

A Memetic Analysis of Public Sign Translation

---A Report from Linyi

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Abstract—Based on the Memetic Theory, this thesis seeks to give a Memetic analysis of the translation of public signs in Linyi. As a special form of applied texts, public signs may be considered as a kind of memes or meme group. The translation of public signs is the process of meme replication and dissemination. There are four stages in this procedure, the most important of which are the decoding of the original memes with language as its vector and the encoding of the memes into the target language vector. When the translator encodes, he tries to conform to some norm memes under-lying by some value memes in his mind, and then he would explore strategies of translating sign memes to meet the socially accepted norm memes. According to translation of memes, the “A-B-C Approach”, namely “Adapting Approach”, “Borrowing Approach” and “Creating Approach”, is widely accepted and adopted in the translation of public signs.

Keywords-public signs; Memetics; adapting approach; borrowing approach; creating approach

I. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of economy, education, culture and tourism, Linyi has been more and more closely connected with the outside world. Since public signs serve as an ambassador to show the image and offer information for people, translation of public signs is intended to give the foreigners great help and convenience. Therefore, it is of mighty significance for Linyi to translate public signs for foreign visitors. However, the translation of public signs in Linyi is still in a mess in terms of misspelling, incorrect grammar, lack of consistency, non-standardized expressions and so on. So it is high time to bring the systematic and standard translation of public signs to Linyi.

On the other hand, as a newly-born theory Memetics stands as a unit of cultural transmission and a unit of imitation and it has caught a lot of attentions from experts and scholars at home and abroad. The emerging theory takes “meme” as the core concept and language is a kind of memes from this point of view, and in this way public signs can be seen as a kind of memes to transmit as well. However, Memetics in China is still a fresh theory which needs further study, especially in the field of translation of public signs.

From the tourist view, the beautiful scenery and unique culture in Linyi have been attracting more and more visitors from other countries year by year. While enjoying scenery, tourists also learn more about local culture by the means of public signs in scenic and cultural spots. Yet, the foreigners would be puzzled if they see the poor and mistranslated public signs. So, it is high time to change the current situation of public signs translation in Linyi and

offer the effective and normative translations. Only in this way can we present our consideration for foreign visitors and therefore boost the image of Linyi in an international sense.

T Literature Review

The term “Meme” was coined by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* in 1976. The main thrust of that book was a defence of the gene as the unit of biological selection and the organism as a “survival machine” [1] for its gene. It suggests a strong analogy with genes. Meme is replicated and transmitted via imitation from one person to another and then to achieve the cultural evolution. In Dawkins’ view, anything can be called memes as long as it is replicated by imitation, such as tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, and ways of making pots or of building arches. Based on memes, Susan Blackmore, the student of Dawkins, published *The Meme Machine* in 1999 and applied “meme” [2] to explain religion, altruism, the origin of brain and language, etc. And she pointed out Memes were transmitted through “imitation” (Blackmore, 1999). Susan’s study to Memetics lands a mark on the study of Memetics. Andrew Chesterman (1997) applied Memetics to translation field and put forward to “translation memes” [3]. To him, translation itself is a kind of memes and there are five super-memes in meme-pool. His study on translation memes has provided a new prospect for the later researchers in the translation field.

Later on the study of Memetics has attracted more and more scholars and researchers and they apply Memetic Theory into different fields. Oxford English Dictionary has recently accepted the word “meme” as a new word, which is defined as follows: “An element of a culture or system of behavior that may be considered to be passed from one individual to another by non-genetic means, especially imitation” [4].

In China, Memetics has started later than that in the west. It is only in these years that scholars began to pay attention to it. *The Selfish Gene* began to appear in 1998 and *The Meme Machine* in 2001. Papers on Memetics mostly focus on the topics about language, and some scholars combine the theory with metaphor and translation, while others connected it with inter-textuality in the literary works. Prof. He Ziran [5], one of the forerunners who introduced Memetics by publishing books and papers, uses the theory to explain the relationship between language and Memetics. In his view, any word, paraphrases, sentence, paragraph and even passage, could be treated as a meme as long as they are replicated and transmitted by the way of imitation. Besides He, other researchers Gu Jiazu (2007) [6], Chen Linxia (2006) [7] and

Wang Bin(2006)[8], etc. have done great contributions on Memetics.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A meme is a unit of cultural transmission, or, a unit of imitation (Dawkins 2006) [9]. Memes transmit across different cultures by translating imitation, simply, by “translation”. Memes do not transmit alone and sometimes, a group of singular memes would cooperate with each other. These groups of singular memes are called memplex. According to Blackmore, languages, religions, scientific ideas, value systems and political thoughts are all typical memplex (Blackmore 1999) Chesterman (1997) takes translation as a pragmatic branch of Memetics. In his opinion, the relative translation hypostasis and conceptions are all translation memes including the translation theories, conceptions, standards and strategies.

