SHEIKHBAHAEE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Problems with English Translations of Persian Signs: A Case Study of Signs in Iran

A THESIS SUBMITED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

By

SEPIDEH RANAZADEH

Supervisor

DR. M.H. TAHRIRIAN

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In The Name of God

Declaration

I declare that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text. This work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

Dedicated to

My Dear Family

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Abstract

The present study investigated problems with English translations of Persian signs in Iran. It set out to answer the following questions: 1. What strategies do translators commonly use for translation of signs? 2. What are the major problems with English translation of some Persian signs? 3. What are possible sources of these problems? To this end, one hundred and seventy four translations of signs were collected from five different cities. The translations were given to 5 experts holding an M.A. degree in English translation, to judge. After identifying the mistranslations, the researcher analyzed them for their major problems and also possible sources of the problems. The researcher also tried to find the strategies that translators had used for translation of signs based on the Vinay and Darbelnet's(2000) classification of translation methods. The data were classified into five groups, each of which were analyzed based on their errors. The results of the study indicated that in most cases translators used calque, borrowing, calque and borrowing, and modulation for translation of public signs. The obtained results showed that most problems of the collected data were lexical, structural and in some cases there were loss of meaning in translations. The identified mistranslations support the idea that not only the translations cannot be helpful for foreigners, but also they may be confusing. Analysis of the collected data also revealed that most of the translators did not have sufficient knowledge of English.

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List of Abbreviations

ST: Source Text

TT: Target Text

1. Introduction

1. Background

Translation plays an important role in the modern world. Chute believes that "Without translation, our world would narrow mercilessly" (cited in Miremadi, 1997, p. 21). Translation is based on interactions and is one of the most important cross-linguistic and cross-cultural procedures.

The term translation can be referred to as a product of the translator, or a process which focuses on the role of the translator in transferring the original or source text (ST) into the target text (TT). Roman Jokobson (cited in Hatim and Munday, 2004, p. 5) referred to the translation which is from one language to another as interlingual translation. He also considered two types of translation; namely, intralingual translation which is the translation within the same language and can involve rewording or paraphrase and intersemiotic translation which is the translation of the verbal sign by a non-verbal sign. He considered just the first type as translation proper (ibid., p. 5).

Interlingual translation consists of at least two languages which have linguistic and non-linguistic differences. Languages have some similarities, but they are not identical, and, thus, due to their differences in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and etc., translation from one to another is not an easy task. Cowley (1618-1667) argued that languages are different syntactically and semantically, therefore translators must avoid introducing to the readers anything, semantic or syntactic which seems queer, odd or strange to them. It is noted that in comparison to STs, translated texts are simpler. As a principle of translation, Pope suggests that the translated text should be simple, accurate, and correct (as cited in Miremadi, 1997, pp. 93).

People communicate in different ways. Signs are a good means of communication and make understanding across linguistic communities easier. By studying translation of signs in public places, we come across errors and mistranslations whose analysis helps us find factors that have caused them, and accordingly we can look for some solutions. Natural translation is important, because bad/mis-translation may lead to communication breakdowns.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

In the age of communication we are exposed to other people's cultures, experiences, and symbolic systems, partly through sign. As tourism industry develops, more people travel to different parts of the world. Now that English is an international language and helps different people from diverse linguistic communities to communicate, it is important to have English translation of signs under their original versions. English translation of public signs in a country such as Iran, where the native language is not English, is a way of communicating with the foreign visitors who do not know Persian and mostly stay there temporarily. The extensive application of public signs involves almost such aspects of daily life as signposts, billboards, stores, etc. We can see lots of bilingual signs in public places, but when we examine them in the two languages, we encounter some misforms or mistranslations. A translator is expected to convey the exact meaning, because partial or incorrect translation may distort the message. Mistranslation causes a barrier in communication and the foreigner may not get the exact intention of the sign; therefore, it is important to analyze these mistranslations for their sources and develop some strategies for overcoming problems that lead to mistranslations.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The present study was planned to investigate problems with English translation of Persian signs and effort was made to find their possible sources. It also tried to find strategies that translators commonly use for translation of signs.

