A Comparative Study of Chinese and English Public Signs: Linguistic and Cultural Perspectives

Xiaoqi Xu[1, a]

[1] School of International Studies, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou 310000, China

[a] 1040939463@qq.com

Abstract

With the upcoming *Asian Games*, public signage, as a platform of information dissemination, plays an undeniable role in the process of Sino-foreign cultural exchanges. This paper, integrating theoretical analysis with empirical research data, is structured into two main parts. The first part undertakes a comparative analysis of the linguistic characteristics of public signs in English and Chinese. Firstly, English and Chinese public signs exhibit distinct tendencies towards hypotaxis and parataxis at the lexical level, resulting in significant differences in verb usage, noun usage, and the expression of logical relationships. Secondly, differences at the sentence level primarily manifest in sentence structure choices, voice, and the employment of politeness principles. In the second part, this paper employs field research methodology to classify and analyze instances of translation errors in public signs in *Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province*. It is hoped that this study will promote enhanced cross-cultural communication and the improvement of the city's external image promotion.

Keywords

Public Signs, English-Chinese Comparison, Translation Errors, Field Research Methodology.

1. Introduction

Public signs refer to "text and graphic information that is publicly displayed and facing the public, conveying, instructing, guiding, displaying, warning, and marking aspects of life, production, livelihood, ecology, and occupation..." [1]. They often employ concise and clear language to ensure rapid comprehension and compliance with the instructions contained therein. The application of public signs is extremely wide-ranging, encompassing street signs, billboards, road markers, warning signs, promotional slogans, tourist brochures, etc.

In the era of globalization, cross-cultural communication has become increasingly common, so a deep understanding of language use and cultural connotations between different cultures has become essential. With the imminent opening of the *Asian Games*, public signs, serving as a medium of information dissemination, become China's platform for showcasing itself to the world. Both Chinese and English public signs, representing two important languages, offer insights into how language reflects and shapes culture.

However, inappropriate translation and usage of public signs have been observed in some regions of China. Inappropriate public signs can evidently affect cross-cultural communication and harm a city's image. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen theoretical research and translation practices related to public signs, especially in the context of comparing English and Chinese public signs.

In recent years, research on public signs has gradually become a hotspot in the field of linguistics, with major research directions including translation studies of English-Chinese public signs and cross-linguistic comparative studies. Many scholars have made a detailed

analysis and investigation of both English and Chinese public signs in different regions of China [2, 3, 4]. When translating public signs, highlighting the significance of pragmatic errors, the importance of pragmatic linguistic equivalence and socio-pragmatic equivalence is emphasized [5]. The principles guiding the translation of public signs, including the predominance of translation strategies based on text types are proposed [6]. Within the framework of ecological translation studies, some scholars explored the translation of public signs, using the theme slogan of the Shanghai World Expo as an example for analysis [7]. Some studies, applying Katalin Rácz's text type theory, categorized public signs into informational and affective text types and proposed four principles for translating informational public signs: normativity, consistency, functionality, and conciseness [8]. It is suggested that signage texts should be classified as vocative-functional texts and communicative translation strategies should be adopted to better fulfill their informational and effective functions [9]. English and Chinese public signs can be divided into two categories: lexical public signs and syntactic public signs, so as to analyze the syntactic structure features and semantic attributes [10]. In addition to Chinese, there are also scholars who have studied the contrast between English and other languages, such as Vietnamese [11].

Currently, domestic research on public signs primarily focuses on translation studies of public signs, while the quantity of comparative research between Chinese and English public signs remains limited and awaits further exploration by researchers. Therefore, this paper conducts a comparative analysis of English and Chinese public signs in terms of vocabulary and syntax through parallel texts to understand the differences in expression, values, and ways of thinking between people from different countries; then, through field research in *Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province*, we investigate the instances of inappropriate translation of public signs and proposes effective strategies to reduce mistranslation.

2. Classification of Public Signs

Public signs can be categorized in various ways based on their purpose and function. The following are some common classification methods:

2.1. Instructive Public Signs

Instructive public signs primarily provide information to the public without any constraints or mandatory implications, i.e., they do not require the public to take any specific actions. The primary purpose of such public signs is to offer instructive information, which is the most basic and fundamental function of public signs. Examples include traffic signs on roads, cooking instructions on food packaging, and usage guidelines on restroom doors. e.g. *"Department Store", "One Way", "Travel Service"*

2.2. Warning Public Signs

These public signs aim to alert individuals to potential dangers or risks to reduce accidents and injuries. They are not directed at specific or individual groups and are not mandatory. The public can choose to comply or not based on the situation. Common examples include *"Watch Your Hand", "Wet Paint"* and *"Explosive Materials"*

