Subway Signs: Symbols of Cultural Norms and Values

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Abstract

Subway signs exist as multimodal displays of information in a public place for the sake of convenience to the community. Public signs in cities have significant influence on the image of a city and its underlying cultural values. In order to illustrate contrastive cultural values as displayed in public, this study presents an analysis of subway signs in Beijing, China and Sydney, Australia, taking into account the cultural diversity of both cities. In exploring similarities and differences from a cultural perspective, an analysis of the visual elements and wording used in these signs seems to indicate differences in not only language but also cultural norms and values. As such, this analysis provides insights into translating from different language systems and the symbolic nature of social processes, which are embodied by the socio-linguistic and pragmatic forces of intercultural communication. This study discusses the differences between Chinese and English translation both descriptively and pedagogically. It provides implications for teaching and assessing the translation of messages in subway signs, enhancing the understanding of the cultural norms and values that influence observers but often remain hidden in the sign itself.

Keywords: subway signs, cultural norms and values, intercultural-communication, language use

1. Introduction

Collective memory depends on physical surroundings and historic circumstance, involving a harmonious relationship between the physical place and person (Halbwachs, 1992). This attempt at mental and spatial congruence can be seen in the semiotic element of subway signs. The role of signs in our world is to raise awareness of cultural norms and
symbolic values, as discussed in various studies analyzing understandings of our visual culture (Jenks, 2014; Bal, 2003). Language is “a system of signs that express ideas”; therefore, linguistics may serve as “a model for semiology because in the case of language the arbitrary and conventional nature of the sign is especially clear” (Liu & Feng, 2007, pp. 132-133).

Signs in English have achieved global reach. The language itself has permeated our everyday life by way of education, mass media, international travel, and communication in transportation. The influence of English also has an inherent relationship with cultural power; the role of English on signage, and the translation from and into English, is ever-present and impossible to ignore (Crystal, 2003). Human language functions as a symbolic system along with dress, manners, behavior, and attitudes. These are symbols which do not have natural characteristics but do have certain social values. These values exist in the minds of the members of a society and form a subconscious underlying structure.

Urban spaces are both material and informational. Information and the circulation of immaterial knowledge are offered by the virtual world of the urban space, including public signs such as street nameplates and traffic lights. As Dennis and Pontille (2010, p. 2) state, “the public display of signs is inherent to the organizing process of urban settings: cities are made of semiotic landscapes”. Consider passengers in a public area: they follow instructions of signs to a public map to obtain designated directions on how to reach their destination. The proper translation and application of public signs could reflect an international image of environmental facilities in a city or region. The role of subway signs, as one type of public sign, is to articulate the places and information by using arrows, texts, and graphics for directions, names for stops, and important transfer details.

Language and culture are bound up with each other. Hu (2006, p. 159) asserts that “[l]anguage is an indispensable carrier of culture. Culture finds a better representation through language use”. Eugene Nida concludes that there exists a close relationship between language and culture. Hu (2006, p. 163) summarizes Nida’s conclusion and states that “[i]f we want to do a good job in cross-cultural communication, there are five types of sub-culture we should be fully aware of: 1) ecological culture; 2) linguistic culture; 3) religious culture; 4) material culture; and 5) social culture”. His notion places emphasis on the significance of culture in translation. Moreover, he claims that a translator should take practical aspects beyond linguistics, like culture, into account.

Theoretically, the relationship between language and culture could be traced from language use in public signs, which would be justified and supported by many theories, including functionalism—examples being Jakobson’s interpretation for language as a semiotic system and Halliday’s concept for the metafunctions of language. Accordingly, the notions of functionalism could be taken and applied to interpret the language use of public signs. These notions indicate that the perspectives of the function and communication of subway signs would influence the studies on their language use and
Studies on public signs have begun comparatively late in China. The *First National Public Signs Translation Seminar* was held in September, 2005, in the Beijing Foreign Studies University. This stands as the official start of systematic research on public sign translation in China. Since that time, studies on public signs have focused on their classification (Yang, 2012), major problems found in Chinese-English translation of public signs (Ma, 2012), the present situation of incorrect English translation of Chinese public signs (Dong & Lu, 2014; He, 2006), further reiteration of Functionalist Translation Theory (Luo, 2017), stylistic convention (simplicity, conventionality and intertextuality) of translation (Luo & Li, 2006), cultural and symbolic dimensions of subway signs (Denis & Pontille, 2014), cultural scripts of public signs (Wierzbicka, 1998), and practical properties of signs at work (Denis & Pontille, 2010). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into the details of each of the aforementioned studies, their presence in academic literature is evidence that further exploring the significance of the translation of public signs from various perspectives is a growing area of interest.

