

A Study on the English Translation of Public Signs of Lanzhou Public Transportation System from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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Abstract: *As the internationalization of China continues to accelerate, Lanzhou, as the hub city of the northwest region, is also increasing its internationalization process, attracting many foreigners to live here. The public transportation system is an important part of the city, and the standardization of the English translation of its public signs not only affects convenience of foreigners' travel, but also has a bearing on the image and future development of Lanzhou. This thesis focuses on the English translation of public signs of Lanzhou's public transportation system from the perspective of Skopos theory. Through on-site research on Lanzhou's hub stations and busy areas, the author collects a large number of public signs materials, analyzes the existing problems, discusses how to improve the translation quality under the guidance of Skopos theory, and summarizes some strategies for translation of public signs.*

Keywords: *Skopos theory; public signs; public transportation system; translation strategies*

1. Introduction

1.1 Relevant background

As the process of globalization continues to accelerate, exchanges between countries are becoming more frequent and relations are getting closer. More and more foreigners come to major provinces in China for study, employment and settlement. The accuracy of the Chinese-English translation of public transportation is an important part of the city, which directly affects the convenience of foreigners' travel in the city, and is also related to the image and development of the city. In recent years, more and more research has been conducted on the public signs translation. In order to improve the level of English translation of public signs, cities such as Shanghai and Qingdao have formulated relevant translation guidelines and translation standards. The Ministry of Education and the National Language Commission established the expert committee to make a series of national standard GB/T 30240 *Guidelines for the Use of English in Public Service Areas* (2017). The guideline covers many areas like education, transportation, tourism and so on. All these guidelines also play a vital role in guiding the translation of public signs in China.

1.2 Significance of the study

According to the data of the National Bureau of Statistics, the results of the 7th National Census in 2020 show that the number of foreigners residing in 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the central government in China and registered by the census is 845,697.(China Statistics Press) According to the report of the 6th National Census in 2010, there were 593,832 foreigners living in China and registered by the census. (China Statistics Press) This indicates that the number of registered foreigners living and residing in the country increased by 301,865 between 2010 and 2020. From the above data, we can see that the number of foreigners living in China is huge and has increased significantly over time. Moreover, English is the most widely spoken language in the world, and many foreigners from non-English speaking countries also use English to communicate. Therefore, it is necessary to provide foreigners with accurate and authentic English public signs.

Lanzhou is the pivot of the new economic belt in the northwest region. It is also a bridge and link between the east and central regions of China and the west. What's more, Lanzhou is located at the "crossroads" of northwest China, connecting south to north and east to west, and has the densest

railroad network in northwest China, which is the strategic channel of the New Eurasian Land Bridge and China's exit to Central and West Asia. As of 2012, there are more than 120 bus lines within Lanzhou; as of September 2020, Lanzhou rail transit has opened one line in total.

From the above data, it can be seen that it is necessary and meaningful to study the English translation of public signs of Lanzhou public transportation system in depth.

1.3 Deficiencies of the previous studies on the translation of public signs

Currently, there are still some deficiencies in study of translation of public signs in China. Firstly, the existing research has a limited range of sampling, so more in-depth research is demanded. Searching the database of CNKI with the theme of "translation of public signs, Skopos theory", there are only 82 master's theses from 2006 to the present, and most of them are studies on translation of public signs in scenic spots. In a search of the database with the theme of "translation of public transportation signs", there were only 16 journals and 5 master's theses, covering the sampling areas of Chongqing, Nanjing, Fuzhou, Nanning, Shanghai and other places. There are only few studies on the translation of public signs from the perspective of Skopos theory and public signs of public transportation system as the research object. The studies on the English translation of public signs of public transportation system in Lanzhou, for example, are even more scarce.

Therefore, it is necessary to conduct the research with the analysis of the current situation of C-E translations of public signs of public transportation system in Lanzhou.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Introduction to Vermeer's Skopos theory

Skopos is the Greek word for "aim" and "purpose". And the word was introduced into translation theory by Hans J. Vermeer in the 1970s. And Skopos is used as a term by Vermeer to describe the purpose and the action of a translation.

Vermeer's Skopos theory is most concerned with the purpose or aim of translation. And Vermeer insists that it is the purpose of translation that determines the strategies and methods of translation so that a translation that fully reflects its function can be produced. Therefore, it is crucial for the translator to know why a source text is translated and what the function of the target text is.

