

On Chinese-English Translation of Signs from a Reader-centered Perspective

Yongkun Wan*

Foreign Languages School of Yuxi Normal University, Fenghuang Street, Yuxi Municipality, P. R. China

wanyongkun123@163.com

*corresponding author

Keywords: Signs; Chinese-English Translation; Language; Culture; Reader-centered Theories

Abstract: Since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been an increasing interest among scholars in the study of the English translation of Chinese signs. Quite a number of scholars draw on theories and methodologies of all kinds to explore topics related to sign translation, which has made great contributions to the study of signs. Nevertheless, few articles are written from the perspective of reader-centered theories. This dissertation, taking the reader-centered perspective as the framework and adopting the method of DTS, seeks to open up a new perspective for Chinese-English translation of signs by providing an insight into the practical application of such theories. By closely observing numerous samples (including some photographs) of both standard and problematic translation of signs, the author manages to generalize the characteristics of signs and to categorize the problems and mistakes in the current Chinese-English translation of signs. Then, proper translation strategies are proposed on the basis of in-depth study of relevant theories and keen observation of practice. It has been an honor for the author to have opportunity to participate in this important research. The author hopes that his effort will, in some small way, serve to study the texts of China's foreign language signs.

1. Research Background

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.

Good translation of signs deliver precise direction or information, and then contributes to effective communication, which in turn promotes mutual understanding, strengthens friendly ties between people, smoothes business relations, and improves China's international image and achieves international recognition. However, according to previous researches and the present author's observations, the current situation of bilingual sign translation in most places of China can be described as "messy" and even "lousy"; some Chinese-English signs are very funny, some even completely unreadable. Dai Zongxuan and Lü Hefa(2005) state, "...some non-standardized, improper and excessive English signs have become a new source of pollution in the metropolis." [1] This kind of severe and urgent situation impels China to begin its campaigns and researches of correcting and standardizing bilingual translation on signs throughout the country.

2. Research Significance

Signs, whose basic purpose is to direct action or give information, are used commonly in our daily life, and bring us convenience and great help. Barry Gray, the Chairman of International Graphical Symbols Committee, used to say that "signing affects everybody—travelers, shoppers, visitors, drivers whether in the course of business or pleasure. Bad signing is at best irritating and at worst can be life threatening and dangerous."

In China today it has become a common practice for sign providers to match Chinese signs with English translations, which provide convenience for foreigners' working, studying, traveling or

living in China. Sign translation is an irreplaceable element of international communication, a showcase of China's cultural uniqueness to visitors from all over the world. In addition, to a certain extent, Chinese-English translation of signs indicates the level of a city's civilization. Proper bilingual translations of signs can definitely promote the internationalization of a city and upgrade its positive image. Therefore, standardized signs and their proper translations are both helpful and useful for foreigners' stay in China. But, people can easily find many types of errors in already-rendered, non-standardized, improper or excessive texts all over China, which have puzzled or misled foreigners, rather than given them clear directives. These problems form a language environment full of errors and misunderstanding, deface an enterprise and are harmful to a city's image and even to a nation's image as a whole.

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.

3. Research Methodology [2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10]

Theories of translation applicable to Chinese-English sign translation all seem to have something to be desired. For the purpose of the present paper, however, the author adopts a contrastive analytical case-study method in accordance with the principles(or the methodology) of Descriptive Translation Studies(DTS). Different from prescriptive theories, descriptive studies endeavors to take into account what happens in actual practice of translation and translation criticism, that is to say, many different ways of translating depend very much on the specific situation involved. When explaining his theory of the target-centered program of DTS, Toury(2001:36) argues, a translation process involves two procedures: the discovery stage and the justification stage. The discovery stage is the first stage which brings about the establishment of translational phenomena, and the justification stage, which in turn serves as a mirror image of the corresponding discovery procedures, generalize these findings. The preliminary findings of the first stage are then tested in the second stage where the whole collected data is analyzed. The whole procedure of the Chinese-English translation of signs should be in line with the DTS methodology, mainly four key steps: making clear the translation brief, analyzing the source language, anticipating the potential translation problems and errors, and evaluating translation.