The aforementioned studies bring into focus the translation of public signs, which uphold the theory of metafunctions as a fundamental theoretical foundation. However, the study of subway signs has not yet become a central issue in the field of public sign research, even though the subway systems have been developing in Beijing and other cities in China at a rapid pace. Thus, this study aims to explore the nature of cultural values reflected by subway signs in Beijing, and to compare the translations by examining similar subway signs in the city of Sydney, Australia as references. Similarities and differences are analyzed for the language features of subway signs used in these two cities.

### 2. Literature Review

#### 2.1 Theoretical background

Language can be interpreted just as any other semiotic system used for communicating both complex and simple ideas. Although communication can be generally conceptualized as referential, linguists typically discuss the function of language in a more abstract way (Jackobson, in Hu, 2006). The language used in subway signs lays emphasis on imperative or declarative clauses and complete sentences sometimes translated from one language to another. Bassnett and Harish (2012, p. 2) declare that “(v)ery obviously: translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum […] It is part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer. Moreover, translation is a highly manipulative activity […] across linguistic and cultural boundaries”. This notion indicates that the element of culture has become an indispensable aspect and needs to be taken into consideration when carrying out translation activities.
2.2 Language and culture

Language and culture are interwoven with each other. Hu (2006, pp. 303-304) supports this idea by using Firth’s notion, regarding “language as a social process, as a means of social life, rather than simply as a set of agreed-upon semiotics and signs. […] Firth attempted to integrate linguistic studies with sociological studies because human beings are inseparable from cultural values, and language is an important part of cultural values”. Saussure is famous for saying that language is a system of signs used to express ideas, but more importantly, he enables us to visualize the ways in which signs are interpreted in society as a science in itself: semiology (Liu & Feng, 2007). Saussure mentions that the interpretation of signs is to help construct meaning, which includes the components of signified and signifier. Subway signs feature a kind of language for the specific purpose of transmitting information in public places for the sake of convenience and the public and management.

Culture is indispensable in a semiotic system. Geertz (1973) claims that culture is essentially a semiotic system, a system of symbolic meanings. Wierzbicka (1998) claims that spoken features in a given community are composed of a behavioral manifestation of a tacit system regarded as cultural rules, or cultural scripts in order to better understand the ways of speaking in a society. Hence, a semiotic view of culture aligns with the definition of language: language is actually a system of signs used to voice oneself. “Besides having cultural and symbolic dimensions, most of them are ‘performative’ […] Cities are partially performed by semiotic landscapes, made up of monumental lettering as well as more mundane graphical artifacts such as traffic lights, road markings, and mandatory signs” (Denis & Pontille, 2014, p. 3). Considering these insights, it is possible to view passengers as becoming a temporary community when they are taking the subway, where they spend time asking others and checking signs for directions and announcements.

Barry Gray, the president of the 145th Technical Committee of International Standard Organization, proposed a definition of signs at the International Symposium of City Guiding and Graphic Symbols hosted in Beijing in May 2006. He said that signs are anything from the simplest way of finding information to the technically sophisticated communication of a message. Signs affect everybody: shoppers, visitors, drivers, etc., whether in the course of business or pleasure. This interpretation is significantly different from the previous one proposed by Liu and Feng (2007), etc. However, both definitions agree on the concept that any written information involved with food, shelter, transportation, and entertainment demonstrated in the public, and serving the public, can be regarded as a public sign. Subway signs are one of the components of this linguistic landscape of public signs.

