

On Issues in the Translation of Public Signs in Wuhan: From the Perspectives of Grammar, Semantics, and Pragmatics

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Abstract: Public signs reflect urban linguistic governance and a city's international image. However, various translation problems have been identified in the translation of public signs in Wuhan. In this context, this study examines public signs at the Yellow Crane Tower and East Lake Scenic Area in Wuhan by analyzing translation problems related to grammar, semantics, and pragmatics. These issues are classified into three main categories: linguistic standardization, semantic non-equivalence, and sociopragmatic failure. Based on this analysis, the study proposes translation principles emphasizing accuracy, semantic equivalence, and cultural appropriateness. Finally, grounded in these principles, the study suggests two translation strategies: amplification for information compensation and cultural adaptation for avoiding mistranslation, with the aim of improving the quality of public sign translations in scenic areas.

Keywords: Public Signs in Wuhan; Grammatical Issues; Semantic Issues; Pragmatic Issues; Translation Principles; Translation Strategies



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1 Introduction

Cultural tourism is vital to the national economy and people's livelihoods, as well as to a city's international image. As an essential component of foreign language services and the language environment for international exchanges, bilingual public signs in scenic areas play a significant role in introducing attractions, showcasing urban humanistic care, and shaping a positive international image.

As a national historical and cultural city, Wuhan boasts abundant historical and cultural landscape resources, attracting numerous domestic and international tourists each year. On May 21, 2025, the Wuhan Cultural Tourism Development Conference proposed that the city would strive to build itself into a world-renowned cultural tourism destination. In this context, the translation of public signs in historical and cultural heritage sites and scenic areas greatly impacts the experience of foreign tourists and their impression of Wuhan. However, a field investigation of

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representative sites such as the Yellow Crane Tower and the East Lake Scenic Area revealed several existing issues. Therefore, taking the public signs at these two scenic areas as examples, by collecting, categorizing, and analyzing problems related to translation, this study is aimed at proposing strategies for public sign translation and drawing attention to the quality of such translations in scenic areas.

2 translation problems in Public Signs at Wuhan scenic areas

The corpus for this study is drawn from English translations of public signs within the Yellow Crane Tower scenic area and the Tingtao area of the East Lake Greenway. Through on-site photography, several translation problems have been documented, primarily concerning issues in linguistic standardization, semantic information, and cultural pragmatics.

2.1 Issues of linguistic standardization

Based on the agency of signs, the linguistic landscape is typically categorized into official signage and private signage (Shang & Zhao, 2014a: 217). The bilingual public signs in both the Yellow Crane Tower Park and the East Lake Tingtao area are official. Compared to private signs, they more prominently reflect the language policies and cultural governance capabilities of local authorities and thus require strict adherence to linguistic standardization. Analysis of the collected corpus reveals that related issues mainly include spelling errors, grammatical mistakes, multiple translations for a single entity, and unclear severity gradation in warning signage.

Regarding spelling errors, “胶卷安全” is translated as “Film Safe”, and the translation for “禁止共享单车入园” appears as “inzhigongxiangdancheruyuan”, which is merely pinyin. In terms of grammatical mistakes, “亲近自然 健康生活” is translated as “Close Nature, Healthy Life” while the word “close” requires the preposition “to” to connect with a noun when used as an adjective meaning “near in space or time”. Besides, the same site has different English versions. For instance, the road sign for “行吟阁” reads “Singing Pavilion”, and “Xingyin Pavilion” (pinyin), while the site’s information board displays “Poetry-Reciting Pavilion”. Additionally, there are issues with warning signage. For example, “当心电离辐射” is translated as “Warning Ionizing Radiation” regardless of warning gradation.

2.2 semantic non-equivalence

The primary function of public signs is to convey information. If the translation suffers from information omission, redundancy, or inconsistency, it becomes difficult to achieve communication and fulfill its intended purpose.

