

Literature Review on Chinese-English Translation of Signs

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Abstract. In a globalized and interconnected world, with exchanges and cooperation between China and other countries increasing day after day, foreigners flood into China either on business, for tours, to attend school, or even to live. In many cities of China, especially in big cities, more and more bilingual signs are provided at target foreigners. Consequently, Chinese-English translation of signs is not only a significant and essential study field, but also an urgent issue that needs to be addressed. What is encouraging is that the authorities and more responsible English workers have shown concern or worries about China's poor sign translation, and are striving to redress the problems where they occur. In the domestic academic field, studies on Chinese-English translation of signs started in the late 1980s. Though much has been achieved, a lot more can still be done, or needs to be done. It is thus the intention of the present author to contribute his bit in filling up some of the gaps left in the field of Chinese-English translation of signs, or rather, to throw some light on some corners of the field which have so far remained dim or unexplored.

Signs are important information carriers that issue to the public, in clear and terse terms, directions, instructions, warnings or alerts. With China becoming a more and more influential member of the world community, foreigners are swarming into China. This has given rise to the need of providing bilingual signs in public places of many Chinese cities. Sign translation, in turn, has drawn the attention of many scholars and translators. However, the omnipresence of poor, misleading, incomprehensible and ridiculous translations of signs everywhere in our country has caused concerns among the public, government, and the academic circle. Many English signs are so incomprehensible and misleading that they have become objects of derision and criticism by those who read them, which has caused troubles and inconvenience to the foreigners in their daily life and to some extent done harm to China's image as a major player in the world economy.

1. Glimpses of Current Status of Chinese-English Sign Translation Study

1.1 Chinese-English Sign Translation Study in China [1]

Although the study of Chinese-English translation of signs as “a special genre of translation”(Luo Xuanmin and Li Tuwang, 2006: 66) was once neglected in the past decades, it has become a hot issue since the 21st century. There has been a marked growth of the concerns over sign translation with the appeal of several renowned experts, then authorities, media and responsible scholars, who have all noticed and paid attention to the unsatisfactory situation, and who are all involved in attempting to make improvements by implementing concrete counter-measures.

1.1.1 Academic Research

Up to now, English translation of Chinese signs has caught more and more attention of the public, the media, and scholars. Quite a number of language workers are specialized in this study field. Many articles on Chinese-English sign translation appear on translation or university journals and have made great contributions to the study of Chinese-English translation of signs. For instance, there were only three articles issued before the year of 2004. While, from 2005 to 2009, more than 200 related academic articles have been established in CNKI, the most comprehensive and authoritative periodical journal collections in China. Approximately 70% of the aforementioned

articles deal with the problems of signs with regard to lack of accuracy, explicitness, and normalization or standardization. The rest supply large quantities of models of the signs that are most commonly used in public places, and is a good reference source for sign translators or users. These articles supply large quantities of models of Chinese-English signs and a good analysis of problems, and thus a good data base or reference source for Chinese-English sign researchers or users.

A Chinese-English Dictionary on Signs, edited by Lǚ Hefa and Shan Liping from Beijing Second International Studies University, was published by The Commercial Press and sold all over the world in 2004. It is considered to be the first guidebook in this field. It collects all kinds of signs in Chinese and provides English translations for them. In 2007, another dictionary—*Chinese-English Translation of Signs* edited by Wang Ying and Lǚ Hefa is published by China Translation and Publishing Corporation. The great circulation of these two dictionaries indicates the great achievements that have been made in Chinese-English sign translation towards a standard and systematic research.

1.1.2 Public Campaigns

In recent years, the English translation of Chinese signs has caught the attention of the general public. So far, the most significant event in the history of Chinese-English sign translation in China is the First Symposium on Chinese-English Signs in a Global Context held in Beijing Second International Studies University in 2005. In this conference, renowned experts gathered to discuss the abuse and errors of English signs in China. In 2007, the second conference on Chinese-English translation of signs was held in Tongji University.

What's more, some public websites have been launched to systematically study Chinese-English signs, such as www.e-signs.info, www.language.chinadaily.com.cn, www.bjenglish.net.cn, www.TAS.org.cn, www.sinosign.com. People can log on them and take part in the public campaigns of correcting mistranslated signs or searching for the standard expression of signs and the latest development of the study so as to complement their own research.

Therefore, although there are obvious limits in the studies of Chinese-English sign translation, the issue has been brought to spotlight by the academic scene, government and even the general public, and it has already become a public concern. It is of great significance and necessity to make further research on this topic.

1.2 Pitfalls in Current Studies in China

All the essays mentioned above have made great contribution to the study of signs. However, a close examination of current research papers on sign translation would lead to the conclusion that the majority of these articles are focused on data-enumerating and error-correcting. Most authors would develop their essays in this way: first of all linguistic analysis on signs, followed by the listing of collected errors and suggested ways to correct them, and then an appeal for more public and academic concern over sign translation, which is, generally speaking, also the ending of the essay. These essays fail to give an all-around introduction, since many only discuss one aspect of them, such as hotel brochures, foreign publicity materials, city profiles, and product introductions. They often fail to provide theoretical guidance for the relevant translating practice. Instead of proceeding to the higher macro-level of theoretical guidance, these essays often confine themselves to the micro-level of specific error correcting and equally fundamental linguistic analysis and specific translation skills.

Sign translation should never be seen as an isolated phenomenon suspended in a vacuum of a purely linguistic perspective, rather, it is an intricate reader-centered and culture-related translation action under the guidance of some appropriate translation theory. But so far there has been no effort to study sign translation from the reader-centered perspective, the present dissertation is thus an attempt to make up the gap.