According to Jakobson’s (1959) principles for translation, interpretation of a verbal sign can happen in three ways: intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic. Intersemiotic lays emphasis on words, arguing that overall message should be conveyed, hence, the translator has to focus on the information being delivered. Intralingual translation usually
takes place within the same language; interlingual translation is carried out within a different language by replacing a verbal sign with another sign. Based on these notions, public signs can be regarded as one way of inter-semiotic: to interpret the traffic signs with language; or, language is used to interpret the information or message carried by the signs. Luo (2017) supports that translation has to be concerned with the exchange and communication of human beings’ cultural activities; thus, bilingual public signs can also be considered inter-lingual translation (such as translating Chinese into English). As is widely acknowledged, language presents culture, and culture is inherited in language. Hence, translation actually functions as a kind of cultural activity.

Based on the current state of translation and studies concerning translation, Wang (2001) proposes that, in an age of globalization, the function of translation should turn from literal rendition on the inter-linguistics level to cultural interpretation and representation on the intercultural level. This again affirms that language and culture are intertwined. Accordingly, the translation of subway signs from Chinese into English should take the English and Chinese cultures that are embedded within the respective languages into consideration, and not merely focus on language use.

In summary, language, culture, and society all associate and interact with each other. They are embodied by certain social norms and values. Public signs serve as a special language form employed in a specific context or language community, like subway signs.

2.3 Studies on subway signs
Subway signs are typically designed to tell passengers about their location, local specialties advertisements, public announcements, or even state ongoing local activities.

Studies on public signs have involved classifying them into 11 types, including: directory signs, traffic signs, fire signs, caution signs, warning signs, etc. Under the category of traffic signs, there are: road traffic, expressway, pedestrian traffic, and parking regulations (Yang, 2012). Research has focused on public transportation; for example, based on the results obtained from a 5-year thorough investigation of public signs, Yang (2012) investigated Chinese public signs, taking American public sign translation as reference. Yang put forward improvement measures and a standardized translation in this field. This study is unprecedented in its attempts to set a standard for travel and sport public signs in China. Wang and Lu (2007) claim that any publicized information related to basic necessities of life for the public could be regarded as the scope of public signage, which, in his view, could be classified as 12 types, including signs of public utilities, communication, and transportation. Subway signs belong to the category of traffic signs. As the language of these signs has informative and instructive characteristics, language use for subway is unique to other types and functions of language. Despite their contribution to the field, the two studies above did not give a thorough investigation of the language used and translation of subway signs.

Based on the case of Chongqing, Ma (2012) explored some major problems in Chinese-English translation of public signs. The problems of public signage translation
can be categorized as grammatical errors, incorrectly-used words, ‘Chinglish’, ambiguous meaning, etc. This study summarized the translation problems that occurred in a single city and put forward some suggestions. However, Ma only looked at public sign translation from the surface without exploring it in detail, digging deeper into the cultural norms and values that can be gleaned from the study of signs.

With the translation principles of Tytler as a basis, Dong and Lu (2014) analyzed the present situation of incorrect English translation on Chinese public signs. The subway signs highlighted in this study are too few to form a universal representation; however, after the study of the present situation of public signs in China, He (2006) discussed types of texts of public signs, and then came up with the strategy of communicative translation; understanding its formative and functional significance would be essential to better understand public signs. These studies involved discussion of signs of advertisement, street signs, and travel signs. There was little mention about language translation of subway signs without involving the embedded cultural values.

2.4 Research questions
The focus of this study is the features of English-Chinese subway sign translation, and to ascertain cross-cultural similarities and differences in the use of language. To serve this end, this paper will center on addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the language features of subway signs?
2. To what extent are cultural norms and values reflected in subway signs?

Natural data were selected randomly from personal collections and to provide relevant and convincing supporting details for the above research questions. It is a limitation of the study that the photos were not taken systematically, or that exact matches (of intended meaning) could not be obtained in both Sydney and Beijing. However, the authors feel that there is enough evidence to support the implications drawn as a preliminary look into subway signs as serving more than just their practical functions but also as potential symbols of cultural norms and values.