1.3. Research Questions

This study intended to answer the following questions:

1. What strategies do translators commonly use for translation of signs?

2. What are some major problems with English translation of Persian signs?

3. What are possible sources of these problems?

1.4. Significance of the Study

Understandability of translation for the readership is a key feature of an appropriate translation. According to Baker (1993), translated texts tend to be simpler or easier in comparison to their source texts. This study seeks to investigate the strategies applied for translation of Persian public signs into English and also their problems. The obtained results will help translators to find out which translation strategy is more appropriate for translation of public signs and in ordet to transfer the message in a way that can be understandable for the public.

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

Mistranslation: Mistranslation is an incorrect translation. In this study the term mistranslation refers to the translation that does not transfer the same message of the original text or is completely incorrect.

Translation Strategy: As cited by Ordudari (2007), Loescher (1991) defines translation strategy as "a potentially conscious procedure for solving a problem faced in translating a text, or any segment of it." Translation strategies that were used in this

study were the strategies proposed by Vinay and Darbelnet 2000. These strategies are Borrowing, Calque, Literal translation, Transposition, Modulation, Equivalence, and adaptation.

Signs: Signs are lettered boards or other public displays placed on or before a building, room, shop or office to advertise business there transacted or the name of person or firm conducting it (Webster's Third New International Dictionary). In this study signs are lettered boards which warn, inform, or give instructions in public places such as, airports, bus terminals, parks, etc..

Expected Translation: Expected translation in this study refers to a translation which is correct and conveys the message the best.

2. Literature Review

Chapter Two:

Literature Review

2. Overview

This chapter includes the theoretical background of the study, definition, functions, and translation strategies of public signs. A brief review of related studies is also included.

2.1. Introduction

The main purpose of a text was to convey information and convince the reader. According to Hatim and Munday(2004), translation is "transferring a written text from SL to TL in a specific socio-cultural context".

Translation as both an art and a craft plays a significant role in today's world. This fact holds true with the translators as well; since they are the ones responsible for properly carrying out this multi-dimensional act. People from different geographies with different languages and culture need to communicate and this communication takes place through translation. Since culture is associated with language, the translator should take into account the culture of both the source and the target language in order to do a successful translation.

Among many acceptable translations, there are some English translations which do not transfer the intended message and sometimes cause loss of meaning and affect the communication. As the number of tourists increases, so does the need for translation. It is important to prepare bilingual signs in public places so that foreigners can find what they want and make decisions about their choices at lower risk in a foreign country. English, as an international language to which every tourist resorts in

order to communicate with other people is used in most bilingual signs. That is why we can find English translation of signs in different places.

There are a number of websites which give a list of mistranslated signs with their pictures. They make jokes out of these mistranslations, which shows that people are concerned with this problem and expect people in charge to take appropriate measures to solve the problem.

In various studies that have been done on in this respect, function of public signs, classification of public signs, translation strategies used for translation of public signs, and some solutions to solve the problem have been presented.

Analyzing these mistranslations and finding out their sources of problems may be of great importance. In this chapter some information on related studies which have been reported by various scholars will be reviewed.

2.2. Translation studies

Translation, in written or spoken form, plays a significant role in the human communication. The history of translation practice originates from the time of Cicero and his debates on literal and free translation, Horace's rejection of literal translation, and St Jerome's Bible translation into Latin (Munday, 2001). Although the study of translation has a very long history, translation is a relatively new research area that has been developed extensively in the second half of the twentieth century and investigated as an independent discipline. It is worth mentioning that much recent work in the field of translation studies has been resulted from dissatisfaction with the way translation has been met. Holmes (2000) coined the term Translation Studies (TS) for the new scientific approach in his well known paper, "*The Name and Nature of Translation Studies*" (as cited in Hatim & Munday, 2004). His work introduces two