

# Towards quality in sign translation: a pragmatic perspective on standards and improvement pathways

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**Abstract:** With the rapid advancement of globalization, bilingual signage has become commonplace in urban and international settings. They serve not only as practical tools for navigation and safety but also as significant representations of a region's cultural literacy and image on the global stage. However, translation errors in signs are rampant, ranging from causing confusion and embarrassment to triggering cultural misunderstandings and damaging national image. Therefore, how to improve the quality of sign translation based on scientific standards has become an urgent practical and academic issue. This paper, framed within pragmatic translation theory and incorporating common error cases, explores the standards that sign translation should adhere to and feasible pathways for quality assurance. The paper argues that the standards for sign translation should go beyond the traditional principles of "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance" to include the accuracy and normativity of "pragmalinguistic standards" and the cultural adaptability of "sociopragmatic standards". The root causes of translation quality issues lie in pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failures, as well as systemic deficiencies. Improving quality requires the comprehensive application of pragmatic equivalence translation strategies and the establishment of a holistic quality assurance system through enhancing translator competence, standardizing the translation process, and improving regulatory mechanisms.

**Keywords:** sign translation; pragmatics; translation standards; translation quality; pragmatic equivalence

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid advancement of globalization, bilingual signs have become increasingly common in urban public spaces and international communication venues. Signage serves fundamental functions including guidance, reminder, and warning, and also acts as a microcosm of a city's or a nation's cultural literacy and internationalization level. However, the endless stream of errors in sign translation ranges from causing confusion and ridicule to triggering cultural misunderstandings and damaging the national image. Therefore, how to enhance the quality of sign translation based on scientific standards has become an urgent practical and academic issue<sup>[1]</sup>. This paper uses pragmatic translation theory as a framework, combined with common error cases, to explore the standards that sign translation should follow and feasible strategies to ensure its quality.

## 2. The Pragmatic Connotation of Translation Standards: Beyond "Faithfulness, Expressiveness, and Elegance"

Traditional translation standards, such as Yan Fu's "Faithfulness, Expressiveness, and Elegance," primarily focus on the fidelity, fluency, and refinement of the text itself. However, for functional and highly context-dependent sign translation, these standards, while instructive, are somewhat insufficient. The introduction of a pragmatic perspective injects new connotations into translation standards<sup>[2]</sup>.

The core of pragmatic translation theory lies in "achieving successful meaning transmission in dynamic communicative contexts." It emphasizes that translation is not merely the conversion of linguistic symbols but also a cross-cultural and

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cross-social communicative act. British scholar Jenny Thomas's division of pragmatic failure into "pragmalinguistic failure" and "sociopragmatic failure" provides two precise tools for assessing the quality of sign translation<sup>[3]</sup>.

### 2.1 Pragmalinguistic Standards: Accuracy and Normativity

This standard requires the translation to be not only lexically and grammatically correct, but also deeply understand the rules of language use in specific contexts. Sign translation must achieve "pragmatic equivalence," meaning the effect of the translation on the target language readers should be as consistent as possible with the effect of the original text on the source language readers<sup>[4]</sup>.

Case: Translating "小心地滑" literally as "Carefully Slide" completely deviates from the original intention of a warning, turning it into a comical instruction to "please slide carefully." Correct translations such as "Caution: Wet Floor" or "Slippery When Wet" align with the conventional expressions of English warnings, achieving pragmatic equivalence.

Standard Embodiment: This means translation must avoid mechanical transplanted (word-for-word literal translation), master vocabulary accurately (e.g., translating "闲人免进" as "Staff Only" instead of "No Idlers"), and eliminate "Chinglish"<sup>[5]</sup>.

### 2.2 Sociopragmatic Standards: Cultural Adaptability and Communicative Appropriateness

This standard necessitates that translators move beyond the linguistic level and fully consider the cultural background, social norms, and values of the target audience. The translation act must serve successful cross-cultural communication<sup>[6]</sup>.

Case: The poetic slogan on a lawn, "小草有生命，足下请留情", if translated literally with its poetic connotations, might confuse international tourists. Using the conventional English imperative sentence "Please Keep Off the Grass" directly and clearly conveys the social instruction, avoiding pragmatic failure due to differences in cultural expression.

Standard Embodiment: This requires the translator to grasp the different connotations of politeness (e.g., the frequency and context differences in the use of "请" in Chinese and "Please" in English), adhere to target language conventions (e.g., the global universality of "No Smoking"), and pay close attention to cultural differences<sup>[7]</sup>.

## 3. The Causes of Translation Quality Issues: Error Classification and Cause Analysis

According to the provided framework, quality issues in sign translation can be primarily categorized as follows, resulting from multiple contributing factors.

### 3.1 Main Error Types: Deviation from Translation Standards

#### 3.1.1 Pragmalinguistic Failure:

1) Lexical Level: For example, mistranslating "售票处" as "Ticketing Office" (should be "Ticket Office"), using non-idiomatic wording.

