

A Study of Pragmatic Equivalence in C-E Translation of Public Signs: A Case Study of Xi'an, China

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Abstract

Nowadays, bilingual public signs have great significance to China's cultural exchanges and economic cooperation with other countries. However, pragmatic failures in C-E translation of public signs occur so frequently that they lower the translation quality and even impair the charm and international image of the cities. The paper introduces Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory and analyzes its application to C-E translation of public signs. Functional Equivalence Theory proves to be quite effective and instructive in the translation of public signs. However, through the practice of the translation of public signs, the author finds that the limitation of this theory is inevitable. Further exploration and enrichment are needed to provide guidance for translation practice.

Key words: Public signs; Pragmatic failure; Functional equivalence

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1.1 The Significance of the Study

With the development of Chinese economy and Chinese reforming and opening up policy, China has more connection with the outer world and people from other countries are beginning to focus more attention on China. In order for foreigners to know better about China and have a happy experience in China, many measures have been considered to make foreigners feel at home. One of the measures is to make bilingual public signs in public

places. Xi'an is the capital of Shaanxi Province and also the political, economic and cultural center of northwest China. With the development of tourist industry and the implementation of the open policy, it has become one of the nation's key tourist cities and tourism has become the mainstay in Shaanxi economy. The long history has made Xi'an the city that has no parallel anywhere as a cultural site. However, it is noted that lots of improper English translations exist in public signs in Xi'an, which, instead of promoting mutual understanding, have puzzled foreigners, or even given them wrong information. Pragmatic failures happen frequently, such as linguistic mistakes, word-for-word transitions, Chinese style English expressions, and many Chinese cultural elements are not properly rendered into English.

In brief, the proper translation of public signs concerns not only the foreigners' needs but China's international image as well. Therefore it is important and urgent to study the translation of public signs systematically and improve the quality of translation. With the application of Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory to the public signs' translation in Xi'an China, the author finds some proper translation methods, which will be of some help to the improvement of C-E translation of public signs in China.

1.2 The Definition and Functions of Public Signs

Definition: According to what Professor Dai Zongxian says on "*The First Symposium on C&E Signs in a Global Context*", "public signs" are signs that are shown publicly, offering a kind of warning, direction, notification and other closely related literal or graphical information. He adds that public signs are actually a very important component to the language environment of a city, especially an international tourist city.

Functions: Public signs share some basic functions. According to Professors Dai Zongxian and Lv Hefa, these basic functions are indicating functions and pragmatic functions (DAI & LV, 2005) which shared

by both Chinese and English public signs. Indicating functions include directing, prompting, restricting, compelling functions. While, arousing attention, rendering information, deepening understanding, promoting action, reinforcing image and serving society are included in pragmatic functions.

1.3 A Probe into Nida's Functional Equivalence

One of Nida's most important contributions to translation theory is the concept of functional equivalence, which was first put forward as dynamic equivalence as opposed to formal equivalence in his book *Towards the Science of Translating* in 1964. The concept of functional adequacy in translating has been described in a number of books and articles as "dynamic equivalence". It was first put forward in *Toward a Science of Translating* and elaborated in *The Theory and Practice of Translation* in great detail. By the mid-1980s, dynamic equivalence was replaced with functional equivalence.

Nida's focus on receptor's response in his new concept of translating is actually the theory of functional equivalence, which is "directed primarily toward equivalence of response rather than equivalence of form" (Nida, 1964, p. 166). Furthermore, Nida's definition of translating "reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning, and secondly in terms of style" (Nida & Taber, 1969, p. 12) is also another way of defining his functional equivalent translation. Thus functional equivalence is defined as "that in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it is substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language" (Nida & Taber, 1969, p. 24). "A translation of functional equivalence aims at complete naturalness of expression, and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of his own culture; it does not insist that he understands the cultural patterns of the source language context in order to comprehend the message". (Nida, 1964, p. 159).

In Nida's view, a functional equivalent translation must fit the receptor language and culture in order to make the translated message intelligible and natural to the target language receptors.

2. THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF THE APPLICATION OF FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE THEORY TO C-E TRANSLATION OF PUBLIC SIGN

This part mainly focuses on the application of Functional Equivalence Theory in public signs translation by employing different strategies. To great extent, the key

to successful translation is mainly dependent on correct application of translation strategy.

