

The Analysis of Application and Problems in Bilingual Public Signs or Plates*

ZHANG Jie

China Youth University of Political Studies, Beijing, China

Public ad is one of the components in the language construction with the using of language and words. The paper applies the social linguistic method, taking public ads in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Xinjiang as the study case. The result shows that standards of public ads are not varied. And there are many problems to be solved. First, the paper will have a review of the papers concerned with the topic. Secondly, the part is to talk about the functions of the signs, the classification of public ads, and the application of public ads. Thirdly, the paper is about the problems language application in the public and the analysis of the public ads. Lastly, it is the suggestion about the overall application of the bilingual language public signs—the English signs in cities in China.

Keywords: application, analysis, public signs, suggestion

Introduction

With the development of world communication, cities of China try to be internationalized. With this conception, most of the public slogan or notice can be found in English. Public notices or instructions are concerned with any fields of life. On the road, there are the bilingual leads; the shops on the street have the bilingual names; at the station the notices are bilingual information. The paper will use the pictures to illustrate the situation of the bilingual application plates or signs in China—Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Urumchi, to analyze the situation of the bilingual plate environment in China.

The Papers Review of Bilingual Public Signs

In the past years, there are a number of papers about the topic. The first one is given by WANG Li. The topic is *Survey of Language Used in Urban Road Traffic Signs, Landscape Signs and Transportation Signs*. The paper is about the use of road traffic signs and the use of public signs is an important component of language environments. Some regulations should be made for the standard. The paper investigates the language signs in Wuhan. And it mentions that they are less standard in the public signs compared with Beijing, Shanghai, and Changsha. And it gets the conclusion that there should be some regulation for the public signs (WANG, 2007). The second paper is by BO Cheng-wei. The title is *The Study of Language Environment in Yang Zhou—The Bilingual Tropic Signs Analysis in Yangzhou*. In this paper, the author investigates the public signs in Yang Zhou. According to the investigation, the conclusion is that there are some problems existing in the public signs. The exact problems are the choices of words and calligraphy of words. It analyzes the

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ZHANG Jie, associate professor, master, Department of Foreign Language and Literature, China Youth University of Political Studies.

problems and culture differences in signs or plates in cities and puts forward some suggestions (BAI, 2004). The paper is about language environment of Beijing in 2008. Beijing did a lot of work on the aspects of language concluding to improve the citizen's language abilities, to foster the language environment, and to set the bilingual traffic signs. The paper talks about the standard of Pinyin for road (XIE, 2007). The fourth paper is *The Language Environment Construction and Evaluation of the Big Cities in China*. The paper concerns the important component in the big cities while holding the international activities (CAI, 2012). The fifth paper is about Xi'an language environment and the problems existing in the language. The paper analyzes the wrong translation due to the culture differences (GE, LI, ZHAO, & TIAN, 2011).

The Function of the Public Signs

Firstly, public signs have the function of warming. Public ads mainly express their function through the vision, such as words and signs.

Secondly, public ads are media of information; it has the function of advertisement, warming (WANG, 2007).

In the daily life, the most frequently public ads are outdoor signs or indoor indicators. Outdoor signs are mostly the traffic signs and indoor indicators are mostly to indicate people where and how to behavior in a certain way.

On the one hand, indicator plates or signs have the function of signs and warnings. The signs are mainly through the visual to show their function. Mainly they are conveyed by the words and signs. On the other hand, the indicator plates are a kind of media for information. They can be advertisements or warnings.

The Classification of the Public Signs

According to the shape, there are various classifications for public ads. Usually, they can be horizontal and vertical indicator plates. Or they can be the digital screen on the wall in modern time.

According objectives, different time can provide light indicator plates and no-light indicator plates; different place can be seen different indicator plates; and the aims for indicator plates can be divided into business plates, public signs, or plates, such as the public signs; the use of indicator plates can show the directions, such as the road signs and road reminders. In the society, there are different kind signs or plates for public. They are mainly used as the notice and there are some instructions for people to follow.

The Application Signs English in China

Public signs or plates can be used everywhere, including the fire-fighting, to lead the people where to go at the emergency. The use of traffic signs is even common in any country or city, even for a village. The traffic signs are mainly for the road information, and they play the functions of the sign language, the traffic control for safety, the guide for both the drivers to improve the driving efficiency for pedestrians to avoid the wrong way.¹ The picture below is traffic for drivers on the road. On the sign, there are four languages—Chinese, English, Korean, and Japanese.² The traffic signs are the most used plates for outdoor information. Usually for the traffic plates, there is only the sign language, no words added. For example, in the following Figure 1, the

¹ See

http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=0AyzKv-MYmeBeZHsgJEZ1ic5MqBK8TEBm_hLled5H5M9WvSf9LbuoTpwdSds_AkQPfWSIXJDNvKESCdzIOtTkK.

² See <http://www.jiaodong.net/news/system/2014/07/17/012351662.shtml>.

first picture is for driving roundabout; the second one is direct driving; the third one is no parking; the fourth one is no passing.³ Most of traffic signs are worldly applied and only with minute differences. In such kinds of traffic signs are usually used the sign language without words. Most of the models of the traffic signs or plates in China are after the examples of Europe or America.



