A Review of Studies on Chinese-English Translation of Public Signs

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Abstract
Public signs Chinese-English translation is the focus of many scholars. In this paper, first there is a survey of the research situation of current public signs translation. Then after a brief review of the western theories popularly applied in the studies of the translation of public signs, this chapter also gives a review of strategies and approaches proposed by Chinese scholars.

Keywords
Theory, Public Signs, Translation.

1. A survey of study on public signs chinese-english translation

In general, there has been a marked growth of the concern over public signs translation. Take Beijing for example. As part of its campaign to prepare the country for an influx of foreign visitors attending the Olympic Games, Beijing began turning its attention to multilingual signs as part of the "reform and opening up" in the 1980s, especially in preparations for the 1990 Asian Games. To avoid embarrassment, the city overhauled the signs, and a number of governmental and non-governmental efforts—from the official release of sign translation regulations to public campaign of sign correcting have been made. Equally dynamic campaigns are taking place all over China. In Shanghai, the year 2004 saw the Shanghai Municipal Language Work Committee (SMLWC) launched a movement to standardize English translation of directions on guideposts and billboards to provide foreign visitors with clearer information. [1]

In 2006, Shenzhen Foreign Affairs Office adopted the proposal advanced by Shenzhen Translation Association and began its preparation for the program of "Improving the Urban Sign Translations in Shenzhen". So far, the most significant academic event in the history of C-E sign translation in China is the First Symposium on C&E Signs in a Global Context held in Beijing in 2005, a national conference co-organized by the Translators Association of China, the website of China Daily, China National Institute of Standardization, and Beijing International Studies University. In this conference, renowned experts gathered to research and discuss the abuse and errors of English signs in China. Professor Luo Xuanmin from Tsinghua University, contributed a thesis entitled "Some Thoughts on Sign Translation", in which he stated the severe situation of sign translation, made a classification of existing errors of translated English signs, appealed public concern about sign translation and initiated the issue of "purifying our language environment". Moreover, Professor Luo warned us the gap between translation theory studies and translation practice, arguing that more attention should be switched from pure translation theory study to translation practice. Professor Lv Hefa from Beijing International Studies University, the specialist for the National Campaign of the Standardization of C-E Translation of Signs 3, made a systematic classification of signs from a perspective of their functions, namely, signs, according to the different categories of information they convey, are "static" and "dynamic". [2] Prof. Lv is also one of the editors of the first bilingual sign dictionary. In 2004, A Chinese-English Dictionary on Signs, the first specialist sign translation dictionary in China, is co-edited by Lv Hefa and Shan Liping and published by the Commercial Press. From 25 July to 7 August 2004, a group of experts of "Chinese-English Sign Research
Team” made a survey in France, Holland, Belgium and other eight European countries. This research collected first-hand data of signs in European countries by taking photographs of signs in English, German, French, Italian, etc. These data provides good materials for our sign translation studies. Moreover, some translators have contributed essays dealing with errors and coping strategies and techniques in sign translation. Published mostly in such journals as Chinese Translators Journal and Shanghai Journal of Translators for Science and Technology, these articles have paved the way to further studies.

2. Related theories in the west

The western theories and approaches are popularly quoted and applied in studies of public signs translation and have proved workable in improving the quality of the translation to great extent, and deepened our understanding of the translation of public signs.

2.1. Nida’s dynamic equivalence

Based on the practice of translating the Bible, Nida(2004a:159) proposed a translation which attempts to produce a dynamic equivalence rather than a formal equivalence.”In such a translation one is not so concerned with matching the receptor-language message with the source-language, but with the dynamic relationship , that the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptor and the message.” Nida defines dynamic equivalence “ in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it substantially the same manner as the receptors of the source language.” So we can find that Nida stress the same response the receptors of the two languages and equivalent effects, with the target receptors as the center.Nida’s methodology may be very useful for those translating propagandas and advertising, and it seems to work well with certain kinds of religion.”(Gentzler, 2004:59) Nida’s theory of dynamic equivalence or functional equivalence and receptors’ response proves valuable and workable in the translation of public signs for practical functions, such as giving instructions, warnings, or directions, but not so explainable for those propaganda signs which might have different functions to different addressees with different ideologies or cultures and nationalities. [3] For example, the communicative translation of a slogan seen at an international event of sports, how can it make the foreigners find equivalent with the chinese receptors since the translation is “Fight for the motherland”? in such occasions, receptors of different cultures or nationalities have different inclinations.

