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Standardization of Translation of Rail Transit Public Signs in the Greater Capital Area of Chinese Mainland

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Abstract

Based on an empirical study, the present research finds that the translation of public signs of rail transit systems in Beijing and Tianjin lacks unified standard and criteria, which will be incompatible with the international status of the region. This paper aims at providing a unified translation criterion for the rail transit public signs in light of the theory of intertextuality.

Key words: Intertextuality; Rail transit; Public sign language; Translation; Standardization

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese President Xi Jinping put forward the coordinated development strategy for Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region on February 26, 2014. Over the past three years, the development of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region has witnessed a coordinated, integrated and swift development in terms of scope and depth. The establishment of Xiong'an New Area in Hebei Province has called for new concepts and principles relating to regional development (Niu & Lin, 2017). By taking an overall picture of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei regional development, the government has adopted a multi-centered and network-based development mode for the governance of urban maladies. As the capital

of China, Beijing is an international and domestic transportation hub and joint efforts are called to lead the integrated innovative development of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, unfold its cultural confidence and the image of a big power and make new contributions to the progress of the world.

Generally speaking, a tram, streetcar or trolley system is a rail-based transit system that runs mainly or completely along streets (i.e. with street running), with a relatively low capacity and frequent stops. Passengers usually board at street- or curb-level, although low-floor trams may allow level boarding. Thus, the current subway networks, commuter rail networks, as well as inter-city rail networks in the Chinese capital area (Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei) belong to rail transit system. Training data collection in the current study reveals two vulnerable points of the English translations of public signs in the rail transit system: 1) poor quality; 2) lack of unified standard. If transportation authorities did not recognize the present situation, the process of transport coordination will be highly compromised or even undermined, which would further slow the pace of internationalization of the capital area. Thus the present paper attempts to probe the issue of standardization of Chinese-English translation of rail transit public signs and provide a reliable standard for the corresponding translation practice of this specific genre.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THE CURRENT STUDY

In Chinese-speaking countries and regions, bilingual Chinese/English public signs in are used extensively in public places such as hotels, restaurants, shopping centres, airports, parks, train stations, public amenities and places of tourist interest to convey information to readers of the two languages (cf. Lü, 2005; Ko, 2010). In Ko's (2010) opinion, "a public sign can be considered to be a sign containing words and/or drawings, posted in a public

place, which serves the purpose of conveying certain information.”

Pragmatically speaking, a public sign could be used for providing information, instructions, warnings or even orders. Chinese scholars (Wang, 2012; Song, 2014) ever discussed the issue of translation standard of subway public signs from linguistic, cultural and social perspectives. Relevant studies already point out that rail transit public signs shall be accurate and brief so as to realize their ideational function.

The current research plans to probe the topic by combing qualitative and quantitative methodology in light of intertextuality theory of translation. By referring to the public signs of MTR, the translation criteria should be unified and standardized, which could also be repeated and promoted by other rail networks in Chinese mainland.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

As a special kind of genre, station names' grammatical category and rank shall be firstly surveyed and determined. The English grammatical categories are divided into five ranks, “sentence, clause, group, word, morpheme” (Catford, 1965, p.17). While Newmark (1988:55) emphasizes the operational units in translating process, i.e., words, collocations, phrases, clauses, as well as sentences. As for the Chinese language, Pan (2002, p.182) classifies its grammatical hierarchy into five ranks, i.e. *zi* (Chinese character), *ci* (word and phrase), *dou* (clause), *ju* (sentence), *pian* (text). By comparing station names in both English and Chinese grammatical categories, it could be inferred that they are a kind of special noun phrases, which also belong to operational units of translating.