2.2.1 Issues of Information Omission or Redundancy

Information omission refers to translations that fail to adequately convey the key information contained in the source text. Information redundancy, also known as “over-translation (hereinafter referred to as over-translation)”, occurs when the translation exceeds the minimum and most appropriate amount of information, resulting in wordy versions that negatively impact the target-language readers’ perception (Lv, et al., 2011: 217-219).

Example 1:

ST (Source Text): 旅游美时美刻 文明随时随地

TT (Target Text): Let's Join Hands To Protect The Environment

Example 2:

ST: 寓言公园

TT: Fable Park

Example 3:

ST: 办公区域 游客止步

TT: Working Area Staff Only

The public signs above all exhibit issues of information omission or redundancy. The source text in Example 1 carries two layers of meaning: one is protecting the environment, and the other is wishing tourists a pleasant journey. Its translation reflects the core meaning of “protecting the environment” but fails to express the second intent. As this sign aims to appeal to tourists to protect the environment politely, the expression needs to be more indirect to foster spontaneous environmental protection. In Example 2, “寓言公园” is a sculpture park featuring themes from ancient Chinese allegorical stories such as “The Fox Borrows the Tiger’s Terror” and “Three Monks Have No Water to Drink”. Therefore, the translated name “Fable Park” omits the exhibits — sculpture. Example 3 expresses the meaning of “Staff Only” or “No Admittance to Non-Staff”. “办公区域”, as a non-key information in English public signs, makes the translation redundant.

2.2.2 Issues of Inaccurate Naming

As a human geography phenomenon, the linguistic landscape is closely intertwined with geographic and political spaces (Wang, 2013: 151-153). The translation of public signs must consider their placement within this landscape and relevant laws and regulations; otherwise, it may lead to inaccurate naming, where the words used in the translation are imprecise, deviate from the original meaning, or do not reflect the actual purpose. Based on field investigations, the problem of inaccurate naming remains severe in these two scenic areas.

Example 4:

ST: 禁止垂钓

TT: No Angling

The Regulations on the East Lake Scenic Area of Wuhan stipulate that no unit or individual may engage in unauthorized fishing of aquatic animals and plants within the scenic area. The phrase “禁止垂钓” in fact refers to “prohibiting any form of fishing activity in this water body”, its scope encompassing the prohibition of fishing methods such as netting, hook-and-line angling, and hand-catching. The Oxford Dictionary defines “Angling” as: “The art or practice of catching fish with a rod, line, and hook”, which limits the fishing equipment to rods, hooks, and lines, excluding methods like netting or trapping. While the translation appears equivalent, the legislative text reveals that “Angling” is actually a hyponym of fishing, which narrows the scope of reference. The reversal in the use of hypernyms and hyponyms leads to inequivalence in semantic scope (Liu, Liu, & Bao, 2018: 24). Furthermore, such translation expands

the boundaries of visitors' perceived fishing rights, thereby creating a conflict between the public sign and the legislative text.

Example 5:

ST: 湖光序曲

TT: Chu-style Garden

“湖光序曲” serves both as a gateway landscape and a first-class service station. Located at the western gateway of the East Lake Greenway, it is the starting point of the greenway and was renovated from the former “Chu-style Garden”. Although experts have renamed it, the English translation “Chu-style Garden” was not updated accordingly and fails to reflect its function as a service station.

2.3 Sociopragmatic Failure

Sociopragmatic failure refers to errors in public sign translation arising from differences in historical culture and social concepts, where translators either misuse the target language or apply the semantic or structural patterns of their native language to the target language. The translations investigated in this field study exhibit two main issues: first, translators mechanically follow Chinese thinking in literal translation; second, they overly rely on domestication strategies without fully considering whether the signified and signifier are equivalent between the source and target languages.

Example 6:

ST: 持有“灵秀湖北感恩卡”的援鄂医护人员本人及 1-3 名陪同人员在平台预约后免费。

TT: Medical staff with the Lingxiu Hubei Thanksgiving Card who aided Hubei in the fight against the novel coronavirus can take 1-3 accompanying staff and all are free of charge after booking in the platform.