2.2. Text typ theory

Buhler classified texts into three categories: conative, expressive and representative on the basis of their main functions. His ideas are further developed by Katharina Reiss, whose text typology is: 1) the informative text where the content is the main focus; 2) the expressive text where the focus is on creative composition and aesthetics; 3) the operative text where the focus is “appellative” by which what is meant is that the text appeals to the reader to act in a certain way, persuading, dissuading, requesting, and cajoling him. In her theory, the text (or sentences or words) is not taken as the primary unit. Instead, texts form a whole with the function of the communicative event. It is this function that determines how a text should be translated . In the translation process, this involves determines the type of the text, the translator’s concepts of fit and the aim of the translation. Thus the practical application of text-type theory is to define the main function of a text as a part of the translation process.

Besides Katharina Reiss, Peter Newmark (2001a:39-42) also develops Buhler’s classification in a way similar to the way Katharina Reiss does. [4] According to him, the three main functions of language are the expressive, the informative, and the vocative functions: these are the main
purpose of using language. The core of vocative type is readership, includes notices, instructions, propaganda, publicity and popular fiction.

A text may have several functions, but many always have one function that prevails. The standard to judge a translation good or not is whether or not its main functions has been transmitted. The conformation of the target text should be determined firstly by the function and purpose required in the target context. In reality, however, the text type of the target text may turn out to have a rather different function from the source text. For example, a translation will hardly have its operative function, but rather be informative, helping the foreigners know more about China.

2.3. **Semantic translation and communicative translation**

For different types of texts, Newmark distinguishes the methods of semantic translation and communicative translation. Semantic translation, as Newmark defines, “differs from ‘faithful translation’ nly in as far as it must take more account of the aesthetic value (that is, the beautiful and natural sound) of the SL text, compromising on ‘meaning’ where appropriate so that no assonance, word-play or repetition jars in the finished version. Further, it may translate less important cultural words by culturally neutral third or functional terms but not by cultural equivalence and it may make other small concessions to the readership. The distinction between ‘faithful’ and ‘semantic’ translation is that the first is uncompromising and dogmatic, while the second is more flexible, admits the creative exception to 100% fidelity and allows for the translator’s intuitive empty with the original.” (Newmark, 2001a:46)

And the method of communicative translation is preferred in the translation of public signs. Newmark says: “Communicative translation attempts to render the exact contextual meaning of the original in such a way that both content and language are readily acceptable and comprehensible to the readership.” (Newmark, 2001a:47) Communicative translation, being set at the reader’s level of language and knowledge, is more likely to create equivalent effect than is the semantic translation at the writer’s level. Public signs exemplify the two poles of the communicative translation. “On the one hand, translation by standard terms and phrases is used mainly for notices. On the other hand, there is, in principle, the recreative translation that might be considered appropriate for publicity and propaganda, since the situation is more important than the language.” (Newmark, 2001a:50)

“Semantic and communicative translation must also be seen as wholes. Semantic translation is personal and individual, follows the process of the author, tends to over-translate, and pursues nuances of meaning, yet aim st concision in order to reproduce pragmatic impact. Communicative translation is social, concentrates on the message and the main force of the text, tends to under-translate, to be simple, clear and brief, and is always written in a natural and resourceful style. Badly and/or inaccurately written passages should be ‘corrected’ in communicative translation. A semantic translation is normally inferior to its original, as there is both cognitive and pragmatic loss; a communicative translation is often better than its original.” (Newmark, 2001a:47-48)

2.4. **Instrumental and documentary translation**

Christine Nord makes a distinction between two basic types of translation production and process, which are documentary translation and instrumental translation.