2. Theoretical Explanations for Reader-centered Translation

In translation, the translator should not just aim at fidelity to the source text, but should also keep in mind the response of readers to rendered texts. The final performer, final appreciator and final judge of a good translation are no other than the readers. The reader-centered perspective (or approach, method) is a broad term for various translation theories that put special focus on the reader's response to the product of translation. In fact, many translation theorists, having included readers in their scope of study, attach different degrees of importance to readers. The most influential of them are Nida, Newmark and the representatives of Skopostheorie (Reiss, Vermeer and Nord).

2.1 Translation Shifted to the Readers[2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10]

2.1.1 Nida and Newmark

For Nida, the first that should be mentioned is his functional equivalence theory. Functional equivalence is defined in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language. Nida bases his reader's response theory on his functional equivalence theory. In the book *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Nida puts forward the concepts of the old focus and the new focus. He says (Nida & Taber, 2004: 1), "The older focus in translation was the form of the message, and the translator took particular delight in being able to reproduce stylistic specialties... The new focus, however, has shifted from the form of the message to the response of the receptor. Therefore, what one must determine is the response of the receptor to the translated message." Nida also describes (Nida & Taber, 2004: 24), "This response can never be identical, for the cultural and historical settings are too different, but there should be a high degree of equivalence of response, or the translation will have to fail to accomplish purpose." According to Nida's theories, a faithful reproduction of the original text is not the first priority in the translation process, where factors like target readers' expectation, cultural knowledge, social background, etc. should be taken into account.

Newmark (2001: 40), in his book *Approaches to Translation* talks about the three main functions of language—the expressive, the descriptive (or informative) and the vocative (or directive, persuasive). All the texts have aspects of the expressive, the descriptive and the vocative function with an emphasis on one of the three. He uses the term "vocative" in the sense of "calling upon" the readership to act, think or feel and eventually to "react" in the way intended by the text. In his another book *A Textbook of Translation*, Newmark (2001: 47) also puts forward two major translation methods, that is, semantic translation and communicative translation. Semantic translation still remains within the original culture and assists the reader only in its connotations. The semantic translation may make small concessions to the readers, while the 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. A semantic translation is written at the author's linguistic level, and a communicative translation at the readership's level of language and knowledge. For Newmark, different texts require different translation criteria and methods, and descriptive and vocative material should not be translated mechanically without an eye to the effect of the target text on the target reader. In other words, factors that concern with the readership are the most priorities in translating the descriptive and vocative text.

Consequently, Nida's and Newmark's theories shed much light on the translation of signs, whose texts mainly belong to the descriptive and vocative types. The translator is offered more freedom to cater for the target readers' situation, and the target readers are given more attention in order to facilitate the realization of equivalent effect. The focus of translation shifted to the intended readers offers a new perspective for studying sign translation.

2.1.2 Skopostheorie

Skopostheorie, the theory of purpose which is regarded as the foundation and nucleus of the functional translation theory, has been formulated by the German functionalist school, whose

representatives are Katharina Reiss, H. J. Vermeer and Christiane Nord. This theory regards translation as a purposeful activity and insists that the purpose of translation is the most important factor which must be considered during the translation process. They believe that the prime principle determining any translation process is the purpose (Skopos) of the overall translation action. According to Skopostheorie, there are three steps when a translator has to take in practice: the first is to know the purpose of translation very clearly; the second is to translate the original into the target language; the third is to evaluate whether the translation text gets the effect that was aimed at the beginning.

In 1971, Katharina Reiss, the founder of Skopostheorie, introduced a functional category into her “objective approach to translation criticism” (Reiss, 2004: 47), and established a general correlation between text type and the translation method. Vermeer and Nord state, “Every translation is directed at an intended audience, since to translate means to produce a text in a target setting for a target purpose and target addressees in the target circumstances.” (Nord, 2001: 12) The target language reader-centered view of Skopostheorie has practical implications for the translation of signs, though many theorists, especially from the literary field, criticize its feasibility.

To sum up, by introducing abroad theorists, whose theories convey the reader-centeration, we can draw a conclusion that the target readers’ responses are crucial to ensure the success of translated texts. In other words, the translation purpose and the function of target texts are the determining factors in practical translation. Reader-centered theories hold that the vitality of a translation version is unimaginable without the participation of readers and the target readers never receive target text passively but should exert their subjective initiative and recreate the target text. So, the present author believes that reader-centeration is one of the core methods or principles that a translator should follow in conducting the translation of signs. Translators should study the target readers’ culture setting and language convention in order to get closer to the target readers and finally attract them, and make them do what signs intend them to do.

2.2 Reasons to Select the Reader-centered Perspective

Sign translation, one type of translation categories, falls into the realm of the practical or instrumental translation. The purpose of Chinese-English translation of signs is for the target readers, so all the reader-centered theories are of great help for Chinese-English sign translation. Nida puts forward the reader’s response on the basis of his functional equivalence theory. Newmark also pays much attention to the readers in his communicative and semantic translation theory. The emergence of Skopostheorie lays much more emphasis to the target readers in translation.

Among so many good theories, the author finally decides to adopt the reader-centered approach as the theoretical perspective for his study of Chinese-English sign translation. There are three specific reasons for him to select the reader-centered perspective for his study: **a.** The reader-centered perspective is developed by the theories mentioned above, such as Nida’s reader’s response, Newmark’s communicative translation, and the purposeful activity of Skopostheorie. In the translation of Chinese-English signs, the reader-centered perspective is more feasible and effective. **b.** The work of translators is no doubt for their target readers. In the translation of Chinese-English signs, translators keep the receptor in mind from beginning to end and they must take into consideration the receptor’s psychology, culture, etc. **c.** From the reader-centered perspective, it is easy to evaluate the reader’s response in the translation of Chinese-English signs.

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