The “感恩卡” expresses the gratitude of Hubei people towards the medical staff who aided Hubei for their selfless dedication. However, the term “Thanksgiving” in the translated text carries highly specific cultural connotations. It primarily evokes the holiday of Thanksgiving, and secondly, according to the Oxford Dictionary, it also refers to giving thanks to God, and is not used to express official gratitude towards a specific group of people. Communicative translation attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original (Newmark, 2001). The term “Thanksgiving” carries a heterogeneous cultural concept, fails to resonate with target-language readers, and may even cause ambiguity in understanding.

Example 7:

ST: 行吟阁游船码头

TT: Troubadour Ferry Pier

The name “行吟阁” originates from the allusion “walking and chanting by the lakeside” in Qu Yuan's *Chu Ci*. It depicts Qu Yuan, in exile, pacing and reciting poetry by the river, expressing the traditional Chinese scholar-official's

concern for the state and its people. In contrast, “troubadour” specifically refers to medieval European poet-musicians from the 11th to 13th centuries. This translation may mislead readers into thinking the pier is a performance venue, completely deviating from the spiritual core of the scenic site.

As a crucial component of the linguistic landscape, public signs function to convey information and carry local culture (Che, 2022: 43). The imbalance in information transmission observed in the English translations of public signs in Wuhan scenic sites diminishes the local standard of linguistic governance. The sociopragmatic failure exposes a lack of refinement in the language policy management of the cultural and tourism departments and a deficiency in established translation principles for culturally specific public signs. In this context, to build a world-renowned tourism destination, updating the principles for translating public signs is imperative.

3 Principles for Public Sign Translation

Academia has shown considerable concern regarding the translation of public signs. Ni Chuanbin and Liu Zhi (1998) proposed five principles for translating public signs into English: conciseness, clarity, appropriate tone, standardization, and moderate humor. Conciseness refers to succinct expression in the translation; clarity means it should be easily understandable; appropriate tone involves grading the strength of the language according to whether it is prohibitory, warning, mandatory, or advisory; standardization requires the translation to align with expressions commonly used in English public signs or international standards; moderate humor suggests appropriately lessening the seriousness of some signs to achieve better communicative effect. Lv Hefa (2004) pointed out that English public signs possess the characteristics of standardization, convention, and inheritance, necessitating a one-to-one translation from Chinese to English for signs used in the same contexts with identical functions within the two linguistic and cultural frameworks. Chen Jianping (2005) emphasized that Chinese-to-English translation of public signs should follow the basic requirements of accuracy, standardization, and brevity. Accuracy means the translation should convey the original information correctly; standardization refers to using expressions widely accepted by readers in English-speaking countries; brevity indicates the translation should be concise, to the point, and easy to understand. Liu Fagong and Xu Beijia (2008) summarized three principles for Chinese-to-English public sign translation: consistency, conciseness, and comprehensibility. The consistency principle requires the use of conventional English public sign expressions and adherence to international practice. Concise means the translation should be succinct, avoiding obscure vocabulary and complex, long sentences. Comprehensibility focuses on enhancing the readability of the translation. Based on Reiss’s text typology, Liu Yingchun and Wang Haiyan (2012) categorized public signs as informative and appellative texts, proposing four principles for translating informative signs: standardization, consistency, functionality, and conciseness. In summary, scholars have focused on analyzing the linguistic features, informative functions, text types, and translation purposes of public signs; thus, principles such as standardization, accuracy, and conciseness are frequently discussed, while culture-related principles receive less attention. As a historical and cultural city, Wuhan possesses a multitude of linguistic landscapes bearing local culture, which consequently demands translation principles that highlight the cultural communication function of public signs.

