

An Investigation on the Translation of Public Signs in Medium Cities: Taking Zhanjiang as Example

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ABSTRACT

With the enhancement of china's open-up policy, more attention have been paid to the translation of public signs, especially in the first-tier cities. How is it in medium-sized cities? Taking Zhanjiang as example, this study focuses on the number, correctness and appropriateness of public signs translation in medium-sized cities, and proposes the according suggestions.

Keywords: translation; public signs; medium city; suggestions

1. INTRODUCTION

Public signs are the word displayed in public information with the function of communicating, offering information and getting instruction(Luo Xuanmin 2006).Nowadays it is easy to find bilingual public signs in many cities in China. Addition to Chinese and Russian bilingual public signs in some cities in the northern part of China, most of them are Chinese and English. With the development of open-up policy and economy in modern China, bilingual public signs are more prevalent, even become a fashion. You can find English and Chinese bilingual public signs in small cities. However, the quality of English expression, that is, the quality of translation, is big problem. Many English signs are on-line translated, and few are checked by professional translators. There should be a lot of mistakes and inappropriateness.

Many scholars have noticed the problems of Chinese-English translation of public signs. Wang Lin (2012) investigated and analyzed the satisfaction of the English translation of tourism public signs. Yang Yiqiu (2009) published a paper on the classifications and characteristics of public signs. And Zhan Chen (2011) has conducted a study on the English translation of public signs in Guangzhou. How about the situation of English translation of public signs in medium sized cities? Comparatively, the translation of public signs in big cities should be far better than that in small cities. Taking Zhanjiang as and example, this research is mainly aiming to find out the status of English translation of public signs in medium-sized cities.

2. RESEARCH METHODS AND RESULTS

During last summer holiday, the research group members visited many scenic spots and streets in Zhanjiang city. Meanwhile, we sent out 50 paper questionnaires to college English teachers and students in English major. We

collected more than 100 pictures and received back 38 valid questionnaires.

We can see the results that reflect the situation of the English translation of public signs in Zhanjiang from the result of questionnaire as below:

Table I. The General Impression on the Public Signs of Zhanjiang City

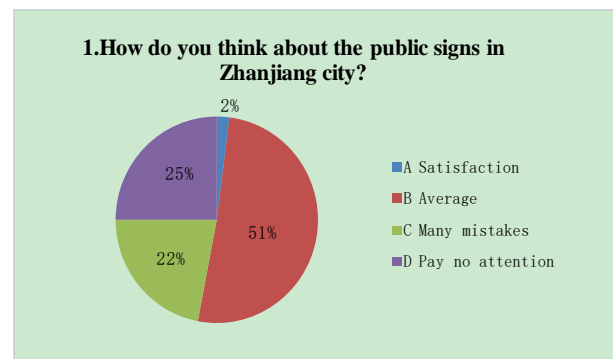
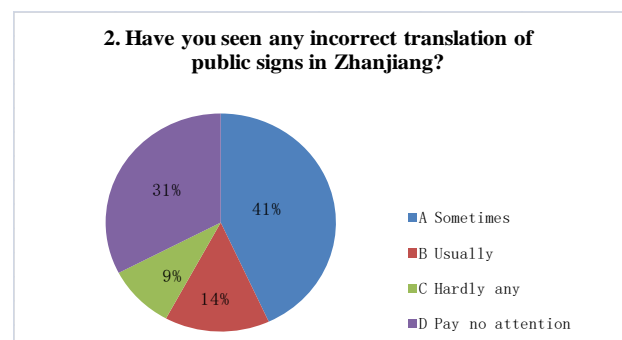


Table II. The Investigation of the Incorrect Translation



All of the participants have comparatively good English ability because they are college English teachers and

English major students. The first item of the questionnaire aims at investigating the general impression on the public signs of Zhanjiang city, certainly it includes the quality of Chinese to English translation. As Table I. shows, only 2% people are satisfied, 51% think it is average, and some of them advise that public signs should be translated by the way of cooperating with foreigners. But surprisingly, up to 25% people pay no attention to public signs, which is not much different to their attention to incorrect translation. The second item of the questionnaire focus on the investigation of the incorrect translation. As Table II. shows, 41% people show that they can find out some mistakes in translation of public signs once in a while. 38% holds the idea that it is the cultural difference that makes the bilingual translation poor. And 29%, 28% and 24% are respectively to the grammatical mistakes, literal translation and inconsistent translated term which cause the inferior of English public signs. All shows that the quality of Chinese to English translation of public signs in Zhanjiang city is very poor.