Documentary translation serves as a document of a source culture communication between the author and the ST recipient. As Nord says, “It aims at producing in the target language a kind of document of a communicative interaction in which a cruder source-culture conditions.” (Nord, 2001:47) “What is meaningful to the translation of public signs lies in the translation of political slogan in high status. “The translation is documentary in that it changes the
communicative function of the source text becomes informative for the target readers (showing what the source culture is like).” (Nord, 2001:50)

Instrumental translation “serves as an independent message-transmitting instrument in a new communicative action in the target culture, and is intended to fulfill its communicative purpose without the recipient being conscious of reading or hearing a text which, in a different form, was used before in a different communicative situation.” “Instrumental translation aims at producing in the target language as an instrument for a new communicative interaction between the source-culture sender and a target-culture audience, using (certain aspects of) the source text as a model. (Nord, 2001:47) In the reception of an instrumental translation, readers are not supposed to be aware they are reading a translation at all. The form of the text is thus usually adapted to target-culture norms and conventions of the text-type, genre, register and tenor. This type of translation can be viewed as the theoretical foundations of the “borrow” in the “ABC” approach proposed by Ding Henqi and is widely taken in the translation of public signs.

2.5. **Relevance theory of translation action**

The theory of translation action, proposed by Justa Holz-Manttari, takes up concepts from communication theory and action theory, with the aim of providing a model and guidelines applicable to a wide range of professional translation situations (Munday, 2001:77; quoted in Li Heqing, 2005: 91). Holz-Manttari views translation as purpose-driven, outcome-oriented human interaction and focuses on the process of translation as message-transmitter compounds involving intercultural transfer. According to her, it is not about translating words, sentences or text but in every case about guiding the intended cooperation over cultural barriers enabling function-oriented communication. Translational actions produces a TT that is functionally communicative and functionally suitable in the target culture. It places translation in its socio-cultural context which includes the interplay between the translator and the institution that initiates it and stresses functionality. The theory helps explain the complex phenomena in translation of public signs. Her use of the term “translational action” in the place of “translation” has stretched the definition of “translation”. [4] It is true that the translation in some special cases are not the “translation” in the traditional sense. Instead it is just the “message-transmitter compounds”. The theory of translational action helps people understand some special cases of the translation.

2.6. **Skopostheorie**

Skopostherie (or the skopos theory; “skopos” is a Greek word, which means “purpose”), developed in Germany in the late 1970s by Han J. Vermeer, is the core theory of functionalism, which is a broad term for various theories focusing on the function or functions of the text.

According to Skopostheorie, the prime principle determining any translation process is the purpose of the overall translation action. Thus the dominant rule for any translation is “Skopos rule”, meaning that a translation action is determined by its purpose; that is, “the end justifies the means” (Nord, 2001:29). Vermeer prostitutes that as a general rule that it must be the intended purpose of the target text that determines translation methods and strategies. From this prostitute, he derives the skopos rule: Human action, including translation, is determined by its purpose. It is not the source text, or its effects on the source text receptors, or the function assigned to it by the author, that determines the translation process; but the prospective function or skopos of the TT as determined by the initiator’s or client’s needs. A translational action may involve a variety of skopos, or purposes, which may be related to each other in a hierarchical order. Three possible kinds of purposes in the field of translation can be distinguished: 1) the general purpose aimed at by the translator in the translation process; 2) the communicative purpose aimed at by the target text in the target situation; 3) the purpose aimed at by a particular translation strategy or procedure.
Two other rules stipulated by Vermeer are the coherence rule and the fidelity rule. The coherence rule stipulates that the TT must be sufficiently coherent to allow the intended users to comprehend it, given their assumed background knowledge and situational circumstances. The fidelity rule concerns the coherence between the TT and the ST, and stipulates merely that some relationship must be remain between the two once the overriding principle of skopos and the rule of coherence have been satisfied. (Li Heqing, 2005:95)

3. Related studies in China and brief comments

China has a long history of translation practice and studies. Among the methodologies and principles proposed by Chinese translators and scholars based on different practice or experience, the principle of “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” summarized by Yan Fu more than 100 years ago is a consensus or common understanding that Yan Fu’s principle does not work well with pragmatic translation, especially with the translation public signs.