Public signs are not merely a linguistic issue; they are also a significant part of urban and national governance. Therefore, besides academia, national and local authorities have issued relevant translation standards. *The Guidelines for the Use of English in Public Service Area* propose the principles of legality, standardization, service orientation, and

civility. *Specifications for English translations in Jinan public service areas* list principles of legality, standardization, regionality, humanistic orientation, and simplicity. *Guidelines for English Translation of Public Signs in Zhangjiajie for the Development of Holistic Tourism* propose principles of “naming based on the cultural connotation of scenic areas and inheriting the English name of institutions”, communicative appropriateness, economy and effectiveness, aesthetics, uniqueness, and conventional usage. *Guidelines for English Translation of Public Signs of Shaanxi Province* establish seven principles: legality, civility, standardization, accuracy, comprehensibility, pertinence, and conciseness. Wei Xu (2023) points out that local standards often emphasize requirements like “humanistic orientation”, “regionality”, and “pertinence” due to local characteristics, elevating principles such as political correctness, legality, standardization, and civility to the level of institutional design, serving as statutory translation principles within the foreign-language public sign management system. Thus, it is evident that the translation principles stipulated in local and national standard documents are not only closely related to translation problems but also involve the relationship between public sign translation and external factors, such as social services, local characteristics, and institutional design.

In summary, the translation principles proposed by academia primarily focus on guiding micro-level linguistic translation problems. In contrast, local and national translation standards tend to construct macro-level guiding frameworks involving institutional design, national and urban image, social services, and local characteristics. The two complement and reinforce each other.

Given that this paper primarily discusses translation problems at the linguistic level, based on the aforementioned review of translation principles and classification of problems, this paper establishes three principles, including standardization, accuracy, and cultural appropriateness in response to the main issues exposed in current public sign translation—such as non-standard language, semantic non-equivalence, and cultural mistranslation. It will attempt to improve translations based on these principles.

3.1 The Principle of Standardization

The Principle of Standardization refers to the requirement that the translation of public signs in foreign languages must comply with the norms of the target language, adhere to China’s translation standards for public signs, accurately convey warning, advisory, and prohibitory information in public spaces, and avoid grammatical and pragmatic failure.

3.2 The Principle of Accuracy

The translation of public signs should, according to the context of use, employ English terms that accurately reflect the meaning of the original Chinese text. It must convey the core message of the sign, enabling the target-language reader to react similarly to the source-language reader. Given that differences between the Chinese and English languages and cultures are significant factors affecting semantic accuracy, translation should reference standard, idiomatic expressions in English to maximize the effectiveness of information transfer.

3.3 The Principle of Cultural Appropriateness

The Principle of Cultural Appropriateness emphasizes that translation must consider the cultural background and cognitive habits of the target-language audience to avoid misunderstandings or offense due to cultural differences. While

accurately conveying information, it may appropriately preserve and transmit characteristics of the source culture, thereby fostering cultural understanding and exchange.

4 Translation Strategies for Public Signs

Based on the aforementioned principles, this paper will propose revisions for the identified translation problems, employing targeted translation strategies, methods, and techniques to achieve standardization, accuracy, and cultural appropriateness in public sign translation. Since standardization constitutes a basic concern in public sign translation, detailed revision suggestions related to it will not be elaborated here. The following analysis will primarily focus on resolving issues of semantic information inequivalence and sociopragmatic failure.

4.1 Ensuring Information Equivalence

On the basis of meeting linguistic standardization, the translation of public signs must accurately convey semantic information. Information equivalence requires the translation to communicate the core message and intent of the source text within the target language, avoiding information distortion caused by word-for-word translation or cross-linguistic differences. This section will focus on correcting such problems, exploring how to apply appropriate translation strategies, methods, and techniques to achieve equivalent message transmission within the target cultural context.