Figure 1. Traffic plates in Qingdao, China and traffic signs language.

The Application Ad English in China

With more and more communication with the world, China uses more bilingual or multilingual signs on the street or at the public places. Especially the traffic plates in big cities are attempting to use the bilingual even multilingual plates to show the internationalization. The following are examples taken for illustrating the situation of the bilingual application plate or signs in China—Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Urumchi.

The first categories of the signs are the traffic plates. Generally speaking, the traffic signs or plates are more standard than other bilingual signs. In 2005, the government set the regulations for the traffic lingual signs, making rules to write the capital letters or initials for certain letters, such as the “Ave.” for Avenue, “Rd.” for Road, “Expwy.” for Expressway. And single sign plate can only be written with capital letters, for example, “EXIT” and “ENTRANCE”, using “E. W. S. and N.” to replace “East, West, South, and North”, for example, W. 3rd Ring Rd. N.. With the regulations and the considerations of the traffic administration, the traffic signs or plates are clear, standard, complete, and internalized.⁴ The first picture is the traffic sign for expressway. It is satisfactorily accepted. The second one is the business poster by the roadside. It has the qualities of the individual company. In this case no matter it is the traffic signs or the signs on the road, they are more standard.



Figure 2. Traffic plates and roadside posters.

The second main categories of the public signs are the instructions in the railway station or the instructions on the bus. The situations are not as satisfactory as those of the traffic signs. From the investigations, the differences or mal-directions can be easily found. In the following pictures, there are six signs or plates in the waiting room either at the station or on the bus. The plate of waiting room for Guangzhou to Jiulong train is written as “Guangzhou-Kowloon Train Waiting Area”; another one is “Ticket waiting”; the third one is “waiting lounge”; the fourth one is the bilingual sign for “Entrance”; the fifth one is “Guangzhou-Shenzhen Train Waiting Room”. It is clear and acceptable, and the last one is the about the sign on a bus, it is said, “seat

³ See

https://www.baidu.com/s?ie=utf-8&f=8&rsv_bp=0&rsv_idx=1&tn=baidu&wd=%E6%8C%87%E7%A4%BA%E7%89%8C&rsv_pq=e27b3010000b2d63&rsv_t=12c09JWCe0QpybFcNC5ZTDcz0m%2F2f9gsJrxj0PsgciNA%2BTVdMdSshVsMhq&rsv_enter=1&rsv_sug3=1.

⁴ See http://www.bjenglish.com/article_1754.html.

well and hold stealily” (it should be steadily). The discrepancy of the signs or plates is obviously noticeable. The place for waiting has the Chinese equivalence of area, room, longue, or not anything in the direction, only inferring from the phrase—ticket waiting. The situation shows that there is no national standard for the bilingual signs at the public place, although the station is the mostly visited place in China.



Figure 3. Public signs at the stations and on the bus.

The third category of the pictures in this paper is the bilingual signs for the restrooms. The following pictures are from different part of China as mentioned above. This time the differences and discrepancy are great, even to the degree of unacceptable. Factually, the toilet has many ways of expressing, and it has its own culture in different countries. So how to use the foreign language to indicate the place is really a tough practice. The pictures below show that it can be “TOILET ROOM”, “Water Clean Public Toilet”, “PUBLIC CONVENANCES”, “RESTROOM-WOMEN”, and “Ladies”. Some of the expressions are OK, like the “RESTROOM-WOMEN”; the others are award for the idea. The toilet room is expressive, but in the phrase the room is included in the word toilet. Toilet itself is a place or a room. The signs with “public” are just under the influence of Chinese image in the expression, and the expression “water clean” is nothing to do with the idea. The situation shows that then it is necessary to have a right way to indicate the toilet. The signs should correctly express the idea and standardly written in case the letters are in capital letters or not. As for the toilet signs in China, there are other signs to warn people to save water. The pictures down below show the difference signs. They are randomly written.



Figure 4. Bilingual signs or instructions at the restroom.

The fourth one is the warning at any public space. In the public space, usually there are some signs for people to be careful and pay attention to the steps or the slippery floor. But in China, the signs for this purpose are varied and funnier written. The seven pictures express the idea in different ways. The first and third picture with the words like “Caution, slip”; the second sign is written as “BECARFUL STEPS”; the fourth one is “CAUTION WET FLOOR”; the fifth one is “Caution Slippery”; the sixth one is “BE CAREFUL SLIPPED”; the last one is “caution watch your steps”. Although there are five expressions here (the first and the third are different from the capital letters), no one is utterly accepted. They are the approximately English equivalent of Chinese expression. The proper one should be “Mind Your Steps”.



Figure 5. Warnings at the public places.

The fifth category is the public services center. As for this type, the phenomenon is comparatively favorable for the public. The pictures down below are taken from the service centers. The first one is the banking service sign; the second one is also a sign for banking hours; and the third one is for the public emergency services. In the first picture, the words can be seen as the “personal service”, “Next Counter Please”, the second picture with “Self-Banking Service” if you feel unwell please contact staff at the next station. All the pictures below show that the signs are alright and acceptable.



