

An Analysis of the Current Situation of English Translation of Library Public Signs: Case Study of Libraries in Xi'an

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How to cite this paper: Li, J. Y., & Wu, J. Y. (2026). An Analysis of the Current Situation of English Translation of Library Public Signs: Case Study of Libraries in Xi'an. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 14, 769-782.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2026.148044>

Received: July 25, 2026

Accepted: August 24, 2026

Published: August 27, 2026

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Abstract

Public signs refer to written information displayed in public spaces, which serve to prompt, guide, warn or restrict public conduct and reflect the cultural civilization and image of a region to a certain extent. From the perspective of Peter Newmark's communicative translation theory, this study analyzes English translations of public signs collected from provincial, municipal and university libraries in Xi'an. In accordance with national standards for the functional classification of public sign texts, this study categorizes library public signs into four types: facility information, warning information, prohibitory information, and directive information. It systematically sorts out prevalent defects in existing English translations from linguistic, pragmatic and normative dimension. This research aims to optimize the translation quality of library public signs, deliver better services to foreign readers, strike a balance between information transmission and behavioral guidance, and embody the humanistic care of public cultural venues.

Keywords

Public Signs Translation, Linguistic Landscape, Communicative Translation, Text Typology

1. Introduction

As a vital component of urban linguistic landscape, public signs exert a profound influence on international exchange in Xi'an, an international metropolis. The quality of bilingual public signs sets higher standards for the standardization of public written discourse. Home to numerous universities, libraries function as core public cultural institutions and symbolic representatives of Xi'an's urban im-

age (Liu & Yang, 2015). Therefore, accurate, standardized English rendering of library public signs carries great practical significance for elevating the city's cultural soft power and offering inclusive services to foreign readers.

Combining field investigation, comparative analysis and literature research, this study selects provincial public libraries, municipal libraries and university libraries of various types as research subjects. While this selection covers the primary categories of public and academic libraries in Xi'an and provides substantial data, the findings and conclusions are primarily applicable to these surveyed institutions. Guided by Newmark's communicative translation theory, this study explores and expands the theoretical value of this framework for library public sign translation. By analyzing defective translated examples collected from multiple Xi'an libraries, this study puts forward operable optimization suggestions to improve international service standards of libraries and upgrade the city's public linguistic landscape.

2. Theoretical Foundation

Based on stylistic and textual differences, Peter Newmark classified texts into three categories: expressive text, informative text and vocative text (Newmark, 1981). Among these text types, "Semantic translation is used for 'expressive' texts, communicative for 'informative' and 'vocative' texts" (Newmark, 1988). Expressive texts include literary works and authoritative writings, centering on the author's self-expression. Informative texts such as scientific reports and textbooks focus on delivering objective facts. Vocative texts cover publicity materials and similar writings, taking target readers as the core and aiming to stir readers' emotions and adjust their behaviors.

Library public signs are composite texts integrating informative and vocative functions. On one hand, they deliver objective factual information such as floor layouts and borrowing rules; on the other hand, they employ restrictive expressions to regulate readers' conduct and maintain library order. Translators shall adjust translation strategies flexibly according to dominant textual functions to secure accurate information delivery and effective behavioral persuasion.

Newmark holds that different text types correspond to distinct translation approaches. Communicative translation centers on target audiences, with its core goal of generating equivalent reading and emotional responses among target readers as those experienced by source-text readers. Its renderings read smooth, straightforward and conform to target linguistic conventions; when confronting obscure content, translators may adopt general umbrella terms for simplification, which perfectly matches the textual attributes of public signs. Newmark further clarifies the applicable scope of communicative translation, stating that standardized public notices are typical text types suitable for this approach (Newmark, 1981). He also argues that texts dominated by vocative functions should be processed with extended translation units ranging from single paragraphs up to complete texts. For public sign translation, translators shall treat each complete sign as an inte-

grated translation unit. Within the premise of retaining core information, sentence structures and logical sequences can be restructured to boost readability and acceptability among target readers.

3. Classification and Function of Library Public Signs

As a showcase of urban cultural soft power, library public signs attach great importance to functional expression. Based on the national standard *Guidelines for the use of English in public service areas—Part 1: General rules* (GB/T 30240.1—2013), this study classifies library public signs into four functional categories: facility information, warning notices, prohibitory regulations and directional instructions.

Facility information public signs primarily provide basic service descriptions, enabling readers—especially foreign users—to quickly locate service zones and improve venue utilization efficiency. Functionally, they belong to the informative-dominant type with weak vocative effects, focusing on presenting objective venue facts. Such signs convey straightforward guidance for readers to access library resources conveniently. For examples, 开馆时间 (Open), 阅览室 (Reading Room), 读者服务处 (Reader Services), 自修区 (Self-Study Area).

Warning signs occupy a pivotal position in library public sign systems. Their core function is to remind readers of potential hazards and regulate their behaviors for personal safety (Chen, 2011). Functionally, they feature strong vocative power with subordinate informative content. Rather than merely stating facts, they prioritize alerting readers and prompting risk-avoidance conduct. For examples, 小心地滑 (CAUTION WET FLOOR), 小心台阶 (MIND THE STEP), 保管好财物 (TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOUR BELONGINGS), 您已进入监控区域 (MONITORING AREA).

Prohibitory public signs standardize readers' conduct and safeguard on-site order by clarifying behavioral boundaries within library spaces. Functionally, they are vocative-oriented texts with limited informative value. Restrictive wording is adopted to restrain improper behaviors and prevent resource damage or chaotic reading environments. For examples, 请勿抛物 (NO LITTERING), 请勿攀爬 (NO CLIMBING), 禁止吸烟 (NO SMOKING), 禁止饮食 (NO FOOD OR DRINK).