First, issues of information redundancy or omission are addressed as follows. As previously analyzed, the translation for Example 1 failed to express the good wishes for a pleasant journey, and Example 2 omitted the exhibits of the park. Therefore, it is suggested that the translations be revised to “Respect, Protect, Enjoy” and “Fable Sculptures Park” respectively. For translations that appear correct but actually omit information, it is suggested that one first ascertain the intent of the sign’s placement by consulting scenic area managers. Then, from the perspective of the target-language readers, they should conduct an on-site investigation into the sign’s layout and its interaction with surrounding features. Finally, employing the technique of amplification (a core translation technique) can clarify the sign’s meaning, thereby improving the ecological chain of the linguistic landscape: planner (the field of authors) – translator (the field of translators) – linguistic landscape (the field of contents) – audience (the field of audiences) (Liu & Pan, 2020: 159). The core message of Example 3 is “游客止步”, which is a condensed translation as “Staff Only”. Redundancy wastes the target reader’s time, conflicts with the concise and distinct the linguistic characteristics of public signs (Liu & Pan, 2020: 159), and violates The Maxim of Quantity in the Cooperative Principle (Liu & Li, 2024: 89). To address information redundancy, it is suggested that refer to international conventions for public signs and apply reduction to eliminate unnecessary elements in the translation.

Second, issues of inappropriate wording are analyzed and revised.

Table 1 Revised Translations of Public Signs with Inappropriate Wording

Example	Source Text	Original Target Text	Target Text (Revised)
Example 8	当心落水	Warning! Falling into Water	WARNING//Deep Water
Example 9	危险水域游泳不安全	Swimming dangerous waters is unsafe	No Swimming

Continued

Example	Source Text	Original Target Text	Target Text (Revised)
Example 10	养护恢复中	MAINTENANCE RECOVERY	Under Recovery
Example 11	文明旅游 请勿在树木上悬挂吊床	To be civilized tourists, Please do not hang a hammock on the trees	Please Do Not Hang A Hammock on the Trees
Example 12	一花一草皆风景 一举一动铸文明	FLOWER AND GRASS MAKES BEAUTY PROPER BEHAVE FEELS NO GUILTY	The Plants Are for All to Enjoy//Please Protect Them

The translation problems in the above public signs are primarily caused by inappropriate word choice and differences between the Chinese and English languages. The standardized translation for Example 8 should be “Warning// Deep water”, reflecting the characteristic that Chinese frequently uses verbs while English is a noun-dominant language (Liu, 2010: 3). However, the original translation emphasizes the action of “falling into water”, which does not align with the linguistic features and expressive habits of English. Similarly, Example 9, “危险水域游泳不安全”, also suffers from this issue. The translation is a rigid and literal rendition that fails to convert the structure into a nominal form. The actual meaning of this sign is “禁止游泳”, and it should be translated into a gerund structure “No Swimming”. Example 10, “养护恢复中”, exemplifies the characteristic serial verb construction in Chinese. In contrast, English lacks this structure and requires verb phrases, coordinate structures, prepositional phrases, etc., for expression (Liu, 2015: 3-20). The consecutive occurrence of the verbs “养护” and “恢复” with a progressive relationship serves an emphatic function. For conciseness, retaining “恢复中” suffices, translated as “Under Recovery”. This also demonstrates the verb-dominant nature of Chinese versus the noun-dominant nature of English. However, when it comes to the translation “MAINTENANCE RECOVERY”, there is no such collocation in English, making the meaning unclear. Furthermore, “maintenance” is typically used for buildings, vehicles, roads, and machinery repairs; using it for the lawn is inappropriate. In Example 11, “文明旅游 请勿在树木上悬挂吊床”, the terms “文明” and “请” reflect Chinese use of a positive politeness strategy to reinforce and maintain the public’s sense of dignity or prestige. In contrast, English employs a negative politeness strategy, giving the public space and avoiding imposition (Li, 2010: 251). The phrase “To be civilized tourists” in the translation carries a strong, imperative tone. “Civilized” refers to being enlightened, as opposed to primitive or barbaric. This word can be offensive because it implies that if the public hangs hammocks, they are being barbaric or uncivilized. Therefore, it is recommended to omit this phrase. Example 12, “一花一草皆风景 一举一动铸文明”, is expressed rather euphemistically. Its actual meaning is “protect the flowers and plants for everyone’s enjoyment”, but the translation fails to convey this connotation. Following the Maxims of Quantity and Manner in the Cooperative Principle (Liu, 2002)—providing as much information as needed and being clear and orderly—the translation method of imitative translation can be adopted, rendering it as “The Plants Are for All to Enjoy//Please Protect Them”.