2.1 Exploration of Effective Strategies in C-E Translation of Public Signs Under the Guidance of Functional Equivalence Theory

Translation of public signs shall satisfy the requirement of promoting functions and unique purpose, aiming at its target readers and adapting to their target language and culture. Due to language and cultural barriers, in the light of Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory, target-language-culture oriented strategy can be considered as the basic strategy for translation of public signs. To a certain degree, Functional Equivalence Theory serves to demolish one of the main barriers occurring in the translation progress, namely, the cultural barrier. The greater the differences in language and culture, the more the difficulties in comprehension and appreciation. That's to say, the less culture-specific text is, the less need there will be for its structure to be modified. On the contrary, the more culture-specific a text is, the more flexible there may be for modification.

Only when the original public sign is adapted to the target language and cultural standards, can the target receptor easily understand the meaning of the public sign and be likely to accept it. We are studying the translation between Chinese and English, so it is necessary for us to probe into the linguistic features in translation of public signs on lexical level and grammatical level respectively as well as cultural features.

2.1.1 Translating Based on Target Language Orientation

According to Nord, linguistic problems arise from structural difference in the vocabulary, syntax and suprasegmental features of the source language and target language. So the linguistic problems of public signs translation can be divided into lexical and grammatical ones.

2.1.1.1 On Lexical Level

•Improper Diction

Diction is the choice and use of words to express meaning. Since most public signs are rather short and brief, the choice of proper words play a very important role in the course of translation. The accurate comprehension is the prerequisite for choosing the correct words. Let's look at some mistranslation caused by the improper diction.

Example 1. **Chinese Version:** 候机楼

English Version: waiting-hall

The English version seems very strange to foreigners. The problem here is caused by the fact that the translator did not understand the target language. The name "候机楼" used internationally is "terminal", which is accurate and clear to the foreigners.



Example 2. The signboard of a coffee bar seen in Xiaozhai: 蘭亭咖啡語茶: **LANTING COFFEE LANGUAGE** seems very funny. Language means the system of communication in speech and writing or a way of expressing ideas and feelings using movements, symbols and sound. But, foreigners will be puzzled with the signboard which aims to show it is a place

where people can chat with coffee and tea. So the word LANGUAGE is an improper diction. According to Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory, target audience's response should be concerned. The suggested translation should be "LANTING CAFÉ".

Let's see another example:



In Sea-Star Supermarket, “我們共同的目标” is translated into “**Our common project**”. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, PROJECT means a planned piece of work that is designed to find information about something, to produce something new,

or to improve something. It is not what the word “目标” means exactly. It means the purpose of doing something or what somebody is trying to achieve in English. Here the target language should be oriented. Then, the suggested translation should be “Our common goal”.



Also, a similar mistake happened in a well-known glasses store. “西北眼鏡行” was translated into **NORTHWEST GLASSES LINE**. “Line” in dictionary means a row of people or things next to each other or behind each other or a system of making something, in which the product moves from one worker to the next until it is finished, etc. All the meanings have nothing to do with business firm. So, the suggested translation is “NORTHWEST GLASSES COMPANY” or “NORTHWEST GLASSES STORE”.

•Redundant Words

Redundancy is superfluous and unnecessary in the use of language. As we mention that one of the key language features of public signs is short and concise, any unnecessary word should be removed. The meaning of the signs can be expressed with very fewer words. The fewer words, the clearer the message. Therefore, keeping the language simple makes the signs much more effective in addressing the warning or behavior that the sign dictates. The followings are examples in terms of word redundancy.

For example “收銀台” is often translated into “Cashier Desk”, actually “Cashier” is enough.

The examples with redundant words are easy to find out. As to other examples like 警務工作站 (Public Affairs

Station), 公廁 (Public Toilet), 前台 (Front Desk), and 出口 (Exit Gate), 进一步改革 (further reform), 互相合作 (mutual corporation), 新制度 (new innovations), the concise translations should be Police Station, Toilet, Reception, Exit, reform, corporation and innovations.

•Spelling Mistakes

Another most common problem in the translation of public signs at the lexical level is spelling mistakes. These mistakes can be seen frequently everywhere, and they mainly result from the carelessness of the translators or painters. These mistakes not only affect the foreigners' understanding of the information on the signs, but also may leave a perfunctory or terrible impression on the readers. There are too many such examples. What we should do is to take more time and make more effort in the translation and making of the signs, checking the spelling as a must to see if there are any mistakes.

Some examples are as follows.





2.1.1.2 On Grammatical Level

Part of Speech Misuse

Chinese characters are very flexible, and one character can be used as a noun, a verb, an adjective, etc., according to its function in the sentence, while in English, words are

divided into different classes and must be used within the strict part of speech. Here are examples of the misuse of part of speech.