Meme is transmitted through non-heredity, especially imitation. Memes propagate by imitation and thus depend on brains sufficiently powerful to assess the key aspects of the imitated behavior as well as its potential benefits. According to Francis Heylighen (Heylighen 418-420) [10], there are four subsequent stages contained in the replication process of memes and at each stage there exists selection, meaning that some memes will be eliminated during the processing of dissemination.

The first stage is assimilation by an individual. When a meme emerges in front of a new potential host, it must be able to “infect” a new receptor, that is, to enter into its memory. The assimilation at that time refers to the host’s attention, understanding and acceptance of the meme(Bjarneskans, 2000) [11].

The second stage is retention. It is characterized by strong selection and only few memes can survive during this stage. Retention depends on the importance of the idea, and how often it is repeated, either by recurrent perception or by internal rehearsal. The third stage is expression. The most prominent means of meme expression is speech, other common methods, such as text, pictures, and behavior are also expressions of memes.

The last stage is transmission. To reach another individual, an expression of meme needs physical vector or media which is sufficiently stable to transmit the expression without too much loss or deformation. Selection at this stage happens through either elimination of certain memes, when the vehicle is destroyed or gets corrupted before it is perceived by another individual, or through differential multiplication, when the vehicle is reproduced into many copies (Bjarneskans, 2000).

III. STRATEGIES OF TRANSLATING PUBLIC SIGNS

Public signs serve as a guide, providing information and convenience. However, the mistranslated public signs can mislead or puzzled people, especially the foreigners and bring great trouble to them. In order to solve the problems, a great many researchers are focusing on the translation of public signs in different ways. Some prefer to translate public signs by importing the correspondent or similar ones to replace the original ones while others keep the features of the original language when translating. In this chapter, we will discuss public sign memes and the translation of public signs in Linyi and seek to find

effective strategies for the translation of public signs from the perspective if Memetics.

A. Public Sign Memes and Translation

According to (Blackmore, 1999), memes and language have a very close relation with each other. Public signs are considered to be memes, meme pools or memplexes. A meme is a unit of information. It can spread and transmit itself through non-heredity method, that is, imitation. Meme transmission within one language takes place through imitation of course also through language (Chesterman, 1997). As a special kind of language, a public sign shares the basic feature in the meme spreading process and represents certain information to enforce people to remember and then put it into practice accordingly. For example,

A public sign meme is the cultural transmission in terms of languages. Memes can spread across cultures by the way of translation. If memes are put into intercultural communication through language, they would need translation to complete. The process of translation can be seen as the process of replication and transmission of memes across cultures.

Public signs carry memes with them, while memes are ideas that public signs communicate. Memes also influence the survival of public signs. Strong memes like proverbs, famous sayings and classic lines will be replicated while weaker ones diminish. For example, the translation of “Xian ren mian jin---Staff Only” survives while the other translation like “Admittance Dented to Idles”, “No Entrance” or “Keep out” are rarely used. Therefore, we can conclude that the survival of the public signs depends on the memes they carry.

To conclude, each public sign is regarded as a meme and a meme can spread across cultures by the way of translation. Memes and public signs have a certain interactive relationship between each other and it will be helpful to make a proper public sign from the Memetic perspective.

B. Strategies of Translating Public Signs

As discussed above, public signs can be the public sign memes in the meme-pool and translation of public signs can be considered as the translation of public sign memes. According to the Translation of Memes of Chesterman (1997), there are a huge number of translation memes in meme-pool. On one hand, they copy the existed memes and can be the heirs of them; on the other hand, the variation memes will be emerged in the process of transmission. On the basis of this theory, we adopt the strategies of translating public sign memes accordingly.