3. DETAIL ANALYSIS ON E-C TRANSLATION

Since there are a lot of mistakes of English-Chinese translation of the public signs, it is necessary to go further to analyze those mistakes. Among those “mistakes”, some are purely errors, some are partly incorrect according to the translation norms, some are inappropriate according to the pragmatic norms. Here we will focus on the phenomena of inconsistency, because the translation inconsistency is the main problem and prevalent phenomenon in our investigation.

3.1. Inconsistency in Street Name Translation

Other than the problem of inconsistency in translation, one thing we should mention is that many streets in Zhanjiang city only have Chinese public signs, or Chinese characters with Pinyin, and only less than 30% of streets in Zhanjiang have English public signs.

As for the translation of street names, there are regulations issued by Chinese government, and transition norms which has been fully studied by scholars. According two authorized published papers, *The spelling of Roman alphabet of place names in China*, *Discussion on phonetic alphabet of place names in China*, Zeng Shiyong (1987, 1989) studied the place name of international standardization strictly and highlighted the significance and seriousness in the translation of place names. Another paper, *On the English translation of street names in China* (Xiang Yang 2018), states that translation of street name should pay attention to two key points: (1)Public signs’ translation is for the foreign people who don’t understand Chinese.(2)The translation should be standardized and consistent with original text.

In spite of the regulations and norms of street names translation, in order to find out the acceptability of street names translation of Zhanjiang city, we also have done an investigation among the college English teachers and students in English major. The item of a questionnaire is about the quality of translation of “南方二横路”. All the 50 participants have returned their opinions, and the result is as below.

Table III. The Acceptability of Street Names Translation

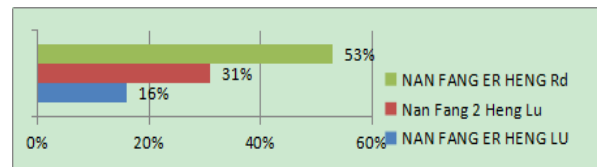


Table IV. Different Translation of the Chinese number “二”

Public Sign in Chinese	Translation of Public Sign
南方二横路	NAN FANG 2 HENG LU
九一二路	JIU YI ER LU
湛江市第二中学	ZHANJIANG NO.2 MIDDLE SCHOOL

The above Tables show that 53% participants think that “NAN FANG ER HENG ROAD” was the best translation while 31% consider that “Nan Fang 2 Heng Lu” was the best choice. Besides, among all these pictures we got, we pick three of the similar street road signs in C-E translation to figure out the problem we meet in translation. It is clear that in these examples the Chinese number “二” is translated in different ways respectively as “2”, “ER” and “NO.2”.

According to the resolution of a single Romanization system made by United Nations, China has published Chinese Phonetic System to standardize the name of road, street, alley and so on. Single Romanization of place name is that every nations should use unified Roman alphabet spelling to name the place so as to achieve the better international communication. In this way, the expression “JIU ER YI LU” (九一二路) is up to the above standard. However, it breaks the Skopos Theory (Nida 1993) and ignores the purpose of indication, which would confuse the foreigner and make the public signs fail to play a right role. A survey has been made about public signs of foreign countries by Google Earth and found that the public signs set on road in foreign countries are divided into several forms, like “St”, “Rd”, “Ave”, “Dr”, “Way”, “Walk” which have no direct relation with direction and extension of the road. So compared with the foreign street public signs, “南方二横路” may translate into “Nan Fang Er Heng Rd, and “九二一路” should be translated into “Jiu Yi Er Rd” so as to offer correct information to foreigners. Besides, “第二” in the public sign of “湛江市第二中学” can not translate into “NO.2”, because “第二” means ordinal number and we call

“第二中学” “the second middle school” customarily in China. Let’s look at other examples:

Table V. Different E-C Translation of Public Signs

Public Sign in Chinese	Translation of Public Sign
1.当心落水	Fall into water carefully
2.当心落水	Caution, fall into water

In Table V, The E-C translation of the first “当心落水” is taken in a geological park and the second is found in website that specializes in making public board. In the survey, 44% of the questionnaire participants think that “Keep off the water” is better than above. Taking the circumstance into consideration, “当心落水”, as far as I am concerned, belongs to prompting function. Still, “Fall into water carefully” has grammatical mistake which definitely make foreigner puzzled and they will even sneer at Zhanjiang city. However, “Caution, fall into water” is used by many foreign countries to play a warning function. Consequently, based on the circumstance and purpose of public signs, the latter seems appropriate.

In addition, we still found “小心地滑” have different translations. In Zhanjiang, most of this public sign was translated into “Caution wet floor”, which is widely accepted by many people home and abroad. However, we found in our research that “小心地滑” is translated into “Be careful the slippery floor” in a star-rated hotel. Though foreign people can understand the kindly reminder, it actually has grammatical mistake. “Be careful” is a verb phrase which should add a preposition “of” to connect with noun phrase.

3.2. Inconsistency Translation in Canteen and Shopping Mall

Other than the street names, in the city, canteen and shopping mall are the very public places which should be well installed with bilingual signs. Generally speaking, C-E translation of public sign in high-level public places is with high quality especially for those five-star hotels, and foreigners can visit alone without any trouble because the public signs there have played an well function of direction for them. How about the actual situation in Zhanjiang? Let’s look at some examples from different canteen and shopping mall:

Table IV. Translation of Public Signs from Ordinary Small Restaurants

Public Signs in Chinese	Translation of Public Signs
天天配送	Daily Delivery
新鲜到家	Fresh Daojia
芬达	The fragrance reaches
果粒橙	Fruit grain of orange
小可乐	Small may be happy

Table IIV. Translation of Public Signs from a Five-Star Rated Hotel

Public Signs in Chinese	Translation of Public Signs
出于安全原因, 请不要让小孩在鱼池边玩耍, 一切风险自负, 同时敬请不要喂鱼, 扔垃圾。	For the safety of your child, please do not leave your child unattended. Management do not responsible for injuries or accidents. Please do not feed the fish and litter the pond.
停车场使用说明	Car park regulations

As for Table IV and Table IIV in question, the first is collected form ordinary small restaurants in geological park Huguangyan, an international tourist attraction, and the second came from a five-star rated hotel Crown Plaza. The qualities of C-E translations of public signs between them are quite different, that’s, the latter is far better than the former. Some translations from small restaurants like “Fresh Daojia”(新鲜到家), “The fragrance reaches”(小可乐), “Fruit grain of orange”(果粒橙) are terribly wrong and make nonsense. To be honest, a foreigner absolutely cannot order a meal in such restaurant with poor translation. As for the famous scenic places, the poor translation will not only confuse foreign visitors, but also make a bad affect to the image of a national geological park. It is comforting that the translation in Crown Plaza five-star hotel is qualified and accorded with foreign life habits in general. However, there are only 3 five-star hotels in Zhanjiang, The proportion is too small and their good translation can prove nothing to the whole city. And even there is some shortcomings in the five star hotels, for example, the translation “Car park regulations”(停车场使用说明)is quite literal, for better translation like “Park Instruction”, which is short and can convey the meaning clearly. In short, the high-level public places achieve the function of public signs to direct and inform foreigner, it still has some problems in translation like grammatical mistakes, inappropriateness that will disrupt people’s understanding.

