or use such verbs as “prohibit” or “forbid”, for example, “严禁吸烟 (No Smoking)”, “桥上严禁超车 (No Overtaking On Bridge)”, “严禁儿童入内 (No Minors Allowed)”, “警戒线勿超越 (Police Line Do Not Pass)”, “严禁疲劳驾 (Do Not Drive Tired)”, “禁止使用手机 (Mobile Phones Prohibited)”, etc.

Persuasive Function

The persuasive function is to persuade the public to act according to the intended text, mainly in the form of advertisements appearing in shopping malls, supermarkets, fairs, and other places, for example, “清仓大甩卖, 机不可失 (Clearance Sale It's Now And Never)”, “买一送一 (Buy One and Get One Free)”, “关门大甩卖, 莫失良机 (Closing Down Sale Don't Miss Out)”, “换季大甩卖, 最高打五折 (End Of Season Final Clearance Up to 50% Off)”, etc.

Publicity Function

The publicity function is to create atmosphere, and of course, it also has the meaning of calling on the public to take action. It manifests itself in various slogans. For example, the theme slogan of the Shanghai World Expo held in 2010 “城市, 让生活更美好”, translated as “A Better City”, expresses the desire of the Chinese people and people from all over the world to work together to create a better life, giving people great encouragement.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that the language function of public signs, whether it is to indicate, instruct, restrict, prohibit, or persuade and publicize, focuses on the public's reactions and actions, aiming to influence public behavior and encourage the public to take action, that is, to make corresponding responses according to the expected intention of the text. These functions are all vocative. Therefore, public signs belong to the category of vocative texts, which means that public signs are texts with vocative functions, such as indication, instruction, restriction, prohibition, persuasion, and publicity. In other words, not all words displayed in public places are public signs. Only words that have the function of prompting the public to respond or take corresponding actions according to the expected intention of the text can be referred to as public signs.

Public Signs With Dual Function

Newmark (1988, p. 42) believed that a text may have several different functions simultaneously, with one of them being the dominant function. As a vocative text, the dominant function of public signs is their vocative function. Meanwhile, public signs may also have other functions:

Vocative and Informative Function

The informative function of some public signs is explicit, but their vocative function, although implicit, is still their dominant function, for example, indicative and instructive public signs. Although these two types of public signs seem to mainly provide information, their focus is still on the actions of the audience. For example, the various store names in public signs are not only to let customers know what kind of store it is, but more importantly, to facilitate their purchasing. So, its vocative function is self-evident. For another example, “连续转弯 (Winding Road Ahead)”, on the surface, this public sign seems to only provide drivers with information, but its true purpose is to remind drivers to drive with caution. Still another example is “当心落石 (Warning Falling Rocks)”. This public sign is not just to inform the audience of the possibility of falling rocks, but to remind the public to be alert to the danger of falling rocks. In addition, there are some slogans whose informative function is explicit, and their vocative function is also explicit, for example, “前方学校, 慢行 (School Ahead, Slow Down)”. From the above examples, we can see that the vocative function of public signs, whether explicit or implicit, is their dominant function.

Advertisements are also a kind of public sign that serves both vocative and informative functions. For example, “买一送一 (Buy One and Get One Free)”, the main purpose of this advertisement is not to convey information, but to attract customers to the store. So, advertisements are also primarily driven by its vocative function. From this, it can be seen that although public signs may have informative function, their main purpose is not only to convey information to the public, but to expect the public to take action. Therefore, the vocative function is their dominant function.

The introduction of tourist attractions is another example. Though it is a purely informative text, its purpose is not only to provide information, but more importantly, to arouse public interest in touring the place. Therefore, like advertisements, it is also a kind of public sign with vocative and informative functions. Lv Hefa and Shan Liping (2005) believed that public signs have seven major functions, such as arousing interest, providing information, deepening understanding, promoting action, consolidating image, serving society, and preventing crime.

