



Public Signs Translation in Major Scenic Spots in Mainland China: Problems and Solutions

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Abstract

The public signs in scenic spots either indicate the way for tourists, or inform tourists of the regulations of the scenic spots, or remind tourists of their behaviors. This paper aims at the improper, erroneous and non-standard translation of public signs in major tourist attractions in Mainland China. Possible solutions were also put forward in response to these problems in public signs translation.

Keywords: Public signs translation; Scenic spots; China; Problems; Solutions.

1. Introduction

Public signs are boards and notices that are used to provide information to the public for warnings, directions and advertising (Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary, 1997). Public signs in scenic spots, a specific form of public signs, are of absolute necessity, this is especially true under the background of the Belt and Road Initiative, for the foreign visitors rely much on these public signs to get information of the warnings and direction when they pay visits to our tourist attractions. The quality of public signs translation thus is of great importance and deserves our attention. For if public signs are inappropriately or wrongly translated or if public signs translation is not standard, it may not only mislead the tourists, but also bring about irreparable side effects to the scenic spots and possibly our national images.

Unfortunately, translation problems are not rare to find in the scenic spots of mainland China (Guo, 2016; Niu, 2008; Tian, 2017; Xue, 2010; You, 2015). This is where our research set in. Our research aims to, by a survey of public signs translation in some main tourist attractions in Mainland China, reveal the problems in scenic spots translation and propose possible solutions, in an effort to optimize our tourism brand and promote our tourism culture.

2. Problems in Public Signs Translation

Our survey of public signs translation in main scenic spots in main tourist attractions in mainland China reveals that public signs translation is far from perfect. This indication could also be found in other relevant literature (Tian, 2017; Zhang, 2014). The most obvious problem is spelling mistakes. For instance, *Japanese* was incorrectly spelt as *Japanes* in *shoot the Japanese general*; *south gate* was wrongly spelt as *soush gate*; and *chicken leg* was spelt as *children leg*.

The second problem would be the inconsistency of different translation versions. That is, different translation versions of one public sign may be found in one scenic spot. One case in point is the translation of *langyashan*, a famous tourist attraction in Baoding, Hebei Province. This scenic spot was translated into *Langya*, *Langyashan*, *langya mountain*, and *Langya Mountain*. Another case in point is *Public Toilet / W. C./ Restroom*. This kind of inconsistency in public signs translation may cause confusion among foreign visitors. And in order to avoid this, it is necessary that we provide one translation.

Furthermore, grammatical errors are not rare to find in public sign translation in scenic spots. Take the *office area*, *please don't coming* and *Everybody has the responsibility to protect the planting*.

The last one, also the one that deserves our immediate attention are the errors made due to cultural disparity. For example, *Caution ! Wet floor* was translated as *slip carefully* and *danger: deep water* was translated as *Pay attention to safety* or *caution, risk of falling into water*; *Do not litter* was translated as *no leaving about peal and wastepaper*; *Disposable Goods* was translated as *A Time Sex Thing*.

Reasons for these errors are varied. To begin with, the negative transfer of mother tongue could be partly responsible for these problems. For example, *caution, slippery floor* was wrongly translated as *slip and fall down carefully*. Another possible reason could be the incompetency of the translators. For instance, *automatic teller machine* (ATM) was inappropriately translated as *cash recycling machine*. Finally, some translators may refer to online dictionaries while translating public signs, the translation may be full of errors and thus cause unpleasant feelings among visitors. For instance, *Handicapped restroom* was translated as *deformed man toilet* (Xue, 2010).

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3. Principles of Public Signs Translation

Public signs are a kind of special applied style. They are characterized for simplicity and clarity (Zhu, 2015). To translate public signs effectively, it is necessary that we observe some principles. Up till now, some scholars have put forward their principles for public signs translation, among which Liu's three Co-principles for public signs translation (2008) on the basis of New Mark's text typology (2001) is the most influential. The three principles are consistency, conciseness and comprehensibility.

3.1. Consistency

By consistency it means that one should borrow from English-speaking countries the ready-made public signs, or use the widely accepted public signs translation to avoid confusion, or refer to authoritative official websites, newspapers and dictionaries for public signs translation.

The simplest and most practical way of public signs translation is to borrow the public signs directly from English-speaking countries. Public signs translation is meant for foreign visitors. And those commonly used public signs are also the easiest for foreigners to understand. For instance, we should employ *caution*, *low ceiling* instead of *take care of your head*, or *attention your head* (Liu and Xu, 2008). More examples are *staff only*, *buses only*.

The translation of public signs of historic sites and street names should be unified to the widely accepted translations. Take *Nanjing Road*, this sign has been accepted by the public and therefore is not necessary to be translated into *Nanjing Lu* (Liu and Xu, 2008).

As for the names of some new institutions or public places, since it is difficult to find similar names in English-speaking countries, we have to refer to official sources for translation. For instance, *Department of Justice*; *Ministry of Land and Resources*, etc.

3.2. Conciseness

By conciseness, it means public signs translation should be concise and clear, without obscure words and complex sentences. In public signs translation, content words should be used while articles, pronouns and auxiliary verbs should be omitted. For example, *City Police Report Centre* should not be translated as *City Centre of Reporting to the Police*.

3.3. Comprehensibility

By comprehensibility, it means public signs translation should be easy to be understood by English speakers and non-idiomatic expressions should be avoided as much as possible. For instance, *cushioned seat* and *ordinary seat of a train* should not be translated as *soft seat* and *hard seat* (Liu and Xu, 2008).

4. Solutions to Problems in Public Signs Translation

Beside the principles aforementioned, several measures should be taken to make sure that problems in public signs translation could be solved.

Firstly, public signs can be managed as a special term and standards should be established. In order to standardize the translation of public signs, it is imperative to introduce criterion for public signs translation in order to avoid ambiguous public signs.

Secondly, it is recommended that the government raise its awareness of the problems of public signs translation. It is expected that governments at all levels fully realize the important role of bilingual Chinese-English public signs in optimizing tourism environment and changing the image of scenic spots, thereby take relevant measures to speed up the construction of bilingual Chinese-English public signs. The government and the media should also make the public realize that the construction of Chinese-English bilingual public signs requires the participation of the public.

Thirdly, administrative departments, agencies and expert committees for public signs translations should be established. The government departments in charge should strengthen the management of public signs translation. It is suggested that each city set up a public sign translation management section under the Tourism Administration, which can cooperate with the Chinese Translation Association, under the guidance of which professionals conduct translation. Departments concerned should make sure that translations of road signs and advertisements have been passed for examination before being used in public.

Fourthly, legal construction and management of public signs translation and production should be strengthened. In view of the problems of public signs translation, the government should organize experts, scholars, representatives of public signs production industry as well as representatives of public signs managers to legislate on the translation, production and management of public signs, and formulate laws and regulations on the translation production and management of public signs.

Public signs in scenic spots are representative of a nation's image and culture. They serve as a window for the exhibition of unique culture and beauty of China. Therefore, we are obliged to improve our public signs translation.

5. Conclusion

Public signs offer a window for foreigners to get informed of our tradition and culture, and have a big role to play in culture export, therefore, we need to give public signs translation due attention. In translating public signs, the three principles of consistency, conciseness and comprehensibility should be observed so that our translation could be acceptable and comprehensible among foreigners. Furthermore, the government, translators and legal

administrative offices and the general public alike should make joint efforts to ensure that public signs translation could be well regulated.

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