3. Research Design and Methodology
This research focuses on exploring the subway signs by collecting data from fieldwork and participant observation within both Sydney and Beijing. Special attention has been given to the observation of public signs and photographic methods. The researcher took photos of the signs in both subways in person. This approach allows the researcher to study the features of language use between two cities from first-hand experience. In addition, the researcher was able to assess their translation into Chinese from a linguistic aspect, analyzing cultural knowledge that is usually hidden so as to promote intercultural communication and awareness.
3.1 Data collection
There are in total 137 copies of graphics taken from subway signs in both cities. Among them, graphics for signs in Sydney were taken in the year of 2014, and graphics for signs in Beijing were taken in 2015 and 2017. The number of graphics collected in Beijing is slightly higher than that in Sydney due to convenience sampling. From the author’s point of view, the data comprised of so many close matches, however she feels that this is not an issue since not all the images in the Analysis were used (please see table 3.1).

Because of the different language systems, there is not an identical layout or language use for signs in both subway systems; however, the function of signs in both cities share similarities with direction, intention of warning or prohibition, and public reminders.

Table 3.1 Collected data-background information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of city</th>
<th>Number of signs taken</th>
<th>Subway line</th>
<th>Traveling route</th>
<th>Proficiency level</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>From Sydney to the Macquarie University station</td>
<td>Central Station &amp; Northern Line</td>
<td>English-speaking country</td>
<td>A cosmopolitan city (Australia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>From Wangfujing to Yuanmingyuan Station</td>
<td>Line 4 &amp; Line 2</td>
<td>Chinese-speaking country</td>
<td>A cosmopolitan city (China)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Data analysis
The analytical framework of the functional features of subway signs in this study is adapted from a classification that was proposed by Yang (2012) and Wang and Lu (2007) and based on subway signage practices from both cities. The coding categories are carried out through analysis of the English version and its parallel Chinese translation. Categories of public signs refer to the provided information of direction, prohibition, and fire signs for the public. Having identified the signs used in both subways, the analytical framework for this study is classified in a threefold manner:

1. Directory signs: refers to signs providing passengers with information to show their location and the direction where they would like to go.
2. Signs of prohibition: refers to the prohibition of dangerous articles when entering the subway, or some activities that are not permitted, including warning and caution signs.
3. Fire signs: refers to an illuminated sign that provides information to prevent fire or gives warning or procedure in case of fire.

4. Findings
4.1 Directory signs
These signs are common in subways; for example, signs for reception, making an inquiry
of direction, ticketing, information texts such as “Help!” or “Information”, or showing the way to the toilet, the next stop, the arrival of the next train, etc. A special group of signage that belongs to categories of direction are operational procedure signs for when an emergency occurs. The signs below are reminders of procedure in case of an emergency situation. Another way to show direction is using visual signs by digital media to arouse passengers’ attention, displaying information such as time and the arrival of the next (See figures 4.1-4.2).

Figure 4.1 Emergency procedure from Sydney subway

![Emergency procedure from Sydney subway](image)

Figure 4.2 Emergency procedure from Beijing subway

![Emergency procedure from Beijing subway](image)

The figures of 4.1 and 4.2 show the language used for emergency procedure in both cities’ subway signs. In both languages, imperative forms and verbal phrases are used to state the procedure as commands. However, the subway signs in Sydney is presented with graphics, which are used to declare their purpose, while there are no graphics for the Chinese sign. In the Chinese sign, punctuation such as a commas or quotation marks are used in both the Chinese and English versions of the text. Interestingly, not a single punctuation mark is used in the English sign from the Sydney subway, even if from a
grammatical perspective it may require a comma before “move to another carriage” in the first step.

In the Sydney subway signs, the sentence pattern and lexical use are concise and easy to understand with graphics to clearly demonstrate the four steps in case of an emergency; only the graphic for the second step is marked in red to highlight the importance for passengers to ask for help from the crew. The background color is green, which is to make passengers feel calm during an emergency. The graphics used are to aid in understanding the procedure together with the language used. Meanwhile, the Chinese version has instructions for an emergency procedure. Three steps are arranged to interpret the procedure, with red as a background color. Both Chinese and English versions are written in white with bold type characteristics.