Among the strategies of translating public sign memes, the “A-B-C Approach” is widely used. “A-B-C Approach” is “Adapting Approach”, “Borrowing Approach” and “Creating Approach”. Adapting Approach is to make some changes of the original memes while Borrowing Approach is to borrow the same sign equivalences or memes in the source culture. As to the unique sign memes in the target culture when we cannot find equivalences in the source culture, Creating Approach is adopted to create new translating sign memes. We will discuss them respectively in the following.

1) *Adapting Approach*

According to Chesterman, except being a copy one of the former, meme can be a variant as well in the process of replication and transmission. When translating, sometimes we can not find proper equivalences in the source culture and we may find the similar memes and make some changes, that is “Adapting”, to imitate the similar expressions, a word, a phrase or a saying. The following examples are all from the translation of public signs in Linyi.

(1) Chinese sign:

Mei tian zhi xu ji mao qian, mian fei bao xiu hao ji nian.

English translation:

Some pennies each day ensure you several years' services for free.

This is a good example of adapting approach. It reminds us of an English proverb “An apple each day keeps the doctors away.” The structure of the proverb remains while the words have been changed. Besides, the adapted sentence is rhymed by “s” (some/several/service) and “f” (for/free). By doing that, it arouses the interests of the customers and attracts more people to buy so as to achieve the effect of transmitting the meme.

(2) Chinese sign:

Wei nian shi ke, xun su bao jing. English translation:

English translation:

BEING URGENT CALL 110 QUICKLY

Suggested translation: CALL 110 IN EMERGENCY

This is a typical Chinglish sign and the sign is translated into English literally. When translating the sign meme, we should take consideration of the habit of the expression habit in target language. We may do some change according to the fixed expression in English as the following “CALL 110 IN EMERGENCY”.

(3) Chinese sign:

Re lie huan ying lai zi hai nei wai de ge jie bin pwng.

English translation:

Warmly Welcome Various Guests From Home And Abroad

Suggested translation:

Warm Welcome to Guests at Home and abroad

The signs like this one are very popular in China and many different English versions can be seen in the public places like hotels, restaurants and scenic spots, etc. This one is a typical Chinglish translation. There are three kinds of errors in this sign. The first one is word-to-word translation. The second one is grammar error. “lai zi hai nei wai” should be translated into “at home and abroad” not “from home and abroad”. The third one is non-standard translation. “ge jie bin pwng” can be simply translated into “friends” not “various friends” according to the way of speaking of English. Besides, the first letter of each preposition should not be capitalized. The suggested translation of this sign is “Warm Welcome to Guests at Home and abroad”.

When we translate the signs with similar meanings in different cultures, we may adopt the Adapting Approach as a shortcut to make sign memes transmit from one culture to another effectively and successfully.

2) *Borrowing Approach*

Although language is unique whether in source culture or target culture, the cultural commonality makes it

possible to replicate memes in different cultures. Memes with similar effects in the source culture can be found in the target culture. Borrowing Approach came into being under such circumstance. It is an approach that “borrows” the same expressions or memes directly without doing any changes from the target culture to the source culture. According to Memetics, Borrowing Approach is looked as the best choice in transmitting public signs memes. In other words, we can find similar memes in the target language from the definition, features and characteristics of public signs. The following are good examples.

(1) Chinese sign:

Zhe shi jie bus hi you quan ren deshi jie, ye bus hi you qian ren de shi jie, er shi you xin ren de shijie.

English translation:

This world doesn't belong to the world, also is not there The money, but with heart world.

Suggested translation:

This is not a world for the rich or the power, but a world for the minded.

In the process of translation, for these public signs like famous sayings, proverbs or other idiomatic expressions, we may simply borrow them into target language directly. This one is no exception. It is obvious that the translation of this famous saying is done by translating machine. Its suggested translation should be “This is not a world for the rich or the power, but a world for the minded.”

(2) Chinese sign: Dang xin shui shen.

A. English translation: Be careful the deep Water

Suggested translation: Caution: Deep Water

B. English translation: Carefully Step

Suggested translation: Mind the Steps

The same memes in English and Chinese appear in different forms, the choice of appropriate memes depends on different contexts. For example, the Chinese meme “xiao xin” has several different ways of expressing in English as “caution”, “be cautious”, “be careful of”, “beware of”, “take care”, “look out”, “mind”, “pay attention to” etc. As is known to us, not all the correct expressions or memes can be used as public signs. As to this one, “caution” and “mind” are usually chosen as public sign memes in English. Accordingly we also borrow them when translating meme “xiao xin”.