In Vermeer's Skopos theory, there are some basic underlying rules⁴ (Reiss and Vermeer 119). They are:

1) A target text is determined by its Skopos. 2) A target text is an offer of information in a target culture and target language concerning an offer of information in a source culture and source language. 3) A target text does not initiate an offer of information in a clearly reversible way. 4) A target text must be internally coherent. 5) A target text must be coherent with the source text. 6) The five rules above stand in hierarchical order, with the Skopos rule predominating^[2]

And here the above six rules can be concluded into three rules which are respectively are:

(1) The Skopos rule; (2) The coherence rule; (3) The fidelity rule.

The Skopos rule is the core rule of Skopos theory. It suggests that the translators should translate the source text according to the purpose of the translation. And the Skopos rule is the most significant one to be observed.

The coherence rule means that the target text "must be interpretable as coherent with the target text receiver's situation"^[2]. This also means that the target text should be translated in a way which is coherent for the target text receiver's knowledge and circumstances. In other words, the translation should be readable and acceptable for the readers of the target text. The fidelity rule means that there also should be coherence between the target text and the source text in some aspects^[2], such as the coherence between the information of the source text acquired by the translator and the translation made by the translator of this information, the coherence between the translation and the information encoded for the readers of the target text and the coherence between the information of the source text and the information encoded for the readers of the target text. To be brief, there should be coherence between the information of the source text, the translation made by the translator and the information encoded for the readers of the target text.

Just as mentioned above, these rules stand in hierarchical order. The coherence rule and the fidelity rule should be secondary to the Skopos rule.^[5] Hence, in the process of translation, the translator should consider the order in which to make the target text conform to these rules in accordance with their importance or so-called hierarchical order.

2.2 Relevance to the study

First of all, this thesis studies the translation of public signs of public transportation system in Lanzhou. The public signs of public transportation system can be seen everywhere in people's daily life and are closely related to people's travel. The English translation of these signs are also significant to the lives of foreigners living in Lanzhou. At the same time, the accuracy of the English translation of these public signs also affects the appearance of Lanzhou^[3].

Secondly, different public signs of public transportation system have different purposes, such as guiding people's behavior, providing information, indicating directions, warning of dangers and so on. Consequently, the English translation of these public signs should also be translated according to these purposes, so that foreigners living in Lanzhou can get the information they need when they see these public signs and thus facilitate their life. Therefore, the author supposes that the Skopos theory, which takes the Skopos rule as the highest principle, can guide the translation of public signs very well. And under the guidance of Skopos theory, this thesis can conduct an in-depth study and analysis of the public signs of public transportation system in Lanzhou.

3. Application of the theory to translation analysis

3.1 Investigation of the status quo of English translation of public signs of public transportation system in Lanzhou

Under the guidance of Skopos theory, this chapter focuses on the C-E translation of public signs of the public transportation system in Lanzhou. The author mainly conducted on-site research on the current situation of Chinese-English translation of public signs at hub stations in Lanzhou. The objects of the research are Lanzhou Railway Station, stations of Lanzhou Metro Line 1 subway, Lanzhou West Railway Station and major transportation hubs (Donggang Town, Xiguan Cross, West Station), and major busy locations (Dongfanghong Square, Zhangye Street, Wuquan Mountain, Yellow River Style Line, Lanzhou Center, around universities of An Ning District). After sorting and categorizing, the collected signs are analyzed under the guidance of Skopos theory while typical wrong translations are selected for analysis and comparison. And appropriate strategies of translation are proposed. In addition, for the collected materials without English translation, the author adopts appropriate translation strategies under the guidance of Skopos theory and give them English translation according to *Guidelines for the Use of English in Public Service Areas*.

3.2 Statistics

Through the on-site research, the C-E translation materials of public signs of public transportation system in Lanzhou collected so far are statistically illustrated in the following table. And the locations of these materials are also shown in Table 1.

Table 1 The Number of Public Signs Materials Collected and the Locations of Collection

No.	Location	Pictures (sheets)
1	Lanzhou Railway Station	39
2	Lanzhou West Station	6
3	Lanzhou Rail Line 1	25
4	Bus Stop Signs and Street Signs	28
Total		98

3.3 Discussion on problems of public signs translation

In this part, the author explores the problems in the collected public signs and classifies these problems into nine categories, namely: incorrect wording, spelling errors, grammatical errors, word-for-word translation, information gap, misapplication of Pinyin, lengthy wording and no English

translation.

Each category of problems is presented in the form of table. And the author analyzes these problems under the guidance of the rules of Skopos theory and gives suggested translations in the tables. For those public signs without English translation, the author also gives corresponding English translations under the guidance of Skopos theory.

3.3.1 Incorrect wording

Incorrect wording means that some words in the source text are not properly expressed in the target text by the translator. In other words, the word chosen by the translator in the target text has the same apparent meaning as the original, but it does not refer to the same thing.