For comparison, we also investigated some big cities like Guangzhou, Shenzhen. We find the same problems in translation of public signs. We mainly take Guangzhou, Shenzhen as examples and also found the quality of translation is not good enough, such as “careful flowers and plants”(小心花草), “strictly trample”(严禁踩踏), “DON’T TOUCH”and so on, including grammatical mistakes, ignoring bi-culture and contextual errors. Certainly, generally speaking, the C-E translation of public signs in first-tier cities are better than that in Zhanjiang city. On the other hand, we also investigated another medium-sized city Maoming. In the statistics, we can easily find some poor translations like “temporary export”(临时出口) on the doors and “carefully slippery”(小心滑倒), which is translated literally without thinking the differences between English and Chinese. Also, it is astonishing that “有你的呵护, 我盈盈飘香” was translated into “with your care, I

ying fragrance”, which somehow like the translation “The fragrance reaches” (芬达) in Zhanjiang. We found that these translations are something like a joke which is rather replaced with only Chinese. In general, the meaning of the English translation is beyond the original meaning of the Chinese text. In addition, there are some wrong words and punctuation marks on the public signs which should be responsible for the carelessness of the translators.

4. GENERAL DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

So far, we have found out the status and shorts of English translation of public signs in Zhanjiang city and compared with other cities to get a round view. Besides, many translation strategies and suggestions are mentioned in our analysis through comparison. It is obvious that the good quality of C-E translations of public signs to the city development is very important. Good translation could not only inspire people to get the information but also reveal the internal attainment of a city.

From the analysis above, general mistakes made in the translations of public signs could be summarized as follows:

1. Spelling and punctuation mistakes: “all product cleaner” (多功能清洁用品), “other wast”(其他垃圾).
2. Replacing English with Pinyin: “Fresh Daojia”(新鲜到家), “xishoujian”(洗手间)
3. Grammatical mistakes: “National Fire Life come first”(全民消防 生命至上), “Don’t playing on the autowalk”(勿在扶手梯嬉戏)
4. Literal translation: “Our commitment Guaranteed low-cost”(我们的承诺 保证低价)
5. Cultural discrepancy: “Pay attention to safety”(注意安全), “Associate Entrance”(员工通道), “Flower Garden”(花圃)
6. Mistranslation: “no playing on the left”(请勿在坡梯上嬉戏), “Come and hurried to also angrily”(来也匆匆去也匆匆)

It is easy to find out that the translation of public signs in Zhanjiang city are not that difficult to translate and even some poor translations are so obvious that a child with basic English knowledge can find out. Why are there so many mistakes and inappropriateness in the translation? We try to sum up the reasons as follow: (1) According to the situation of C-E translation of public signs at present, cultural difference is an intricate problem for us to reach the absolutely perfect C-E translation. (2) lack of the professionalism of translators, many translation of populations are translated by the English learners instead of the professional translators. So inaccurate understanding of the Chinese signs, ignorance of the makers in producing public signs, bilingual transfer inadequacy will cause the inappropriate translations. (3) Zhanjiang is a medium size city, less attention is paid to public signs by government and media. The English translation of the public signs are

viewed as an ornament, that’s why the poor translation can not be found and corrected for a long time.

Accordingly, we put forward several suggestions for C-E translation of public signs as follow: (1) Attaching importance to the translation talents. The government should pay high attention to education of English translation and realize that public sign play a key role in accelerate the development and internationalization of a city. Moreover, related department of the government should help to build up right attitude in translation. (2) enhancing he supervision on the translation of public signs. For example, some of the translated words imprinted on the sign board may be blurred and even been misprinted the careless workers. (3) Renewing public signs regularly. The investigation shows that some public signs are nearly remaining the same mistakes for years. It is clear that no one points out the errors and renews a correct public signs. (4) Standardizing public signs translation. As the research shows, the translation of Chinese number and same public signs are inconsistent with others in the same text. Though UNESCO states that the translation of places name should be translated literally, the English translation of Chinese public signs should have our own norms because Chinese is a unique language loaded with the rich cultures.

5. CONCLUSIONS

By investigation, detailed analysis and general discussion, we found that the translations of the public signs in Zhanjiang are not well qualified with the problems of inconsistency and blunder mistakes. And comparing with the other cities, we noticed that the translation of public signs is a common problem but the situation is different, and Zhanjiang is worse than that of big cities. From this, English translation of public signs is still need to be put more effort to plan, supervision and renew. Some solving strategies are accordingly mentioned to improve the quality of public signs in Zhanjiang. As a harbor city, Zhanjiang has attracted many foreign business and visitors, and the well translated public signs will play an significant role.

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