Third, translation problems involving deviation from the original meaning or intended purpose will be analyzed as follows.

Example 13:

ST: 参观游览方向

TT: Visited direction

Example 14:

ST: 驿站

TT: Post House

Example 15:

ST: 碧潭观鱼

TT: Bi Tan Guan Yu (View of Fish in the Green Pool)

Example 13, “参观游览方向”, guides visitors to the route for viewing the “White Clouds and Yellow Crane” mural on the first floor of the Yellow Crane Tower. It is suggested to translate it as “Mural//This Way”. Example 14, “驿站”, actually refers to a service center along the East Lake Greenway, and the translation should be corrected to “Service Center” accordingly. Example 15, “碧潭观鱼”, is in fact a garden architectural complex for visitors to view fish, so the suggested correction is “Fish Viewing Garden”. If the original translations were followed, the target-language readers may fail to comprehend the referent, violating the maxim of quality in the Cooperative Principle.

The purpose of translating public signs into English is to convey semantic information accurately and effectively, fulfilling the target-language readers’ needs for information. Therefore, English translations of public signs should be target-reader-oriented, emphasizing the reproduction of semantic information rather than formal correspondence, and should give maximum consideration to target-language readers’ comprehension and response to achieve the communicative purpose.

4.2 Avoiding Cultural Mistranslation

When using a foreign language, individuals inevitably encounter conflicts between their native language and the target language in terms of both language and culture. For example, they might select linguistic forms or communicative strategies in the foreign language based on native language habits; directly transfer words or phrases from their native language into the foreign language; or commit pragmatic failures due to cultural differences (He & Ran, 2009: 268-375). Given the significant differences in Chinese and Western historical cultures and social concepts, the public sign translations found in this field study exhibit two common problems: mechanical literal translation and excessive domestication.

4.2.1 Historical and Cultural Differences

The linguistic landscape is a crucial carrier of a city’s historical context (Chen, 2016: 157), showcasing socio-cultural connotations and revealing the status, identity, and emotional affiliation of linguistic communities (Shi, 2021: 66). Taking the Yellow Crane Tower Park as an example, the scenic area preserves numerous ancient and famous trees, inscribed steles with poetry, and classical garden landscapes. The Yellow Crane Tower itself, as a landmark of Wuhan, embodies collective memories of concern for the nation and nostalgia for home. The field investigation revealed that errors in translating Wuhan’s linguistic landscape often involve the inappropriate appropriation of target-language cultural imagery, leading to the distortion of connotative meanings.

Example 16:

ST: “曲水流觞”溪

TT: Wine Cup Floating along a Wandering Stream

The term “觥” refers to an ancient wooden or pottery wine cup. In the Oxford Dictionary, “wine” denotes fermented grape or fruit wine, distinguishing it from distilled liquor. Zhao Weidong’s (2019) research into monographs on alcoholic beverages indicates that traditional Chinese alcoholic drinks primarily include grain-based baijiu and huangjiu (distilled liquor), as well as fruit-based hongjiu (grape wine). Based on different brewing techniques, it is suggested that baijiu and huangjiu be translated as “liquor”, while hongjiu should be translated into “wine”. For the generic Chinese term “酒”, “liquor” is the most appropriate English equivalent instead of “wine”. The same domestication strategy, rendering “觥” as “wine cup”, does not align with the actual categories of alcoholic beverages in ancient China.