Table 2 Examples of Incorrect Wording Errors

No.	English	Suggested Translation
1	Connect one side of the fire hose to the fire hydrant joint	Connect one side of the fire hose to the fire hydrant mouth
2	CHILD TICKET ELEVATION	—m— mHeight Limits for Children's Tickets:

The analysis is based on Table2.

In example 1, the word “joint” is used to express “Jie Kou” in Chinese. This is not accurate. The word “joint” is explained as “a place where two bones are joined together in the body in a way that enables them to bend and move” and “a place where two or more parts of an object are joined together, especially to form a corner” in *Oxford University Press*. But the “Jie Kou” here refers to the mouth of the fire hydrant. Therefore, the sign should be translated as “Connect one side of the fire hose to the fire hydrant mouth”. This word “mouth” is very visual, so that the readers of the target language can immediately understand, so as to achieve the purpose of instructing people how to use the fire hydrant.

In example 2, “CHILD TICKET ELEVATION” is also incorrect. The sign is a line used to definite whether a child can buy children’s ticket or not. But the word “elevation” means that “the process of somebody getting a higher or more important rank” and “the height of a place, especially its height above sea level” (OUP). So “elevation” is not appropriate to describe the height of people. The suggested translation is given as “Height Limits for Children’s Tickets” and the limits can be marked above the sign. In this way, foreign tourists can understand what the meaning of the sign is. And the purpose of the line is also achieved.

3.3.2 Spelling errors

Spelling errors are mistakes in the spelling of words used in translations, which will make foreign readers confused and the purpose of translations of the signs are not achieved.

Table 3 Examples of Spelling Errors

No.	English	Suggested Translation
3	No carring flammable and explosive materials	Explosive Materials Prohibited
4	No carring poisonous materials and harmful liquid	Poisonous Materials and Harmful Liquid Prohibited

The analysis is based on Table 3. Example 3 and example 4 make the same mistake. Both of the two examples spell the word “carrying” as “carring”. And this not only makes the readers confused but also makes the signs meaningless, thus the purpose of the translation is not realized. Besides, even if the spelling is corrected, the translation is lengthy. The purpose of the translation is to inform the public that explosive materials and poisonous materials and harmful liquid are prohibited. So the author gives more concise and accurate translations “Explosive Materials Prohibited”, “Poisonous Materials and Harmful Liquid Prohibited”.

3.3.3 Grammatical errors

Grammatical errors refer to that there are some grammatical mistakes in the target text.

Table 4 Examples of Grammatical Errors

No.	English	Suggested Translation
5	Rotary hydrant interface 90°	Rotate the fire hydrant interface 90°
6	Attend Children	Watch for Children/Attend to Your Children

The analysis is based on Table 4.

In Example 5, The sign is translated as “Rotary hydrant interface 90°”. “Rotary” is an adjective and cannot be used as a verb. Therefore, the sign should be translated as “Rotate the fire hydrant interface 90°”.

In example 6, the sign is translated as “Attend Children”, which is also wrong. The correct translation should be “Watch for Children” or “Attend to Your Children”. The public signs with correct grammar can effectively convey information and achieve the purpose of the translation.

3.3.4 Word-for-word translation

Word-for-word translation means that the translator does not do much thinking, but just rigidly finds the words corresponding to the source text and arranges them in order, without really expressing the meaning of the source text.

Table 5 Examples of Word-for-word Translation

No.	English	Suggested Translation
7	Welcome to use QRcode for the ride, No more waiting in lines for ticketing	QR Code Scanner
8	DOMESTIC AFFECTION AREA	Personalized Service
9	Elegant Waiting Room	VIP Only/ VIP Lounge
10	Caution, Scald Burns	CAUTION/Hot Water
11	Please stand outside the safety line	Please stand behind the yellow line/ Stay behind the yellow line

The analysis is based on Table 5.

In example 7, the translation of the sign is “Welcome to use QR code for the ride”. The sentence is correct in term of grammar, but it is too rigid. Actually, the sign is placed at the turnstile to remind the passengers to use QR code to enter in. Therefore, the only thing needed is to remind the passengers that there is a QR code scanner.

In example 8, the sign is translated word by word as “DOMESTIC AFFECTION AREA”. If the foreign passengers see this sign, they don’t know what’s the domestic affection area refers to. Actually, the sign means the post where personalized service is provided. Consequently, the translator only needs to translate the function of the post, so that the passengers can understand the role of the post and get the service they need.