2.3. Restrictive Public Signs

Restrictive public signs are used to limit or constrain people's behaviors or activities. The main purpose of such signs is to provide clear instructions or rules to ensure that the public adheres to regulations in specific environments, thus maintaining order, safety, or hygiene. Restrictive public signs are typically expressed in concise and straightforward language to ensure rapid comprehension and compliance with the rules. However, violating these regulations usually does not entail severe legal consequences. e.g. *"Wait in Line"*

2.4. Mandatory Public Signs

Mandatory public signs exert significant constraints on the relevant public, requiring them to either perform or refrain from specific actions while emphasizing the necessity of compliance. Violating these regulations may lead to legal or other serious consequences. Examples include *"No Overtaking"* and *"No Minors Allowed"*

3. Comparative Analysis of English and Chinese Public Signs

This paper collected representative public signs in both English and Chinese as research materials and conducted a comparative analysis of these public signs. The aim is to explore the commonalities and differences between English and Chinese public signs.

3.1. Lexical Level

In both English and Chinese, public signs exhibit characteristics of conciseness, directness, precision, and standardization. These attributes are shared between the two languages. However, due to the distinct language families to which English and Chinese belong, coupled with differences in expression habits and cultural variances, there are notable differences in vocabulary usage in public signs.

In Chinese public signs, there is a significant emphasis on the use of verbs, as seen in phrases like *"禁止停车"* and *"请勿触摸展品"*. In contrast, English signs often features noun-dominated structures, such as *"(Noun)...+only"* and *"No + noun (verb-ing)"*. Verb phrases are less commonly used and are usually limited to fixed collocations. This results in a marked difference in the quantity and flexibility of verb usage compared to Chinese.

This phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that Chinese and English belong to different language typologies. Chinese is an analytic language, where verbs enjoy greater flexibility due to less morphological constraints. This makes the language more inclined toward using verbs or verb phrases, imparting a dynamic quality to the narratives. English, on the other hand, is a synthetic language, and verb usage is often constrained by inflectional changes and syntactic rules. Consequently, English tends to rely more on nouns, adjectives, and prepositions, resulting in narratives with a static quality. The contrast between the static and dynamic aspects of English and Chinese public signs is evident in examples like *"非请莫入"* /*"Admission by Invitation Only! "* and *"严禁烟火"* / *"No Fire"*, where verbs in Chinese public signs are transformed into nouns or prepositions in English, effecting a transition from dynamic to static language expression.

3.2. Sentence Level

At the sentence level, one noticeable difference in the use of English and Chinese public signs lies in the explicit and implicit representation of logical relationships. Take the public signs *"火车未停，请勿开门"* / *"Don't open the door until the train stops"* for instance, in the Chinese public sign, there are no apparent conjunction markers, yet it implies a logical relationship of "you can only open the door until the train stops." In the corresponding English public sign, the logical relationship is explicitly conveyed through the word "until". In the example *"切勿践踏草坪"* *"Do Not Walk on the Grass"*, the Chinese public sign lacks a connecting word that is present in the English sign, where "on" links the action to the location.

The explicit and implicit representation of logical relationships in this context is related to the concepts of "hypotaxis" and "parataxis" in both the English and Chinese languages. "Hypotaxis" refers to the use of linguistic formalities, including vocabulary and morphology, to establish connections between words or sentences. On the other hand, "parataxis" relies on the meaning or logical connections between words or sentences. The former emphasizes cohesion in sentence structure, while the latter prioritizes coherence in meaning.

Another difference in sentence structure and voice preference is apparent in English and Chinese public signs. Chinese public signs often lack main clauses and feature sentence structures with omitted subjects. Active voice is predominant, and there is a substantial use of imperative sentences, such as "严禁吸烟" (Smoking Prohibited), "不许涂写" (No Writing Allowed), "请不要在此倒垃圾" (Please Do Not Dump Garbage Here), and "切勿平放" (Do Not Place Flat). In contrast, English public signs more frequently employ non-personal subjects, passive voice, and declarative sentences, as seen in phrases like "smoking prohibited," "this is a smoke-free building," and "smoking in designated areas only."