(3) Chinese sign: Fang cao qing qing, ta zhi he ren.

English translation: Please don't step on the grass

Suggested translation: Keep off the Grass

As to the restricting and compelling signs, Borrowing Approach is available. Although the core meaning of this Chinese sign “Fang cao qing qing, ta zhi he ren” is: “don't step on the grass”. The expression “don't step on the grass” is usually used in oral English and rarely as an English public sign. The most popular expression as a public sign is “Keep off the Grass”.

To conclude, when the public sign memes in English and in Chinese share the same core meanings, we adopt Borrowing Approach, that is to say, we just borrow the English ones directly to Chinese without doing any changes.

3) *Creating Approach*

The big problem when translating lies in cultural gap. There is no exception to English and Chinese cultures. So we should take cultural differences into consideration

when we transmit memes. As is often the case, there are untranslatable memes between English and Chinese cultures. That is to say, when there is no existing expressions or memes in English that we can borrow or no similar expressions or memes that we can imitate then what should we do? Under such circumstances, Creating Approach is the best choice.

(1) Chinese sign:

Dui jing xiu rong yan, dui ren zheng pin xing.

English translation:

Perfect Appearance before Mirror

Cultivate Morality after People

This Chinese sign cherishes deep Buddhist connotation and is hard for the westerners who believes Christianity. Therefore we can not find similar expressions or memes in English language, what we should do is to create “translation” or memes. Its translation “Perfect Appearance before Mirror/Cultivate Morality after People” is a typical example of the application of Creating Approach.

(2) Chinese sign:

Jun zi he er bu tong, xiao ren tong er bu he.

Jun zi ji en bu ji chou, xiao ren ji chou bu ji en.

English translation: Gentlemen and different, with SIMS with/Gentlemen does not hold it against you remember/Well. SIMS, hold it against you don't remember well.

Suggested translation:

Gentlemen tolerant while petty people alienate.

Gentlemen forgive while petty people complain.

When we translate some public signs which are designed for Chinese only and can not be found their equivalences in English culture, we must pay attention to its core meaning regardless of each word or each phrase. These are Confucius' words and there are several different translations like “The gentleman is friendly but not at the expense of principles, the villain agrees outwardly but not really cooperate.” The translation in the picture is simply done by the machine. Since the sentences serve as public signs, they must be short, concise, and to the point according to the features of public signs. So the suggested translation is “Gentlemen tolerant while petty people alienate; Gentlemen forgive while petty people complain.”

As we adopt Creating Approach when translating, it should be clear that the translation must convey the core meaning and specialty of Chinese and it must be readable and acceptable by English readers. In other words, we should not only understand Chinese quite well and grasp its core meaning, but also make a proper use of English idiomatic expressions.

All in all, the proper use of A-B-C Approach is essential to the successful transmitting memes from Chinese culture to English culture. On the basis of the

translation memes, we establish a bridge between source sign memes and target translation memes.

IV. CONCLUSION

Public signs translation is attaching more and more attention and the appropriate translation of public signs is essential to the cross-cultural communication. Although many experts and scholars have done deal in how to translating correctly and canonically, there still exist many problems. They seek to find solutions for these problems in many different ways by applying different theoretical basis, such as Relevance, Adaptability, Skopstheorie, etc., but harvest less. Therefore, this thesis seeks to give a Memetic analysis to find some effective strategies in translating memes and hopes that it can provide something new in this area.

This thesis has discussed public sign translation from the Memetic perspective, there still exists some limitations such as the limitation of collecting materials, the competence of the author in language expressing and the research experience, and there are still many other parts needed to be found and explored.

All in all, public signs translation is not a small issue. It is not only the concern of researchers but also the government, the advertising agency and the related organizations and it deserves everyone's efforts. Based on Memetics, this thesis establishes the public sign memes and provide A-B-C Approach to bridge the original sign memes and the target foreign sign memes, hoping it can enlighten more people to do further research in translate public signs from the Memetic perspective.

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