Example 17:

ST: 古铜顶

TT: Ancient Bronze Spire

According to the Oxford Dictionary, “spire” refers to a tall pointed structure on the top of a building, especially a church. However, “古铜顶” of the Yellow Crane Tower is actually a decorative roof element of a traditional Chinese pavilion with a pointed roof. Following the specifications for the use of English for Chinese cultural heritage, the translation of traditional Chinese roof types should prioritize internationally accepted terminology. For instance, “flush gable roof” for “硬山顶” and “overhanging gable roof” for “悬山顶”. In the examples above, “顶” is translated into “roof”, which originates from Liang Sicheng’s *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture*. Liang Sicheng frequently employed the translation method of “analogical interpretation”, using Western architectural terms to explain Chinese ones (Wang & Zheng, 2024). This conceptual matching embodies a domestication strategy. Its reasonable application can aid in introducing traditional Chinese architecture to the world. Therefore, it is recommended to translate “顶” as “roof” in accordance with the aforementioned Specifications.

4.2.2 Differences in Social Perceptions

Different societies foster diverse social perceptions. The study of linguistic landscape examines “the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signage in a given territory or region” (Landry & Bourhis, 1997: 23). It reflects linguistic power relations, as well as the social identities and statuses of ethnic groups within a specific region (Shang & Zhao, 2014b: 83).

Example 18:

ST: 老、弱、病、残、孕人群绿色通道

TT: Green channel for the elderly, Infirm, sick, disabled and pregnant

The phrase “老弱病残孕” embodies the Confucian social concept of “providing care for widowers, widows, orphans, the childless, and the disabled”, originally intended to show consideration for vulnerable groups. However, their physiological conditions are unduly highlighted. Apart from pregnancy, which is an objective state, terms like “disabled” and “infirm” involve a degree of subjective judgment and can easily reinforce stereotypes. Regarding attitudes towards physical conditions, the “*mere difference view*” posits that disabilities themselves are not inherently negative. The challenges faced by vulnerable groups stem mainly from a lack of inclusiveness in social norms and institutional

design, which prevents them from equally pursuing their unique life paths. Thus, disabilities are socially constructed as a negative state (Blake, 2020: 319). Therefore, in language choice, terms referring to vulnerable groups should be premised on upholding human equality and dignity (Sheng & Gong, 2009: 106), aiming to make their social identity visible while minimizing the use of labels that reinforce stereotypes. For instance, London Underground signs read “Priority seat // for people who are disabled, pregnant or less able to stand // Not all disabilities are visible”, which fully considers passengers’ dignity. Hence, it is suggested to use more tactful translations such as “Priority Channel” or “Courtesy Channel”, which consider target-language readers’ feelings and reflect the warmth and harmony of social interpersonal relationships.

The linguistic landscape not only serves cultural functions (Guan, Liang, & Jiang, 2025: 103) but also shapes urban sentiments, evoking specific emotional responses among community members (Shang, 2022: 41). Public signs encapsulate the characteristics and connotations of traditional Chinese culture and local culture. Therefore, it is necessary to appropriately and effectively disseminate the cultural information they contain to target-language readers (Chen, 2018: 69). Furthermore, when internationally common public signs are used in different countries, if the social value elements in the source text conflict with ideologies accepted within the target culture, it is necessary for translators to carefully consider the communicative purpose of the original text.

5 Conclusion

The United Nations has commended Wuhan for its culture-driven urban sustainable development. Peter Simon, Chairman of the Pacific Asia Travel Association, hailed Hubei’s cultural tourism as a “shining new star”. However, building a world-renowned cultural tourism destination requires not only world-class tourism resources but also the provision of first-rate international language services. A field investigation into the translation of public signs in Wuhan’s scenic areas revealed persistent fundamental grammatical and semantic errors, as well as numerous pragmatic failures arising from cultural differences. As Wuhan advances its high-level opening-up in depth, rectifying translation problems in public signs at relevant scenic areas should be prioritized. Despite multiple rectification efforts for public sign translation in Wuhan, the pervasive errors reflect deeper management problems. In response, a management mechanism should be established, featuring government leadership, regional coordination, social participation, expert support, and the use of technology. By clarifying the responsible development and management authorities, improving translation standards, establishing error correction and feedback mechanisms, and creating a nationally networked intelligent corpus, an efficient and sustainable quality management system for public sign translation can be built. This will tangibly enhance the city’s international language environment and China’s national image.

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