These differences can be attributed to the varying tendencies of hypotaxis and parataxis, as well as the cultural and pragmatic considerations of politeness. Chinese places greater emphasis on parataxis, often considering whether the expression accurately conveys meaning, with a preference for brevity, clarity, and practicality. The simplicity of the Chinese syntactic framework reflects the values of the Chinese people, who favor practicality and straightforwardness. English, on the other hand, leans toward hypotaxis, considering both semantics and formal concordance. It tends to be rigorous, precise, and concrete, emphasizing objective thinking. This leads to a greater use of non-personal expression, passive voice, and declarative sentences, which align with the principles of politeness among English speakers. Chinese places a strong emphasis on "parataxis," employing fewer conjunctions and relying on contextual cues and common knowledge to understand logical relationships. In contrast, English leans toward "hypotaxis," resulting in a higher frequency of conjunctions or phrase connectors. These linguistic devices contribute to greater logical and grammatical precision in English.

Another difference between English and Chinese public signs is the preference of sentence structure and voice. In Chinese public signs, active voice is predominant, and there is a substantial use of imperative sentences, such as *"严禁吸烟", "不许涂写", "请不要在此倒垃圾"* and *"切勿平放"*. In contrast, English public signs more frequently employ non-personal subjects, passive voice, and declarative sentences, as seen in phrases like *"smoking prohibited" "this is a smoke-free building"* and *"smoking in designated areas only"*.

These differences can be attributed to the varying tendencies of hypotaxis and parataxis. Chinese attaches great importance to parataxis, often considering whether the expression is appropriate, paying more attention to accuracy, simplicity, vividness and realistic basis. English, on the other hand, leans toward hypotaxis, considering the consistency of semantics and forms. It tends to be rigorous, precise, and concrete, emphasizing objective thinking. This leads to a greater use of non-personal expression, passive voice, and declarative sentences, which align with the principles of politeness among English speakers.

Additionally, principles of politeness affect the selection of sentence structures in Chinese and English public signs. Chinese signage frequently employs imperative sentences like *"禁止……"* and *"不许……"*. Although Chinese speakers have grown accustomed to these expressions as societal directives, these expressions often convey a stern, rigid, and impolite tone. Conversely, for English speakers, considering politeness and appropriateness in language use, the imperative sentence structure is not a widely adopted form for issuing warnings. A more indirect and polite form of expression aligns better with their politeness principles. Language and worldviews mutually influence each other, and modes of thought directly impact the structural expression of language. It is the unique features of English and Chinese, as well as the distinct thinking patterns and personalities of the two cultures, that determine the differences in the ways these languages are expressed.

4. Analysis of English Translation Errors in Public Signs

As the host of the *Asian Games*, *Zhejiang Province* accommodates six major competition zones, making the importance of standardizing public signs self-evident. However, through field investigations, it has come to our attention that while public signs in Hangzhou adhere to standards, many translation errors exist in other cities within *Zhejiang Province*. This paper, taking *Wenzhou* as an example, investigates the English translation of Chinese public signs. Following the framework for error classification proposed by Carl James and in accordance with the "*English Translation Standard for Public Services*", we categorize and analyze the translation errors [12]. The objective is to further standardize the bilingual environment in China, enhance the external image promotion, and increase the level of internationalization.

4.1. Substance Errors Warning Public Signs

4.1.1. Spelling Errors

Spelling errors, while relatively infrequent, still exist. For instance, "健身" (fitness) was mistakenly spelled as *"Fintness"*; "停车场" *(parking)* was incorrectly spelled as "Parkingh". Additionally, "灭火器箱" was translated as *"Fire extinguisher br box"*. *"br"* has various meanings as an abbreviation, but it is not applied in the context of firefighting. Hence, *"br box"* is evidently a spelling error, and the correct translation should be *"Fire Extinguisher Box"*.

4.1.2. Capitalization Errors

The "*English Translation Standard for Public Services*" specifies that phrases, sentences, or all words should be either all uppercase or have only their initial letters capitalized. Therefore, the English translation of "应急出口" as "*Emergency exit*" contains a capitalization error and should be corrected to *"Emergency Exit"*. Furthermore, for phrases or sentences that need special emphasis, all letters should be uppercase. For sentences consisting of a warning mark and warning content, the warning mark should have all uppercase letters. Following these rules, the English translation of "小心地滑" *(Caution Wet Floor)* contains an error as "*Caution*" should be written as "*CAUTION*". Moreover, sentences composed of a warning mark and warning content should be written on separate lines while maintaining the integrity of words and semantic units. Therefore, the correct translation for "小心地滑" is *"CAUTION// Wet Floor."*

4.2. Text Errors

4.2.1. Lexical Errors

On buses, "车内禁止吸烟" was mistakenly translated as *"No smoking in the car"*. "Car" in the Oxford Dictionary is defined as *"a road vehicle with an engine and four wheels that can carry a small number of passengers" or "a separate section of a train."* Therefore, the use of "*car*" is inappropriate as it confuses "*car*" with *"bus"*. The correct English translation should be "*No Smoking in the Bus*". In a shopping mall, "儿童卫生间" was incorrectly translated as *"CHILDREN'S BATHROOM"*. According to the Oxford Dictionary, a bathroom is "*a room in which there is a bath, a washbasin, and often a toilet.*" Places that only have toilet facilities, without a bath, are typically referred to as "Restroom" or "Toilet" in English. Hence, a more accurate translation would be *"CHILDREN'S RESTROOM"* or *"CHILDREN'S TOILET"*.