2) Grammatical Level: Errors in tense, voice, singular/plural forms, e.g., "残疾人电梯" translated as "Elevator for the Disable" (correct: "Elevator for the Disabled").

3) Chinglish: Influenced by native language thinking, producing rigid translations like "Good Good Study, Day Day Up," manifested in signs such as translating "某某大道" as "XX Big Road" (should be "XX Avenue")<sup>[8]</sup>.

#### 3.1.2 Sociopragmatic Failure:

1) Ignorance of Cultural Differences: For instance, directly translating slogans with strong political connotations or specific historical backgrounds into international contexts may evoke unnecessary associations or resistance.

2) Inappropriate Tone: Chinese signs often use strong imperative tones like "禁止", "违者罚款." If directly translated as "It is forbidden to...", "Violators will be fined," it may seem rude in Western cultures that emphasize individual rights. More appropriate translations use phrases like "Thank you for not + V-ing" or "Please refrain from..."<sup>[9]</sup>.

### 3.2 Underlying Causes: Systemic Shortcomings Affecting Translation Quality

#### 3.2.1 Insufficient Professional Competence of translators

Some translators lack bilingual ability and cross-cultural awareness. The source text they provide might already be non-standard, or they may underestimate the importance of translation.

### 3.2.2 Marginalized Role of the Translator

Sign translation is often regarded as "trivial" and not taken seriously. Translators may lack professional training without understanding the specific context, leading to disconnection between the translation and the actual scene<sup>[10]</sup>.

### 3.2.3 Lack of Supervision and Review Mechanisms

This is a key reason why substandard translations ultimately appear in public spaces. Many places lack an effective review process involving foreign language experts, native speakers, and industry managers, allowing erroneous translations to "pass" and persist<sup>[11]</sup>.

## 4. The Path Towards Quality: Translation Strategies and Systemic Solutions

To systematically improve the quality of sign translation, efforts must be made both in strategy application and mechanism building, implementing pragmatic translation standards effectively<sup>[12]</sup>.

### 4.1 Core Translation Strategies: Practicing Pragmatic Equivalence

#### 4.1.1 Implement Pragmatically Equivalent Translation:

1) Borrowing and Adoption: For internationally common signs, directly use existing, functionally equivalent expressions from the target language. For example, uniformly translate "紧急出口" as "Emergency Exit."

2) Free Translation and Reconstruction: When literal translation fails to convey meaning, boldly discard the original form and reconstruct based on the core function. For example, translate "带好随身物品" as "Please Take Your Belongings With You."

#### 4.1.2 Implement Sociopragmatically Equivalent Translation:

1) Prioritize Domestication: To make the translation easily accepted by the target culture, prioritize expressions that conform to its habits. Translating "酒香不怕巷子深" as "Good wine needs no bush" is a successful example of domestication<sup>[13]</sup>.

2) Cultural Annotation and Adaptation: When necessary, use amplification, omission, or adaptation to mediate cultural conflicts, ensuring the accurate communication of the intended message<sup>[14]</sup>.

### 4.2 Systemic Suggestions for Guaranteeing Translation Quality

#### 4.2.1 For Translators:

1) Master Vocabulary Accurately and Expand Knowledge Reserve: Build a database of professional terminology and familiarize themselves with standard translations for signs in various fields.

2) Adhere to the Principles of "Brevity and Accuracy": The value of signs lies in instant comprehension. Translations should strive for conciseness and precise information.

3) Develop Pragmatic Decision-Making Skills: Translators should be adept at choosing between domestication and foreignization strategies based on a thorough analysis of the sign's function, target audience, and communicative context.

#### 4.2.2 For Management and Supervision Levels:

1) Establish Standardized Translation Guidelines: National and local governments should take the lead in formulating and publishing local or national standards for sign translation in public areas, providing authoritative references for translation practice.

2) Establish Sound Quality Review Mechanisms: Set up expert committees for multilingual public services to conduct mandatory professional reviews of sign translations in important public spaces.

3) Encourage Public Participation and Supervision: Create convenient platforms for reporting erroneous signs, utilizing social forces to identify and correct errors, forming a virtuous cycle of interaction<sup>[14]</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

Signage, though a small domain, is a significant window. Its translation quality directly impacts the efficiency of cross-cultural communication and the shaping of the national image. Under the lens of pragmatic translation theory, excellent sign

translation must not settle for superficial correctness but must pursue the successful transmission of function and effect within the target context. This requires us to establish new-era translation standards centered on "pragmatic equivalence" and "cultural adaptation," and to build a comprehensive quality assurance system encompassing translator competency enhancement, translation process standardization, and regulatory mechanism improvement. Only in this way can we thoroughly eliminate "awkward translations," ensuring that every bilingual sign becomes a civilized symbol accurately, appropriately, and efficiently disseminating China's voice, thereby truly fostering international understanding and exchange<sup>[15]</sup>.

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