3.1. “ABC” approach

Therefore, Ding Hengqi (2004:92) proposed a guidance of “take-in, imitation, improvement and creation”. And in 2006 he developed his idea into the “Adapt-Borrow-Create” approach, explaining, “if there is an equivalent expression available in English, we borrow it as it is; if there is a similar one we adapt it as we need; when the precious conditions are not available, we create one in accordance to the English conventions and ways of thought. ‘Create’ means creative translation.”[5] Ding’s “ABC” approach has got widely accepted in China and frequently been quoted in the studies of the translation of public signs. The “ABC” approach, based on no theoretical foundations, is just an empirical description of practices.

3.2. The memetic perspective

In 2007, a paper entitled “Application of Memetic in the translation of Chinese Public Signs” published in the Journal of Henan University can be assumed to serve a foundation thought it did not only mention the ABC approach. [6] The author have given their memetic restatement of the two of them (“directly introducing the target meme”-borrowing; “faithfully copying the source meme” in the target language-creating; replicating the core meme of the source language-also referring to the “borrowing” approach by by the examples they have given), but missed the approach of adaptation.

According to the definition of “Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia”, “a meme, a postulate unit or element of cultural ideas, symbols or practices, gets transmitted from one mind to another through speech, gestures, rituals, or other imitable phenomena. Richard Dawkins first introduced the word in The Selfish Gene (1976) to discuss evaluationary principles in explaining the spread of ideas and cultural phenomena. (meme:Wikipedia)

Richard Dawkins noted that the three conditions which must exist for evaluation to occur:
1. variation, or the introduction, or the capacity to create copies of elements.
2. heredity or replication, or the capacity to create copies of elements.
3. differential “fitness”, or the opportunity for one element to be more or less suited to the environment than another.

The Memetic perspective assists in better understand the different way of transmission of public signs as a cultural phenomenon.

3.3. The “three-C” principle

Liu Fagong (2008:47) put forward “three-C” principles for translating public signs into English: consistency, conciseness and comprehensibility. The “consistency” means a translation should be consistent with what is widely accepted, which is similar to “borrowing” in the “ABC” approach. Consistency serves as a method as well as a rule of value judgement. The other two
principles are just rules for value judgement. [7] The “Three-C” principles reveal a general requirement for the translation of public signs into English. But they will meet failures in explaining and guiding the translation of public signs with cultural specialties since there are no way to be consistent with what is widely accepted or nothing in the target language to adopt or borrow.

3.4. Special public signs and universal public signs
In the Second National Seminar on the translation of Public Signs held in 2007, Yang Qingping (2007:188-189) proposed his classification of public signs into two categories of special and universal public signs, which helps to understand the complex phenomena of public signs and ways to translate them. Each category leads to a different approach of translation. According to him, “universal public signs” refers to those commonly used in every country of the world, expressed in different languages, but sharing the functions of reminding, instructing, restricting or forbidding, etc. “Special public signs” refers to those composed and used by a certain governmental office, social group, commercial agency, enterprise or individual for the purpose of publicizing affairs or business, in the form of slogans, advertisements and notices. Based on the outlook of universality and individuality, Yang Qingping's classification of public signs proves meaningful in understanding what to take in and what to adapt or create, adding something in theory to the "ABC" approach. That is by the content or function of a public sign and not by its expression that we determine to adopt or create or adapt in the translation.

4. Summary
No matter the functional equivalence, text typology, communicative approach and so on in the west or the ABC approach, the Three C principles and the two categories of universal and special public signs, they are all based on the foundations of equal functions. They are suitable for those signs with practical functions. In the translation practices, however, things are much complex. The translation is determined by many factors. The thesis attempts to applied a different theory, that is eco-translatology approach to study the translation of public signs in the following chapters. By analyzing the problems and errors existing in current public signs translation, the writer will conclude that the “three-dimension” principles in eco-translatology is suitable for the translation of public signs.

Reference