Example 1. Chinese Version: 卡友服务中心

English Version: **VIP Card Serve Center**

Obviously, the translator takes the verb serve as a noun. Though it seems to be a minor mistake, the translation does not make any sense to foreigners. The right translation should be “V.I.P. Card Service Center”.



Another example is 请您关注

English Version: **Please The Concern.**

“Please” can be used to express a polite way of asking for something or telling somebody to do something, it should be followed with a verb. And “Please” also can be used as a verb. It means “making somebody happy or being very attractive at something”. So the English version “Please The Concern” does not match its Chinese version. The suggested translation is “Attention Please”.

Word-for-Word Translation

In the process of translation, one of the important things that the translator should do is to express the pragmatic meaning in a certain situation. The pragmatic meaning shows that, when using language, people not only talk or write to others, but more importantly, they perform actions or do things. In some situations, when the language is translated into another one, the pragmatic meaning is more important than the meanings of words. Thus the word-for-word translation is usually incorrect in terms of sentence structure and grammar, and even if they are right, it still cannot transfer the real information of the original text. Examples are as follows:



Example 1. Chinese Version: 市场人多拥挤，请您注意自身安全

English Version: **MARKET PERSON MANY CROWD PLEASING WATCH FOR THE ONESELF THE SOFETY.**

It is a typical word-for-word translation. The translator translated the Chinese version into English according to our Chinese sentence structure and words' order. The translator totally ignores English grammar. The translation is meaningless to those target audiences. According to Nida, readers' response should be weighted. The suggested translation should be “CROWDED IN THE MARKET, PLEASE WATCH YOURSELF!”

2.1.2 Sociopragmatic Failure Influenced by Chinese Thinking Pattern

Chinese and English belong to two different language families, so there are totally different characteristics in the two languages. What's more, the way of thinking of the two nations greatly influences the languages. The pragmatic failure in the public signs' translation we are going to discuss in this part are caused by “Chinese way of thinking”, which leads to Chinglish translations. In the book *The Translator's Guide to Chinglish*, Joan Pinkham (2000) states that “Chinglish, of course, is that misshapen, hybrid language that is neither English nor Chinese but that might be described as ‘English with Chinese

characteristics” (Pinkham, 2000, p. 1). She also points out that “to one degree or another, the work of all but the most highly trained and experienced among readers will inevitably contain elements of Chinglish” (Pinkham, 2000, p. 1). As Chinese and English speakers have different thinking patterns, they have different ways of expressing ideas accordingly. For this reason, there are different sentence structures in Chinese and English. Influenced by the mother tongue, the translator will unavoidably put his Chinese thinking into the translation. As a result, the translation may be wrong in terms of sentence structures. Here are some examples:

Example 1. Chinese Version: 有困难请直接找110.

English Version: **Be in trouble, please call 110.**

When we Chinese see the sign, we know it means we should call 110 when we meet some difficulties. But the English version, in the foreigners' point of view, seems to encourage people to be in trouble, so that they can call the police. So in English thinking pattern, the sentence structure should be: “In Case of Emergency, Dial 110.”

Example 2. Chinese Version: 小心滑落.

English Version: **Slip Carefully.**

One of the important purposes of public signs is to offer information, telling people what to do and what not to do. When we read the Chinese public sign, we know it is intended to warn tourists to be careful, for there are steep steps or similar situation. However, when we read the translation we find it rather confusing. “Slip carefully” seems to invite tourists to slip down the steps in a careful way. In fact, it is really dangerous. Thus, the original text is a warning whereas the English version is an invitation. Chinese Version has totally opposite meanings. This poor translation must mislead tourists. Actually, the sign should read: “Watch your step”.

2.1.3 Cultural Misunderstanding

Language reflects culture. Language includes plenty of cultural information and a great deal of cultural features and background. Public signs are full of cultural elements, which in fact are often overlooked by translators. Influenced by our own culture, we habitually interpret other cultures according to it and it is likely to cause misunderstanding.

Generally speaking, it is easy to overcome the mere language barriers in translating; but it is difficult to overcome the differences and barriers of culture which reflect upon language. It is clear that translating is a complex exchanging process which expresses one language connotation in another language. In this process, various cultural elements must be involved. Because of different cultural background, translating is intended to break down the cultural barriers. If the translator does not deal with cultural elements well, the translation is by no means a good one, let alone be accepted and used among addresses.

Example 1. Chinese Version: 请让我们的工作人员到房间为你服务

English Version: **Please let our Maids Come to Your Room and Serve You**

When we see the Chinese public sign, we know it wants the guests to cooperate with the hotel's work. But the translation has kind of hint of temptation from the viewpoint of Western cultures. Therefore, the translation is not proper. The suggested one is “Please Call for Room Service”.