Taking the reader-centered perspective as the framework and adopting the method of DTS, the author hopes to open up a new perspective for Chinese-English translation of signs by providing an insight into the practical application of such theories and establishing a set of systematic methods.

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correcting and standardizing bilingual translation on signs throughout the country.

Translation is not merely a cross-linguistic activity, but more of a transmission of cultural information. The translation of signs is no exception. An appropriate translation of signs should not only be linguistically correct, but also culturally acceptable. In that sense, the author believes that successful sign translation requires more than mere linguistic competence. Only when armed with proper methods and under the guidance of appropriate theory, can a sign translator have idealistic achievements.

Among so many good theories, the author has selected the reader-centered perspective(or approach, method) as the theoretical perspective for this dissertation, due to the fact the core of translation is not only the fidelity to the original texts, but rather, is the response of the target readers to the rendered texts. In the translating of signs, the target readers' response is the referential point rather than the original text.

In fact, many translation theorists have involved readers in their theories. The most influential of them are Nida, Newmark and the representatives of Skopostheorie(Reiss, Vermeer and Nord). Nida puts forward the reader's response on the basis of his functional equivalence. Newmark also pays much attention to the readers. According to his view, a sign has vocative function. For the vocative text, communicative translation is often adopted to create equivalent effect as it is at the readership's level. The emergency of Skopostheorie attaches much importance to the target readers. This theory advocates the translation is purposefully driven and the status of the original text is belittled.

Any translation should be directed to an intended receptor. 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. In terms of theory, the author finds that the reader-centered theories are particularly inspiring.

4. Sample Collection

In order to collect enough samples to complete his study, in addition to different kinds of examples from books, journals and the Internet, the author crossed every block of Yuxi City (certainly including Yuxi Normal University) and the northern district of Kunming City, photographing and noting-down road signs, traffic signs, institution names, visiting signs, shopping signs and public slogans.

Thus, these 1000-odd samples are common, authentic and representative. They, all coming from our daily life, are actually mirrors of English translation of Chinese signs; at the same time, they could reflect the translation competence of Chinese translators. The source and target languages are coupled in this dissertation for contrastive analysis, explanations and commentaries are also given on the examples.

5. Dissertation Structure

The present paper consists of the following six sections: The first section is an introduction, presenting research background, significance, methodology, sample collection and the structure of this dissertation. Chapter One is a review of the literature available on the current status of Chinese-English sign translation study and provides theoretical explanations for Chinese-English translation from the reader-centered perspective. Chapter Two focuses on the overview of signs for a thorough understanding, introducing their definitions, functions, classifications and categories, and characteristics as well as discussing differences between Chinese and English signs. Chapter Three is an in-depth analysis on the common errors existing in the translation of Chinese-English signs from the perspectives of linguistics and culture respectively. Chapter Four, based on the enlightenments of the reader-centered theories, examines general reader-centerations, principles and strategies for the translation of Chinese-English signs. The last section, serving as a conclusion, summarizes this dissertation and points out the findings and limitations of the present study.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Dissertation Summary

With China's entry into WTO, the communications between China and foreign countries will become more frequent. Signs constitute an important part in our daily life, and their English versions contribute a great deal to foreigners in China. That is why China is now sparing no effort to ensure decent translations on bilingual signs.

As far as the author is concerned, the target-reader-centered is the primary approach(or perspective) that the translator abides by during sign translation. Many translation theorists have taken target readers into consideration in formulating their theoretic framework. The most important of them are Nida, Newmark and the representatives of Skopostheorie(Reiss, Vermeer and Nord). In their theories, target readers are paid much attention to, which makes them different from the former translation theorists and is compensation for pure linguistic theory, which ignores readers' reception psychology and aesthetic elements. The reader-centered theories are equivalence-based with shift of translating focus on the target readers, and thus have a practical significance for sign translation. The fate of the translated signs will be always determined by the intended receptors, who may have different culture system, knowledge background and communicative needs.