Digital media in the two subways show the date, the time left for the next train, the name of the current stop as well as the name for the next one, and (in the Beijing subway) the logo and name of the subway system. For example, the next train is to Xizhimen, and it will arrive in five minutes; on the top of the screen there is text that reads “May 18, 2017 Thursday” and the words “Welcome to the Beijing Metro”. TV programs play on the digital screen; for example, the football match in the screen above. Similar information could be found in the timetable for the Sydney subway (see figures 4.3-4.4).

Figure 4.3 Timetable for the Beijing subway

![Figure 4.3 Timetable for the Beijing subway](image)

Figure 4.4 Timetable for the Sydney subway

![Figure 4.4 Timetable for the Sydney subway](image)
Similarly, some seats are arranged for special purposes; the text is translated with pictures for support as “Seats reserved for seniors, children, pregnant women, the sick and the disabled” in line 2, while in line 4 the translation has changed into “Seat for passengers in need” but is collocated with pictures of seniors, children or children accompanied by an adult, pregnant women, and the disabled. In the subway sign of Sydney, a statement titled “Courtesy seat” says: “Please offer this seat if someone needs it more” and goes with two images indicating a woman with a baby in her arms and a person with a cane.

Figures 4.5 and 4.6 are reminders for passengers when taking escalators, stairs, and ramps. The pictures do not have much difference between each other. When on the escalators, stairs, and ramps, the signs of Sydney subway reads “Keep to left”, while figure 4.6 from subway signs of Beijing shows “Keep right”. In Yang’s study (2012) on public signs in transportation, phrases like “Keep right” also occur. It can be observed that the letter “h” in “keep right” on the subway sign from Beijing has been wrongly printed or mistyped as a “u”.

Figure 4.5 Sign with escalator instructions (Sydney subway)

Figure 4.6 Sign with escalator instructions (Beijing subway)

4.2 Signs of prohibition

Signs of prohibition are composed of warning and caution signs, which are mandatory-to-post for the public. Interesting findings show that signs of warning and caution in the Sydney subway are marked with bold headlines of “Warning” or “Caution” in a
triangular form with text, while there is no bold headline but only bilingual text in signs of prohibition in the Beijing subway. Bilingual signs in Beijing’s subway are printed with white bold words collocated with a large red background color to demonstrate their emphasis and importance (see figures 4.7-4.9).

The same warnings are posted on the top of the double doors. In order to place emphasis on the important or dangerous consequence, bolder words are printed on the right side together with a large triangle collocated with an exclamation mark at the center. This type of sign is compulsory for passengers to follow, according to the instructions given. These words are printed with color and graphics on both sides of the doors to catch passengers’ attention and to facilitate the observance of the public order required.

Figure 4.7 Signs on the door of the subway in Sydney

![Figure 4.7 Signs on the door of the subway in Sydney](image1)

Figure 4.8 Caution signs in Sydney subway

Figure 4.9 Signs on a door in Beijing subway

![Figure 4.8 Caution signs in Sydney subway](image2)

![Figure 4.9 Signs on a door in Beijing subway](image3)
The translations for signs used in newly-built subways in Beijing have different colors and texts than older ones have. For example, in signs to remind passengers not to lean on the door: the translation for line 2 (the first generation of subway built in Beijing) uses the phrase “Keep clear of the door” while in line 4 (a newly-built subway) the language has become “Please stand clear of doors”, without the “the”. The similarity is that both languages are using some of the same verbs frequently, such as lean, keep, force, watch, and mind. In addition, subway signs of Beijing are displayed with words and pictures, making the signs vivid and clear to understand. Phrases are also used without definite articles “The” in the Sydney subway system, such as “Do Not Lean on Doors”, or “Keep clear of moving doors”.