Let's see another example. Chinese Version: 教师休息室

English Version: **The teacher's restroom.**

This is an incorrect English version that I found in a school in Xi'an. In order to establish a good international image and bring convenience to the foreign teachers, there are bilingual signs in this school. But because the translator lacked knowledge, the translation became the laughing stock among the foreign teachers. In American English, rest room is the euphemistic phrase for the bathroom in the public places such as the theatre, market, airport, etc. In English, there are several expressions of “休息室”, like lounge, lobby and so on. So the rest room and “休息室” seem to be the same concepts to the Chinese, but these terms refer to different things in the two cultures.

2.1.4 Meaningless Literal Translation

Because of cultural differences, the words have been given different meanings in the two languages, the translator should know this. Otherwise the cultural differences may make literal translation meaningless. An English word and its correspondent Chinese term do not always share the same semantic register.

For example, “肉松” was translated into “**MEAT PINE**”. It is a typical word-for-word translation. Foreigners will be puzzled. They do not know what the stuff is. Suggested translation should be “MEAT SOFT” or “DRIED MEAT FLOSS”.



On a campus, the sign “话吧” is translated into “**TALKS ABOUT**”. “Talks about” is an English phrase which means to say something. It has nothing to do with telephone. The suggested translation is “Telephone Bar”. The reason of misunderstanding in this case is that “话” stands for “TALKS” and “吧” stands for “ABOUT” in Chinese, so many people just fill out the sentence pattern with a direct translation, without having a basic knowledge of the English word.

2.1.5 Cultural Conflicts

For the cross-cultural translation beyond the semantic level, most importantly, we should consider the different

cultural background of English and Chinese, and in order to achieve the best effect, we should respect different cultural customs and traditions. Lack of such knowledge will lead the translation to cultural conflicts.

Chinese Version: 警告:此地有恶犬!

English Version: **Warning: bad dogs!**

In western countries, pets, especially dogs, are very popular. Most people love dogs and regard dogs as members of their family. So dogs have pretty high status in the western culture, hence there are many saying like lucky dog, love me, love my dog. But in this sign, the use of bad dogs may give the western readers unpleasant feelings, so my suggested translation is "Warning. Mad dogs!"

Chinese Version: 粮油干货

English Version: **Grain, Oil and Fuck Foods**

This translation is terrible because it is totally wrong in semantic and cultural level. Fuck is taboo in spoken English, and the meaning is offensive. Seeing this word, the readers will feel annoyed and irritated. The translation should be "Dried Foods".

3. THE CAUSES OF PRAGMATIC FAILURE IN TRANSLATED PUBLIC SIGNS

To define "pragmatic failure", it is essential first of all for us to have a clear idea of "pragmatic competence". A speaker's "linguistic competence" would be made up of grammatical competence and pragmatic competence. "Pragmatic competence" refers to the ability to use language in a goal-oriented speech situation in which the speaker is using language in order to produce a particular effect in the mind of the hearer. A lack of pragmatic competence on the part of both the speaker and the hearer would result in pragmatic failure. Pragmatic failure occurs when the hearer fails to perceive the illocutionary force of an utterance or when the speaker fails to convey the intended meaning. Pragmatic failure, then, is an important source of cross-cultural communication breakdown, but in spite of this, sometimes people have almost ignored it. From my point of view, the translation problems and errors are mainly caused by the followings:

1. The translator's low language competence. As Nord puts it, linguistic errors are often due to deficiencies in the translator's source or target-language competence. And the grammar, pragmatic and cultural problems can also be caused by this reason.

2. The translator's lack of knowledge of the public signs. Public signs have developed the characters of their own and not everyone who has learnt English can translate them well. The translator should be not only an expert in the language itself but also be professional in the public signs. Thus the translation can be accurate and pure.

3. The translator's failure to take consideration of

cultural difference. He or she is over influenced by Chinese culture, thinking patterns and language, and fail to think of the cultural differences between Chinese and English. Then the translator brings too many Chinese cultural elements into the translation, without thinking the cultural differences, the translation problems may occur.

4. The translator's weak responsibility. The spelling mistakes and grammar mistakes are caused by the translator's carelessness and irresponsible attitudes.

4. SUGGESTIONS IN THE TRANSLATION OF PUBLIC SIGNS

So from what we have mentioned above, we now come to the conclusion that a qualified translator must possess linguistic and cultural competence of the target language. As Susan Bassnet once said that a translator is like a surgeon, "operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it (Susan Bassnet, 1991, p. 14).