4.2.2. Grammar Errors

For instance, "未戴口罩//请勿入内" was incorrectly translated as *"WITHOUT MASK//DO NOT ENTER"*. This translation contains two errors: component omission and incorrect word order. First, the English translation lacks an appropriate article. In this context, the article "a" should be used to indicate a specific mask, making the correct translation *"WITHOUT A MASK"* instead of *"WITHOUT MASK"*. Second, the word order in the English translation is not natural. It is suggested to revise it to *"NO ENTRY WITHOUT WEARING A MASK"*, which aligns more closely

with English grammar and expression conventions. Similarly, "*明码标价，谢绝议价*" was mistakenly translated as "*THE PRICE TAG DECLINED TO BARGAIN*". *"THE PRICE TAG"* refers to the price tag itself, while in this context, it is the seller or business that declines bargaining, not the price tag. A better expression would be "*THE SELLER DECLINES TO BARGAIN"* or *"NO BARGAINING ACCEPTED".*

4.3. Discourse Errors

According to the "*English Translation Standard for Public Services*", English translations in the public services should use civil language and avoid words that damage the image of China, other countries, or hurt national sentiments. Discriminatory or translation methods that harm societal interests should also be avoided. Therefore, the English translation of *"老弱病残孕专座"* on public buses as "*Priority Seats for People who are Disabled, Pregnant or Less Able to Stand and Elderly*" contains a socio-pragmatic error. *"老弱病残孕"* directly emphasizes individuals' vulnerabilities and health conditions, containing sensitive information that can be perceived as discriminatory or disrespectful. Therefore, translators should approach this matter with extreme caution. Typically, Translating *"老弱病残孕专座"* as "priority seat" or "courtesy seat" is sufficient. *"老弱病残孕"* should be omitted from textual translation instead be conveyed indirectly through graphics. This approach is more respectful and inclusive, avoids emphasizing individuals' weaknesses and aligns better with socio-pragmatic requirements.

In sum, common types of translation errors include spelling errors, capitalization errors, lexical errors, grammar errors, and socio-pragmatic errors. To avoid these translation errors, attention must be paid throughout the pre-translation, translation, and post-translation stages. Prior to translation, a deep understanding of the background, context, and specific vocabulary of public signs is necessary. Only with a precise understanding of the original meaning and intent can accurate translation be ensured. During translation, cultural differences must be considered to avoid offense or unnecessary confusion. After completing the translation, review and testing are essential to ensure accuracy and clarity. Feedback from native speakers can help correct errors or improve expression. Furthermore, testing the feasibility of translations in real-world scenarios is crucial to ensure that information is widely understood. By adopting these improvement strategies, the quality of English translations in public signs can be enhanced, ensuring accuracy, clarity, and compliance with social pragmatic requirements.

5. Conclusion

This paper, through a comparative analysis of English and Chinese public signs, reveals differences that exist at the levels of vocabulary and sentence structure. These disparities reflect the linguistic and cultural characteristics of the two languages. Firstly, at the vocabulary level, English and Chinese public signs exhibit distinct tendencies in hypotaxis and parataxis, leading to significant variations in verb usage, noun usage and expressions of logical relationships. Secondly, differences at the sentence level primarily manifest in choices of sentence structures, voice, and the employment of politeness principles. English public signs tend to employ non-personal subjects, passive voice, and declarative sentences, while Chinese public signs more frequently employ imperative and hortatory sentences.

In addition, this study collects cases of translation errors in public signs existing in *Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province* through field investigations. We delve into the translation errors of public signs, focusing on the grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic differences between English and Chinese. By conducting comparative analyses with examples, we identify common types of translation errors such as spelling mistakes, capitalization errors, vocabulary errors, grammatical errors, and socio-pragmatic errors. Since public signs fall within the realm of applied writing, their English translations should be reader-oriented, conforming to English

expression conventions and cognitive patterns to achieve effective communication. These findings hold significant implications for the English translation of Chinese public signs, contributing to the improvement of translation quality in public signs and enhancing the cross-cultural communication.

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