Table 1
Translation methods and strategies of Beijing Subway, Tianjin Rail Transit and MTR

Translation Methods	Beijing Subway	Tianjin Rail Transit	MTR	Translation Strategies
Literal translation	国家图书馆 (National Library) 军事博物馆 (Military Museum) 传媒大学 (Communication University of China) 奥林匹克公园 (Olympic Green) 2号航站楼 (Terminal 2)		迪士尼 (Disneyland Resort) 机场 (Airport) 炮台山 (Fortress Hill) 北角 (North Point) 第一城 (City One)	Domestication 
	四惠东 (Sihui East) 北海北 (Beihai North) 天安门东 (Tiananmen East) 北京大学东门 (East Gate of Peking University) 雍和宫 (Yonghegong Lama Temple)		大埔墟 (Tai Po Market) 尖东 (East Tsim Sha Tsui) 旺角东 (Mong Kok East) 九龙湾 (Kowloon Bay) 车公庙 (Che Kung Temple)	
Transliteration+literal translation		滨海国际机场 (Binhaiguojijichang) 天津站 (Tianjizhan) 财经大学 (Caijingdaxue) 周邓纪念馆 (Zhoudengjinianguan) 空港经济区 (Konggangjingjiqu)	油麻地 (Yau Ma Tei) 尖沙咀 (Tsim Sha Tsui) 牛头角 (Ngau Tau Kok) 湾仔 (Wan Chai) 调景岭 (Tiu Keng Leng)	Foreignization 
Transliteration	惠新西街南口 (Huixinxijie Nankou) 清华东路西 (Qinghuadongluxikou) 首经贸 (Shoujingmao) 天坛东门 (Tiantandongmen) 物资学院路 (Wuzixueyuanlu)			

3. TRAINING DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

We downloaded all the parallel texts of Chinese and English station names from the official websites of Beijing

Discourse is the way in which language is used individually to convey broad and complicated meanings. Intertextual references can be horizontal and vertical. Horizontal intertextuality is the concrete, real reference or quotation from other texts; vertical intertextuality is not a real citation but allusion, which implicates an echo effect. The concept of intertextuality was formally proposed and elaborated by Kristeva (1969). Every level of expression from live conversational dialog to complex cultural expression in other genres and art works is an ongoing chain or network of statements and responses, repetitions and quotations, in which new statements presuppose earlier statements and anticipate future responses. Kristeva (1980, p.66) defines the dynamic literary word in terms of a horizontal dimension and a vertical dimension. In the horizontal dimension “the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee”; in the vertical dimension “the word in the text is oriented toward an anterior or synchronic literary corpus”. Intertextuality is thus a kind of processing mechanism to realize ideational function Hatim & Munday (2004, p.86). Therefore, the English versions of rail transit public signs in the capital area have a certain kind of vertical intertextuality with their counterparts in MTR. The corresponding translation strategies and methods of MTR could also be borrowed and adopted. Previous studies reveal that rail transit public signs must be accurate and brief so as to offer passengers enough information about the subway stations in that translation itself is also a “purposeful activity” (Nord, 1997, p.12). The English translations of rail transit public signs not only realize their communicative function but also promote the coordinated development of the greater capital area in Chinese mainland.

Subway (<http://www.bjsubway.com/>), Tianjin Rail Transit (<http://www.tjdt.cn/>), and Mass Transit Railway (MTR, <http://www.mtr.com.hk/ch/>) and classified them according to translation methods as well as strategies (as illustrated in Table 1).

The strategies of domestication and foreignization was formally proposed and discussed by Lawrence Venuti (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997, p.59). Domestication and foreignization are two major translation strategies which provide both linguistic and cultural guidance. These strategies have long been the focus of debate in translation circles. Domestication aims to minimize the strangeness of the source text for target readers while foreignization helps retain something of the foreignness of the original. Domestication and foreignization strategies are generally realized by literal and free translation methods on the linguistic level. Thus it could be found that public signs in both Beijing Subway and MTR adopt “domestication-foreignization” strategies, while Tianjin Rail Transit’s public signs only choose the foreignization strategy.

4. DEFICIENCIES AND SOLUTIONS

Verbal data analysis implicates two major deficiencies in the translation of public signs in the rail transit networks of the capital area. Therefore, we propose possible solutions with special reference to the translation strategies and methods of MTR.