Vocative and Aesthetic Function

The aesthetic function aims to please readers. This function is particularly prominent in Chinese public signs. Chinese public signs tend to enhance their expressive power through rhetorical devices, such as rhyme, parallelism, exaggeration, and personification, giving rise to many so-called “poetic public signs”. For example, “上前一小步, 文明一大步 (A Step Closer Keeps It Cleaner)”, this public sign often appears in men’s restrooms, with the purpose of reminding the audience to approach the urinal when urinating to avoid dirtying the toilet. For other examples, “司机一滴酒, 亲人两行泪 (Don’t Drink and Drive)”, “来也匆匆, 去也冲冲 (Please Flush After Use)”, and “手上留情花自香, 脚下留意草如茵 (Keep Off Grass, Please)”, these Chinese public signs all use rhetorical devices of parallelism and contrast to increase their expressiveness, reminding the public not to drive under the influence, to flush the toilet after use, and to take care of flowers and plants. It is not difficult to see that the aesthetic function of these public signs is only a linguistic means, serving the vocative function of public signs. Therefore, in such aesthetically pleasing public signs, the vocative function remains the dominant function, with the intention of arousing readers’ actions rather than providing the audience with aesthetic enjoyment.

In summary, public signs not only have a vocative function, but also have informative or aesthetic functions. However, the vocative function has always been the dominant function, while the informative or aesthetic

functions is only a secondary function.

Methods of Public Sign Translation

Understanding the language function and text type of public signs is of great significance for the selection of translation strategies for public signs. Because public signs are a type of vocative text, the status of the original author is unimportant. Therefore, when translating public signs, we must first grasp their vocative function. The primary goal should be to convey their vocative function, while also considering their informative function. As for their aesthetic function, if it can be translated, it should be translated; if it cannot be translated, it should be discarded. There is no need for the translator to be confined to the original text. Many erroneous and poor English translations of public signs stem from the fact that translators treat public signs as expressive texts, following the original text step-by-step. Some translators try their best to faithfully convey the form of the original text, only to neglect the vocative function of the original text.

According to Newmark's (1982) theory of text types, communicative translation should be used when translating texts with vocative function (p. 44). The communicative translation approach focuses on the reader and emphasizes that the translated text should strive to produce a similar effect on the target readers as the original readers can achieve. The communicative translation method provides a framework for our translation, telling us that the translation of vocative texts should focus on reader response, but it does not provide us with specific translation methods that can be applied.

In terms of specific translation methods, we can adopt methods, such as loan translation, imitative translation, and creative translation according to different situations.

Loan Translation

Loan translation refers to using existing standardized public signs in English as much as possible during translation. Many public signs have established customary forms in English and are familiar to people in English-speaking countries. Except for some public signs with ethnic or local characteristics, most Chinese public signs can find their corresponding public signs in English. Therefore, loan translation is the preferred method for translating Chinese public signs into English. For example, there are several ready-made expressions in English for the Chinese public sign “小心碰头”: “Caution Low Ceiling, Mind Your Head (British), Watch Your Head (North America)” We only need to choose one of them. For another example, the Chinese public sign “碧水清清, 却亦无情, 河湍势险, 请勿戏水” has a ready-made expression in English: “Danger Deep Water!” When translating such a public sign, we can ignore the beautiful wording in Chinese and directly adopt its English counterpart.

Imitative Translation

Imitative translation refers to translating public signs based on the characteristics of the English language and the national standards for translating public signs into English, referencing existing public signs in English, for example, “上海西站 (Shanghai West Railway Station)”, “上海公共汽车长途客运站 (Shanghai Long-Distance Bus Station)”, “南京东路 (East Nanjing Road)”, “玉佛寺 (Jade Buddha Temple)”, etc.

Creative Translation

Some Chinese public signs do not have corresponding or similar expressions in English. In this case, creative translation can be carried out based on the structure and expression characteristics of English public signs, under the guidance of national standards for English translation and writing of public signs. For example, “豫园

(Yuyuan Garden)”, “华联超市 (Hualian Supermarket)”, “首都国际机场 (Capital International Airport)”, etc.

Conclusion

In short, when we translate Chinese public signs into English, the first thing to remember is that public signs are a type of vocative text. So translating the vocative function of public signs is the primary task. In the process of translation, the translator should fully consider the language characteristics and functions of English public signs. There is no need to be confined to the language form of the original Chinese text. Only in this way can the translation achieve the expected effect of the public sign.

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