4.1 Translating Based on Target Culture Orientation

Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory put emphasis on cultural factors in translation. In his view, "the most serious mistakes in translating are usually made not because of verbal inadequacy, but of wrong cultural assumptions" (Nida, 2002, p. 29). He argues that translation should aim at "complete naturalness of expression, and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of his own culture" (Nida, 2002, p. 159). Therefore, "for truly successful translating, biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism" (Nida, 2002, p. 81). We now know that translation involves the transfer of two cultures as well as that of two languages and that translation is regarded as a cultural communication to transplant the source culture. Therefore, translation is not merely an interpretation of verbal signs, but also a cultural interpretation. And translation between Chinese and English is not an easy task because the two languages belong to entirely different cultural traditions and serves as vehicles for the transmission of western and Chinese cultures. Since translation is an activity of the exchange of the activity of cultures, the translator should know the difference between western and Chinese cultures, otherwise it will make mistakes in the translation. Sociopragmatic failures are related to the question of whether conventions should be adapted to target-culture standards. (Nord, 2004, p. 77). In the translation of public signs, the translator should accept and preserve differences while seeking and appreciating similarities. Sensitivity to cultural differences can be regarded as a must for a qualified translator, because the cultural differences are omnipresent in any translation. If not, cultural differences may cause misunderstanding or the literal meaningless in the translation.

4.2 Choosing Appropriate Language Forms to Convey the Pragmatic Force

To achieve the functional equivalent effect in public signs translation involves choosing the appropriate forms of language to convey the intended meaning or pragmatic force of the source text.

Translators should check their work and do proofreading when they finish translating. In order to achieve competent translation, translators must keep in mind that translation needs an honest attitude, wide knowledge and language competence. The mastery of language is not easy and requires painstaking effort. A good command of target language will produce language sense and make it sure in choosing suitable words. Holding that only qualified translation will guarantee effective communication, the translators will take some measures to have their versions checked after being finished to ensure the quality. Only by keeping a high sense of duty can the translators do their work properly, which is the most fundamental prerequisites for a competent translator. This is the force, which, as it involves the spirit, not just the mind, will be ultimately decisive in the making of a good translator. Translators should keep in mind that any carelessness or lack of duty might bring about losses. They should be convinced that they are confronted with arduous tasks, and should put heart into it.

4.3 Standardizing the Translation

To help foreigners even further, all the public signs around the city are to be standardized, so that they are unique and distinctive in foreigners' eyes.

An administrative department in charge of related organizations such as ministry of communication, tourist bureau should be set up to draw up a statewide unified rule, making the translation of public signs standardized.

To avoid the disorder and irregularity of the public signs' translation, relevant management system should be inducted. The certification authority of translating qualification should be set up as soon as possible, all the bilingual signs have to be submitted to the approving agency to examine and revise before using. And before being qualified, translators should pass some stiff examinations. Only the person who possessed the qualification can be engaged in public signs' translating work.

However, the establishment of translating standards of public signs is not easy; it is a long-term job. The whole nation, experts and relative organizations should make their joint effort to reach the aim of standardization.

CONCLUSION

Translation of public signs is a science as well as an art. It is a comprehensive process, which covers linguistics, cultural factors and translation studies. Translation of public signs has its own unique function and purpose,

which is to offer information, arouse attention. Functional Equivalence Theory stresses the equivalent response between the source audience and the target audience, with emphasis on the target language orientation and target culture orientation.

Dr. Nida says: "There can be no exact equivalence between languages, nor can there be absolutely exact translations; as a whole, a version can be very near to the original." (1982, p. 52) This can be understood in this manner that every language has something untranslatable. So we cannot expect one hundred percent equivalent effect. As is known, translation is seldom done for a single person, but usually for a group of people, who may differ in age, sex, experience, level of education, ability of understanding, and who have different criteria as to what is a fine piece of translation. A translation may be found satisfactory by some people but not appreciated by others. We cannot expect that a translation will be comprehended in the same way by all readers. What's more, different translators are bound to differ in their ability not only to understand and appreciate the same source language text, but also to express it in the target language. It is only natural, therefore, that different translators will understand the same source text differently and produce different translations. As a result it is practically impossible for a translator to achieve the desired identical responses.

In a word, with the application of Functional Equivalence Theory and from perspectives of language and culture, the author gives a thorough analysis to the problems and the causes in C-E translation of public signs and offers some tentative solutions which will be of some help to the study of C-E translation of public signs.

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