4.1 Deficiencies

There are two prominent problems in the public sign translations of subway station names in the Chinese capital area. First, the incompatibility of the English translations of public signs in Beijing Subway and Tianjin Rail Transit because there are three major translation methods for Beijing Subway, i.e., literal translation, literal translation + transliteration, and transliteration; while Tianjin Rail Transit only adopts transliteration. Secondly, lack of unified translation standard. Even within the system of Beijing Subway, different translation methods and criteria co-exist. For example, *chuan mei da xue* (Communication University of China) follows literal translation method, but *shou jing mao* (Shoujingmao) and *wu zi xue yuan lu* (Wuzixueyuanlu) choose transliteration. *Bei jing da xue dong men* (East Gate of Peking University) uses transliteration plus literal translation, while *qing hua dong lu xi kou* (Qinghuadongluxikou) selects transliteration. *Sha he gao jiao yuan* (Shahe University Park) and *liang xiang da xue cheng* (Liangxiang University Town) demonstrate that translators lack unified criteria. Last but not least, the transliteration method applied in translating public signs in Tianjin Rail Transit could also cause cognitive obstacles for foreign travelers. As for the station names such as *Binhaiguojijichang*, *Konggangjingjiqu*, *Tianjinzhan*, *Caijingdaxue*, *Zhoudengjinianguan*, *Xizhan*, and *Beizhan*, foreigners may not obtain much denotative information by reading the signs translated by *pinyin* system.

4.2 Solutions

Thanks to the standard and long-established translation methods adopted by MTR, the rail transit networks at the

greater capital area shall also abide by the principle of accuracy, fluency, and briefness and apply the methods such as literal translation, transliteration plus literal translation, and transliteration. Firstly, briefness shall be emphasized. As for *Binhaiguojijichang*, it could be re-translated into Tianjin Binhai International Airport or simply Airport (just like MTR did). Likewise *Tianjinzhan* should be translated into Tianjin Railway Station, and *Zhoudengjinianguan* should be translated into Memorial to Zhou Enlai and Deng Yingchao. *Beizhan* should be translated into Tianjin North Railway Station, and East Gate of Temple of Heaven seems to be a better version than *Tiantandongmen*. Secondly, boycott strict literal translation. For example, *sun he* could simply adopt transliteration instead of literal translation (Grandchild River). While *Dalianpo* is also a better choice than Long Rectangular Bag Slope. Thirdly, accuracy is quite important for rail transit public signs’ translation. Under this principle, *Huixinxijie nankou* and *Huixinxijie beikou* might be re-translated into West Huixin Street, South End and West Huixin Street, North End so as to enhance accuracy level. Similarly, *Rongjingdongjie* could be re-translated into East Rongjing Street and *Wuzixueyuanlu* could be re-translated into Beijing Wuzi University Road or simply Wuzi University Road. Frederick Hale (2013 academic communications) at Cambridge University points out that the modifiers denoting directions are usually quite flexible in British English. Thus “Stratford East” and “East Stanford” are both correct and acceptable in modern English. We suggest that the station of *Guanzhuang* in line 15 of Beijing Subway might adopt the version of North Guanzhuang or Guanzhuang North, while the station of *Guanzhuang* in Batong line of Beijing Subway might choose the version of South Guanzhuang or Guanzhuang South. Thus foreign travelers may clearly make a distinction of the two remote stations.

CONCLUSION

In the years since the central government put forward the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei coordinated development plan, local authorities have taken a series of measures, including working on key issues such as top design, to help shift Beijing’s noncapital functions to neighboring locations, integrating the region’s transport network and better strengthening environmental protection. The future greater capital area rail transit networks might also include the intercity railway connecting Beijing and Xiongan area which is currently under construction. Therefore, unified and standard translation criteria must be discussed and revised by the language planning authorities. The future criteria shall also be repeated and promoted nationwide, which might require the coordination and cooperation between different government authorities including transportation department as well as language commission.

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