As sign translation is a cross-cultural activity, the translators are required to be familiar with the source and the target cultures and be sensitive to their differences. Also, they need to be bilingually competent. Equipped with these abilities, the translators bring their creativity into full play under the direction of reader-centered theories. Actually, most poorly translated signs are due to the incompetence and lack of responsibility of translators, printers and the supervision organization. Since the quality of sign translation represents the image of a city, even the whole country, an improvement on this serious current situation is becoming important and urgent. In this dissertation, the author has made an endeavor to discuss how to translate Chinese signs into English under the guidance of reader-centered theories, which, as a matter of fact, has never been tried before. But it is an arduous and long-term task requiring every translator concerned to work hard at it.

6.2 Research Findings

This dissertation is the author's tentative research attempting to analyze Chinese-English translation of signs from the reader-centered perspective. He hopes this new perspective could provide broader scope to study sign translation and solve practical problems in this field. After having analyzed English translation of signs in China, the author has had some findings from his study:

First, the reader-centered theories are a very practical approach to the translation of signs. In light of these theories, the English translation of Chinese signs should be target-reader-centered and considered from the view of the foreigners' needs and acceptability. The translator should always keep his target readers in mind and is able to reproduce the original spirit with the perfect language; otherwise, the translated texts will be difficult to hit upon the optimal version.

Second, signs are not just simple words or sentences. They have their own definition, scope, functions, characteristics and text types, and therefore, the translation task is not as easy as the author thought. Sign translation is not merely a cross-lingual activity, but also a cross-cultural and even cross-social interaction. The translators should have high language and culture competence as well as the professional knowledge of signs.

Third, overviewing the current situation of English translation of Chinese signs, the author has found that numberless errors are shocking and deserve special attention and systematic study. These errors reveal some Chinese-English translators' deficiencies in linguistic competence and cross-cultural communication competence. In accordance with the reader-centered perspective, the author has given a detailed analysis of the translation errors of signs with many typical examples as well as pointing out the causes behind.

The last finding is also the author's final purpose of this dissertation, that is, to find appropriate methods and suggestions to tackle the issue, to realize the functions of translation towards the target readers. With the reader-centered approach, he has given some suggestive strategies. The author

hopes his strategies in this dissertation will be practical, and the translation of signs can be given enough attention so that all the versions will be standard and accurate.

6.3 Limitations

Generally speaking, the study of signs is dynamic rather than static, practical rather than theoretical. Although expecting to provide a comprehensive analysis of this topic, the author has to point out that due to his own incompetence in both English and Chinese, and this is his new touch in the translating field, he is sure that there are some limitations or deficiencies in this dissertation, which is expected to be further explored and supplemented by other scholars being engaged in the study of sign translation: First, this study may have covered a wide range of topics, but they are not thorough and profound enough. Some of the discussions are comparatively simple. Second, reader-centered theories have been employed into sign translation study in details, but they are far from perfect and can not be used as a panacea for all problems. No single translation theory can neatly summarize the various genres and stipulate a series of succinct principles of what can and should be done in each case. Therefore, more relevant translation theories need to be discussed and applied. Third, with limited access to first-hand materials, most examples cited in this dissertation are confined to a few places of two cities or quoted from books, journals and the Internet, so they only consist of a small part of all the varieties of signs and may not be typical or representative enough. Fourth, due to his limited language competence, the author can not give better versions of some signs, even if he knows the original translations are not good enough. Thus some of the author's suggestive versions may not be accurate and standard, and they are only for references and need improvement. In consequence, the results may not be convincing as the author expected. In his opinion, further research can be made in the following directions: First, more typical and sufficient examples, especially the first-hand material, are to be collected. Second, the more detailed analysis of the characteristics of signs between English and Chinese must be made. Third, the complete set of translation strategies should be employed. Forth, more relevant translation theories need to be discussed. Obviously, we have a long way to go in this field.

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