Figure 4.10 Signs of dangerous articles prohibited in Beijing’s subway

![Figure 4.10](image1.png)

Figure 4.11 Signs for prohibited goods and activities in the Sydney subway system

![Figure 4.11](image2.png)

There is a difference in the subway signs of Sydney which is that both text and graphics are presented together with the consequence of violation; i.e. a person smoking in the subway system would be fined $1000. The same format for prohibited goods and activities such as eating or drinking is used, too (with an interesting finding that passengers are not allowed to bring durian onto a carriage). CCTV (Closed Circuit
Television) is in operation (see figure 4.11). However, signs in Beijing subway are printed only and no fine is shown in the phrases for prohibited goods or behaviors like “No smoking” (see figures 4.9-4.11).

4.3 Fire signs

By observing graphics and texts printed on fire signs, along with bright colors such as red or yellow for the background color and bold letters printed in white, we can see they serve as a deterrent even if there are no “warning” phrases printed on them.

These signs share similar intentions and functions, that is, to remind passengers of regulatory warnings when they take the subway. Figure 4.12, although it is not intended to be taken seriously, shows the same feature as traditional fire signs in Sydney: all words are written in capital letters, whether it is a function or content word; while for the words in the signs in Beijing, only the first letter of the sentence is capitalized. Fire signs in the Sydney subway are marked with words and pictures which make the signs vivid and clear to understand, even making light of the situation by including bits of comedy rather than seriousness. Figure 4.13 shows that there are Chinese words that demonstrate the consequences of certain hypothetical acts in violation of a given regulation but no parallel English version is displayed. The sign in figure 4.13 could be considered a sign of prohibition; however, its design is indicative of the fire signs intended to warn people in Beijing.

Figure 4.12 Sarcastic fire signs in the Sydney subway

Figure 4.13 Signs for a fire hose in the Beijing subway


5. Discussion

This study mainly explores cultural values reflected in subway signs collected from the cities of Beijing and Sydney, completing an analysis from the perspective of intercultural communication. The research results show that the subway signs present a symbolic account of social attitudes and cultural values. The wordings in the signs indicate that the English translation for subway signs of Beijing have features in a typical Chinese style. In other words, by comparison with an English usage for Sydney subway, the English translation (Chinese is translated into English) in Beijing subway tends to feature more wording and prefers using function words, such as article “the”. This finding is consistent with that found in Yang’s study (2012).

Different language systems affect the language structure. In directory signs, there are no accompanying graphics in the signs of the Beijing subway. Moreover, as for the English translation of the signs used in Beijing, the length of text is longer than that used in the Sydney signs, making the text a bit long and tedious to follow, which would be inconvenient during an emergency context. Subway signs with only text but no graphics would seem to lessen the effectiveness and quality of the signs. Bronaft, Dobrow and O’Hanlon (1976) claim that the poor legibility of signs in subway system tends to make it difficult for passersby to develop quickly or easily a permanent cognitive information process of unfamiliar parts of the system. Therefore, social interaction could be better mediated through the legibility of public signs, and any language used should be clear, concise, and easy to understand. In order to meet these requirements, these signs should not use sentences but short phrases instead.

Directory signs show that the English translation in subway of Beijing (please refer to figure 4.2) feature as being more verbose, while the English language used in subway sign of Sydney, equipped with pictures, is explicit and more readily understood. While in the Chinese signs, the background is in red to imply danger and urgency, as well as having an eye-catching effect. In caution signs, an interesting finding is that the words used are “Keep to left” in Sydney subway, while “Keep right” and “Stand on right” are used in Beijing subway. A preliminary conclusion can be drawn that in Australia, the people normally drive on the left side of a road, but in some Asian countries and regions, including China, the traffic flow for vehicles is on the right side. Accordingly, even if taking an escalator, the passengers are required to walk on the left in Sydney and on the right in Beijing. Hence, the subway’s public signs reflect assumed cultural norms for public movement.

Ideology may be mirrored in language used. A parallel reminder in Chinese is to use complementary words to emphasize that these facilities are only to be used in case of an emergency, or else, there will be punishment, but also that the nature of the punishment is presented as a means to warn the public that someone in violation of the regulation must bear the consequences. The cultural assumptions hidden behind the phrases are diversified. The management supervises the passengers, and their relationship has become
one of the superior to a subordinate. These signs at least suggest that they are not frozen formulae but are upheld with semantic implications.