Figure 6. Notices at the public centres.

Public Ads in America

As for the public signs for directions are common in the world, and China follows the examples of Europe and America. Especially for the bilingual signs, the American ways of expression the idea should be the standard to follow. In the way of posting the signs for the public, the States has its regulations and standards. In America there are some exhibitions every four years. It started in 1947. It really shows the importance and updated requirement of the signs in the States.

The United States has more compulsory signs for the traffic. The signs are for the drivers, the pedestrians, and the cyclers. Different states have different regulations for the signs. In a word, although in the State, different states have its own way to design and direct the traffic, it is the compatible in the same state.⁵ The following is the example of the direction for different states. The first picture is the sign by Arizonan; the second one is Indianan; the third one is Idaho; the fourth one if Illinois; and the last one is Yukon. So in the States on the one hand, there are some meetings to regulate the standards and criteria of the public signs; on the other hand, there are some varieties for different states. The following pictures show the public signs.



Figure 7. Traffic signs in the States.

As for the public signs of the restroom, in the States there are more varieties for different situations. Some places are suitable for the humorous way; some places are for the solemn way. Some signs are vivid and some

⁵ See

http://wenku.baidu.com/link?url=Xs3NCqHwJ2fw6ROiODJC8Q9gtIfd98vXWWzxwMRiuupBWai-kdhPNiLEoaWtNYCGpPs1_hPt8LaLHiEuKJMnsctfELxThThpwoQYSXSEm.

are funny. All the signs have one common feature—they are expressive with the pictures—male and female, high-heeled shoes and tobacco pipe, or even with wheel chairs. And the last but one picture is the sign with both the woman image and a hen for indirection.⁶ The last picture is toilet sign in the Ambler Warner Theater in the 30s of the last century.⁷

So the public signs in the State are either confined to the state standard or are used in its way to express the idea.



Figure 8. English directions of the restroom.

The Problems Existing in the Ad English

The bilingual signs can be found everywhere in China, as indicated in the previous part, but there are some problems existing in the signs in China. In Beijing, the bilingual signs even exist in every streets and lanes. According to an investigation, 140 mistakes have been found in the streets and about the public signs for the companies or offices. In China, there is no administration to regulate the public ads or signs. Many companies or offices have their own ideas about the standard and ways of expression. It is said that foreigners are affected by the mistakes. Many public signs are jokes for foreigners. They do not understand at first. After asking the idea from friends, and then comparing the expression, they get to know the idea, and they find there are some mistakes about the translation.

The first problems are the culture differences in the translation. In the process of translation, some signs are not based on the English culture, but just the equivalent of the Chinese words. For example, at the hotel, the “evacuate” was translated to “scatter”, the WC was directed with a man’s head but with red color, but in the international standard red was to mean it is a toilet completely forbidding men. And in China, there are many toilets signed with WC. For Englishmen, the word WC is not proper, it is same as “茅厕” in Chinese. So it is the wrong style for public signs. As for toilet for public signs, the restroom is most frequently used.

The second example is about “restroom” in Chinese culture. It is usually translated as public toilet. The word “public” should not be translated in the English version. And for “business reception desk” should be “reception”, and the “business suspended” or “pleased next counter please” should be “No service”. This kind of mistakes can be found everywhere.

⁶ See

http://image.baidu.com/search/index?tn=baiduimage&ct=201326592&lm=-1&cl=2&ie=gbk&word=%C3%C0%B9%FA%B2%DE%CB%F9%B1%EA%D6%BE&fr=ala&ori_query=%E7%BE%8E%E5%9B%BD%E5%8E%95%E6%89%80%E6%A0%87%E5%BF%97&ala=0&alatpl=sp&pos=0

⁷ See <http://news.163.com/15/1126/07/B9B5KJSN00014AED.html>.

The third example is to “send coals to Newcastle”. “The police affair office” should be “police station”; “parking lot” should be “parking”.⁸

The second problem is that in the public plates, the English words and Chinese Pinyin are used freely. Some plates are using the “road” and some are using the “LU” for “road”. The “bridge” can be used, and “overpass” or “qiao” also can be found.

Conclusion

The analysis and pictures above show that in China there are more and more bilingual signs or plates. The signs and plates can be found either on the roads or in the toilet. The bilingual signs are for the convenience of foreigners, but in fact, because of the wrong translation of the signs, the bilingual signs lessen their function in the way of direction. So some suggestions should be made. First, the government should lay some regulations for the standards of the signs and plates. Second, there should be an office to supervise the making of the signs and plates. Third, the existing signs and plates should be removed gradually. Fourth, it is not necessary for everywhere, every location to use the bilingual signs and try to use more pictures instead of words to direct the meaning. Fifth, the State Language Commission should be responsible for the task to watch and inspect the standard of the signs and plates.

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⁸ See http://www.verydemo.com/demo_c128_i127696.html.