In example 9, the sign is translated as “Elegant Waiting Room”. The purpose of the sign is to tell passengers who the waiting room is for, not to tell them what the waiting room looks like. So the sign can be translated as “VIP Only” or “VIP Lounge” to indicate that the waiting room is prepared for VIP passengers.

In example 10, the sign is translated as “Caution, Scald Burns”, which also makes the mistake of word-for-word translation. The purpose of the sign is to warn the passengers that there is hot water and they should be careful. Therefore, the translator only needs to tell foreign passengers “Caution” or there is “Hot Water”.

In example 11, the sign is translated as “Please stand outside the safety line”. Actually, in subway stations of cities in China, safety line is usually a yellow line. But if the translator doesn’t point out this, passengers from other countries may not understand which line is the safety line. In that case, the purpose of the translation is not achieved. Hence, the sign just needs to be translated as “Please stand behind the yellow line.” or “Stay behind the yellow line”.

3.3.5 Information gap

Information gap means that there is a gap between the target text and the source text, which is usually caused by the inadequate translation of the source text.

Table 6 Examples of Information Gap

No.	English	Suggested Translation
12	PRESS HERE	Press for Help in Emergency/Press Button in Case of Emergency
13	High Temperature Eater Caution Hot	Caution !Please Save Water.

The analysis is based on Table 6.

In example 12, the sign is translated as “PRESS HERE” and doesn’t explain under what circumstances can passengers press the button. So there is an information gap between the source text and the target text. And the sign can be translated as “Press for Help in Emergency” or “Press Button in Case of Emergency” to tell the passengers that if they meet some emergent situations, they can press the button for help. Thus, the purpose of the sign is achieved.

In example 13, the sign is translated as “High Temperature Eater Caution Hot”. In spite of the grammatical errors, the phrase is not translated. So there is also an information gap between the source text and the translation. The sign can be translated as “Caution! Please Save Water.” to warn the passengers of the danger and advise them to save water.

3.3.6 Misrepresentation

Misrepresentation means that the translation doesn’t convey the exact meaning of the source text and will mislead the readers.^[4]

Table 7 Examples of Misrepresentation

No.	English	Suggested Translation
14	No Oversized Luggage	For Passengers Only
15	Boarding Ends 5 Minutes Prior To Departure	Check-in Closes 5 Minutes Before Departure

The analysis is based on Table 7.

In example 14, the sign is translated as “No Oversized Luggage”, which is not the exact meaning of the source text. The sign means that the escalator is forbidden to carry luggage but for passengers only. But the English version “No Oversized Luggage” can be perceived as “The escalator can be used to carry luggage which is not oversized.” Thus, the translator misrepresents the meaning of the source text. Therefore, the sign can be straightly translated as “For Passengers Only” .

In example 15, the sign is translated as “Boarding Ends 5 Minutes Prior To Departure”. The meaning of the source text is that the check-in closes 5 minutes before the departure of the train, rather than the passengers are not allowed to board the train five minutes before the departure. So the translator should also adhere to the coherence rule and the fidelity to convey the meaning of the original text exactly. Here, the sign can be translated as “Check-in Closes 5 Minutes Before Departure”.

3.3.7 Misapplication of Pinyin

These five examples can be regarded as indicating signs. Their function is to serve as reminders. But the English translations in these examples all have the same error, which is the direct use of Chinese Pinyin as the English translation of the public signs, which is totally incorrect.

Table 8 Examples of Misapplication of Pinyin

No.	English	Suggested Translation
16	FANJIA WAN LU	FANJIWAN ROAD
17	DIANZI JIE	DIANZI STREET
18	DONGGANGDONG LU	DONGGANGDONG ROAD
19	JINCHANGNAN LU	JINCHANG SOUTH ROAD
20	GUANGCHANGNAN LU	SQUARE SOUTH ROAD

The analysis is based on Table 8.

According to Skopos theory, the most important thing is that the translations should observe the Skopos rule. As mentioned in the above paragraph, the five examples in the table are street signs, whose function and purpose is to let the public understand what the name of the street they are on is, and thus clarify their exact location. However, the translations of these public signs in the examples are only replaced by Chinese pinyin. Even words like "road, street" are replaced with Pinyin “Lu, Jie”. They don’t observe any rule of Skopos theory, so that the translations don’t achieve their purposes. And they are also incoherent and unfaithful to the original text. These translations will confuse the readers of the target language and will not serve the purpose they are supposed to.

3.3.8 Lengthy wording

Lengthy wording means that the translation is not concise enough and uses many unnecessary

words. In that case, the public signs will not be able to fully play their roles.