Color culture could be reflected in signs as well. This could be present in the cultural difference of color terms in different countries. A red box with text in white for emergency use could mean that the color “red” in China not only refers to good luck or fortune, but also refers to situations of “danger” or “emergency”. However, colors are not only chosen for cultural reasons. We must acknowledge that ‘emergency’ colors are chosen for ease of visibility, too. Pictures or graphics designed with language would help make it clear to understand and to explain the emergency procedure. One similarity for both versions is the use of a mandatory hue to state significance. Red is associated with danger in Western culture as well as Chinese culture. In nature, bright colors such as red on berries, leaves, and insects often indicate poison or danger; so, nature even has designated colors to alert potential victims. Humans have mimicked these natural cues and transferred them to our urban settings since these cues are part of our evolutionary heritage and we react to them unconsciously. Suggestions for designated graphics should be arranged for emergency signage, in particular, the specific situational procedures of what to do in the event of an emergency. As Halbwachs (1992, p. 2) states, “Spatial images play [an] important role in the collective memory”. Text with graphics could help activate a person’s collective memory to the semiotic element of subway signs, allowing people to remember their instructions in an emergency situation. The texts, graphics, and color displayed could better help people to “strongly articulate spatial configurations and informational devices” (Lash & Urry, 1994, in Dennis & Pontille, 2010), and could calm them down and aid them to take action and follow the emergency procedure instructions. Red as a background color and imperative tone for emergency procedures states the importance and seriousness of the text. Juhlin and Dormark (2008) said that, strictly speaking, a socio-semiotic sign system should categorize the official signs as one of the components.

Language use in warning signs supports the research that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) users are inclined towards overuse of function words in writing, in particular, the overuse of the definite article “the”; this finding echoes with results of studies (Wei, 2013; Liang, Li & Xu, 2013; Yang, 2012). In their empirical studies, the first 50 most frequent items in corpora are function words, particularly, the occurrence of the definite article “the”, followed by “a” and “an”. In the English used in subway signs of Sydney, there is no “the” in the sentence “Do Not Lean on Door” and “Do not force doors”. Accordingly, the article “the” may be considered unnecessary in the Chinese version “Keep Clear of the Door”. In addition, these sentences are in the imperative form to indicate information of warning and command. English language patterns “No-ing /Do Not/ (be) prohibited” are frequently used to express information functioning as a warning. Thus, it is necessary to place emphasis on employing appropriate and conventional sentence structure when translating in order to present the original meaning and intent. Signs also guarantee reference to a certain person or issue and both act as the addresser and
the addressee (Zhang, 2016). These ongoing changes suggest that a determiner is not perceived as semantically empty.

Furthermore, the wide use of “Please” in imperative sentences is to present information politely to the passengers. In this context, the passengers and the authorities belong to the same community, which narrows down the distance between the managing authorities and the passengers. The increasing usage of “Please” in imperative sentences to show a polite request or respect for the passengers to abide by the principle indicates significant changes in interpersonal relations in “the direction of more egalitarian informality” (Clyne, 1995, in Wierzbicka, 1998, p. 5). In addition, the ongoing changes are not a frozen but rooted in Chinese culture, which upholds the concept of harmony as central to its social ideology. The word “Please” used in a sentence has taken on a more euphemistic tone.

The idea of linguistic decision of thought has had tremendous influence on language users’ choices when talking about the role of language and thought. According to Hu’s understanding (2006, p. 162), the Sapir and Whorf Hypothesis refers to “Our language helps mould our way of thinking and, consequently, different languages may probably express speakers’ unique ways of understanding the world”. According to this hypothesis, it seems that native language is in a rooted position and is spontaneously used to express a speaker’s concept. It should be noted that this hypothesis has been contested with two versions: a strong version and a weak version. According to this hypothesis, the strong version implies that language has decisive role to shape our thinking patterns, while the weak version suggests that “there is a correlation between language, culture, and thought” (ibid.). According to the weak version, when we would like to express novel ideas or experiences, our immediate culture, language and thought would interplay with each other spontaneously.