Table 9 Examples of Lengthy Wording

No.	English	Suggested Translation
21	Prohibition of the carriage of controlled weapons	No Weapons/ Weapons Prohibited
22	Prohibition of carrying radioactive substances	Radioactive Substances Prohibited/ No Radioactive Substances
23	Please board in sequence and after the first on	Yield to Alighting Passengers

The analysis is based on Table 9.

In example 21 and example 22, the signs are respectively translated as “Prohibition of the carriage of controlled weapons” and “Prohibition of carrying radioactive substances”. Both of the translations of these two signs are long and use unnecessary words, such as “carriage” and “carrying”. The purpose of these two signs is to tell the passengers that “controlled weapons” and “radioactive substances” are forbidden. Therefore, the key words are “controlled weapons” and “radioactive substances” and the signs can be respectively translated as “No Weapons” or “Weapons Prohibited” and “Radioactive Substances Prohibited” or “No Radioactive substances”.

In example 23, the sign is translated as “Please board in sequence and after the first on”. Actually, the translator does not need to emphasize “after the first on” in the translation, because the phrase has already indicated that the passengers need to board in sequence. Therefore, the sign can be translated as “Yield to Alighting Passengers”. Thus, the translation of the sign is not only concise but also observe the three rules of Skopos theory with the achievement of the purpose, the coherent content and the fidelity to the source text.

3.4 Strategies

The author analyzes the above eight types of errors and gives the corresponding suggested translations. In this part, the author will summarize some translation strategies according to the analysis process in the above parts.

3.4.1 Conversion of the negative into the affirmative

Conversion of the Negative into the Affirmative means that words with negative connotations in the source text are presented as affirmative in the translation.

For example, example 15 is suggested to be translated as “For Passengers Only”, rather than the original “No Oversized Luggage” or “No Baggage Cart Allowed”. Because the conversion of the negative into the affirmative can make the sentence or phrase more direct and more readable and easier for the readers to understand.

3.4.2 Purpose-oriented translation

Purpose-oriented translation means that the translator should figure out what the purpose of the original public sign is before translating, so that the meaning of the original text can be more accurately reflected in the translation and the readers of the target language can better understand what the public sign refers to, thus achieving the purpose of translation.^[1]

For example, example 7, example 8, example 9 are respectively suggested to be translated as “QR Code Scanner”, “Personalized Service” and “VIP Only” or “VIP Lounge” instead of “Welcome to use QR code for the ride, No more waiting in lines for ticketing”, “DOMESTIC AFFECTION AREA” or “Elegant Waiting Room”. Because the purpose of these three signs are respectively to tell the passengers that there is “QR Code Scanner”, that there provides “personalized service”, and that “the waiting room is for VIP”. And the use of purpose-oriented translation can tell the most essential information for the readers directly and make the signs play a full role.

3.4.3 Omission

Omission means that translators can omit some unnecessary words in the translating process in order to make the translation more concise and easier to read. This strategy can be applied into the categories of problems of word-for-word translation and lengthy wording.

3.4.4 Appropriate use of Pinyin

The author sets a category of problems as misapplication of Pinyin, which doesn't mean that Pinyin cannot be used in the translation of public signs. Since many words in Chinese such as names of locations have no equivalent words in English, the use of pinyin is unavoidable in the translation of public signs in public transportation systems. Moreover, the appropriate use of pinyin can also serve the purpose of cultural communication and showing the way.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Summary of the study

This study contains five parts. In the first part, the author illustrates the background of the research and the significance of the study. In the second part, the author makes the literature review of the previous studies on the translation of public signs. In the third part, the author expounds the theoretical framework of the thesis and introduces Skopos theory in detail. In the fourth part, an in-depth application of the theory to translation analysis is given. In order to better conduct the research, the author categorizes and organizes the collected materials and analyzes them from the perspective of Skopos theory. Then the author finds that many of the English translations of these public signs have problems, and classifies them into nine categories.

After that, the author analyzes these problems and gives suggested translations. And the author also proposed some strategies of translation of public signs according to the errors under the guidance of three rules of Skopos theory.

The problems found in the study provide the direction of improvement for translation of public signs of public transportation system in Lanzhou. And the strategies proposed by the author also can contribute to the improvement of the translation of public signs in Lanzhou and the development of the internationalization of the city.

4.2 Suggestions for the further research

For future research on the translation of public signs of public transportation system of Lanzhou, the sampling scope should be expanded to include the whole Lanzhou city area as far as possible, so that the research conclusions obtained will be more authentic and credible

In addition, the research on translation of public signs can be combined with subjects such as law and aesthetics to conduct interdisciplinary research, which cannot only enrich the research in the field of translation of public signs but also promote the development of these subjects.

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