As noted in previous sections of this paper, it is widely acknowledged that language and culture are mutually interdependent and reflective of one another. The interaction between language and culture reflects the influence of a certain socioeconomic and cultural background. Euphemism is a universal language and cultural phenomenon which presents psychosocial aspects that are reflected in the language. The pursuit of civilized language has become necessary and significant. Thus, to employ euphemism in human interaction has become one kind of moral excellence and realization of the civilization of language. For example, those signs used for seats served for specific purpose as “Courtesy seats” instead of “Seats for the disabled”, are also the product of politeness, symbolic of the advancement of civilization in modern times.

The translation of intertextuality has not yet been established in subway signs. Among stylistic convention, features of simplicity and conventionality have been widely acknowledged by the public; such signs as “No smoking” or “No eating or drinking” are only several simple words but uphold a mandatory effect or order, implying that anyone who violates the rules must suffer the consequences of the action. However, intertextuality-oriented translation needs to be further developed in translating subway
signs. For example, translation of emergency signs could combine text and graphics. In this way, the sentence would draw a reader’s attention more quickly and effectively than when in a regular, standard print sentence structure.

In summary, subway signs not only interpret information but also embody a country’s culture. Accurate and authentic translation of subway culture is crucial to represent an image of and a window into a city. The development and improvement of the economic and international status of China as part of an international community has garnered the attention of many international visitors to China. As an indispensable transportation means in cities, the subway plays a vital role for travelers’ convenience, and the subway also serves as a channel to reflect the local and national culture, economic strength, and international presence of a city. The translation and wordings of subway signs therefore become an effective way to present embedded cultural values.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study contributes to the existing knowledge on the language use and translation of subway signs in both Sydney and Beijing. The results reveal that language and culture would affect the manner of translation, and that text and graphics are specially used in subway signs to create harmony and convenience for the public in a special language community. Bilingual public signs could better help international visitors understand China and her culture, as well as facilitate cross-cultural communication. Public signs function as informing, warning, and directing media to help passengers determine their orientation and destination.

The limitations in the design of this study are as follows. The source text is not big enough to be representative on a large scale. Due to the space limitations of this paper, only three types of signs are discussed in detail. More signs could be collected and presented in future studies, such as different versions for the same classification. Despite the limitations, our understanding about the influence of language and culture on translation could shed light on the current research of subway signage in a specific language context.

Firstly, signage categorization has not yet been standardized in the Beijing subway system. A classification of signs is necessary to implement in order to provide a clear understanding and to differentiate between the proper use of text and graphics of subway signs. A tentative suggestion is to add some headwords along with graphics to match the text for a significant sign, such as setting “Warning” with an exclamation mark beside the words. Pedagogically, classifying the euphemism of language used in signs into types of directory signs would be beneficial. In addition, signs related to specific smells, such as the aroma of durians, could be classified into public prohibition signs; public signs and their translations could be categorized into transportation English which could then be developed in schools, colleges or universities as a subject in English for Specific Purposes (ESP).
Secondly, when translating the signs, it is not only necessary for the planners and designers to consider the aesthetic value of the signs but also to integrate cultural and conventional knowledge. This could make travelers, in particular native English users, feel at ease when determining their locations by direction from the signs.

Thirdly, English instructors and translators need to improve language training and professional knowledge of translation. There is a definite need to understand and appreciate cultural conventions in order to improve intercultural communicative competence. The effectiveness of trained or instructed feedback is of value for the quality of translation. To learn and connect internal standards in translation for public signs in order to arouse awareness for those who need to refer to public signs, they have to work as envoys to publicize the knowledge of culture and ways of translation of public signs to the public and for international visitors.

Finally, it is suggested that international seminars, conferences, or symposiums should be organized to discuss studies on the translation or standardization of public signs to know more about international conventions and to understand our progress on translation in the field. Afterwards, a team of experts and translators could be organized to launch a model for standardizing translation activities for public signs.

References


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