Indicating signs guide readers' behaviors and streamline public service procedures. They fall into the vocative-dominant text category with weak informative functions. Different from outright prohibitions, they adopt imperative yet polite wording to inform readers of appropriate conduct (Luo & Li, 2006). For examples, 请在一米线外排队等候 (Keep One Meter Apart And Line Up In Order), 阅后请放回原处 (Place On Shelf After Reading), 请将电子产品调到静音状态 (Turn Off Your Cell Phone Or Tune It To Silence), 本区域文献不外借 (Local Collection: Library Use Only).

This chapter systematically sorts out the textual properties and inherent characteristics of four types of public signs based on functional differences, laying a

comparative benchmark for identifying translational deviations and analyzing error causes in practical sign translation.

4. Analysis of Common Translation Errors in Library Public Signs

After sorting out collected bilingual corpus from Xi'an libraries, this study summarizes frequent translational errors in public sign English renderings. Guided by communicative translation theory, such errors are categorized into three dimensions: linguistic level, pragmatic level and normative level.

4.1. Linguistic Level

Linguistic errors constitute the most intuitive and fundamental problems in library public signs, mostly arising from translators' insufficient linguistic competence or careless typesetting during sign production, covering spelling, grammar and lexical misusage.

The primary errors in the English translation of public signs lie at the linguistic level, among which spelling mistakes constitute the most fundamental type. (Liu & Yang 2015). As illustrated by the 3rd-floor floor plan (see **Figure 1**), this facility-informative public sign only objectively marks each reading area in the library to deliver location information without any persuasive or restrictive functions. Nevertheless, spelling oversights such as redundant letters appear in the words "Boooks". Such basic linguistic faults hinder foreign readers' identification of collection zones and greatly reduce the information transmission efficiency of directional signage. An elevator warning in a local university library wrote "Overloading is Prohibiteed" with an extra letter "e"; another notice mistook "Earthquake" for "Earthquak" by omitting one letter (see **Figure 2**). Though these spelling errors appear minor, they confuse foreign readers, damage the cultural image of libraries, weaken the rigor of safety alerts, and delay readers' quick recognition of hazard reminders. Rigorous proofreading prior to printing is essential to completely eliminate such flaws.



Figure 1. Floor guide sign.



Figure 2. Elevator warning signs.

Grammatical errors are a common issue among non-native English speakers, which mainly stem from rigidly copying Chinese sentence structures without adjusting English syntactic rules (Xu, 2019). Shaanxi Provincial Library translated “禁止喧哗” into “No Noisy”. The fixed collocation “No + Noun” requires nominal words, while “noisy” is an adjective; the standard version should be “No Noise” (see Figure 3). This sentence pattern is widely adopted for warning expressions in English. Translators should apply appropriate sentence structures to clearly convey the original meaning and fully realize the warning function of the source text (Niu, 2007). “读者餐厅” was rendered as “READER’S RESTAURANT”. Singular possessive form violates English conventions, which should be revised to “Readers’ Restaurant” or “Readers’ Cafeteria” (see Figure 4). “男洗手间” was written as “Man toilet” without possessive markers and standard capitalization, the correct translation being “Men’s Room” (see Figure 5). These two signs are facility-informative public signs. “禁止饮食” was translated as “NO EAT FOOD”, violating fixed English prohibitory structures and ought to be changed to “No Eating or Drinking” (see Figure 6).



Figure 3. Sign with grammatical error.



Figure 4. Sign with possessive error.



Figure 5. Sign with incorrect wording.



Figure 6. Sign with syntactic error.

Improper word choice originates from confusing synonyms or misjudging contextual connotations. “操作间” was translated as “Operating Room”. The term “Operating Room” exclusively refers to hospital surgery wards in English and triggers unnecessary panic. This sign is a facility-informative public sign that only marks the staff-only workspace. The appropriate equivalents are “Workroom” or “Staff Room” (see Figure 7). “开水房” was rendered as “BOILER ROOM”. This translation fails to match English lexical conventions; it should be replaced with “Hot Water Room” (see Figure 8). “茶水间” was rendered as “DRINKING ROOM”. This literal translation leads to lexical dislocation; the correct equivalent is “Pantry” (see Figure 9). “无烟单位” was translated into “NON-SMOKING UNIT”. The noun “unit” primarily describes physical components rather than institutional venues in English, and the idiomatic expression “Smoke-Free Area” is more suitable (see Figure 10).



Figure 7. Staff Room sign.



Figure 8. Hot water room sign.



Figure 9. Pantry sign.



Figure 10. Smoke-free area sign.

To sum up, linguistic defects are caused by translators' inadequate proficiency, mechanical literal translation, or careless sign production. These barriers block effective information transmission and damage libraries' cultural reputation. Complete proofreading and auditing procedures must be implemented throughout translation and manufacturing to comply with standard English linguistic norms.

4.2. Pragmatic Level

As Newmark proposes, communicative translation aims to achieve equal communicative effects for source and target readers (Li & Dong, 2023). Pragmatic errors

occur when translations ignore foreign readers' cognitive psychology and cross-cultural connotations, resulting in cultural conflicts. Such problems feature blunt wording and inappropriate emotional undertones, which fail to deliver expected guidance and even arouse readers' aversion.

Improper tone is prominent in prohibitory and directional signs. Chinese public signs frequently adopt imperative, forceful expressions; direct literal translation produces harsh English versions. “禁止喧哗” was translated as “KEEP SILENT”. The imperative expression sounds mandatory and inconsiderate, lacking the pragmatic politeness expected in English public signs; the standard version should be “Quiet Please” to deliver milder hints (see **Figure 11**). “请勿触摸” was rendered as “Don't Touch” (see **Figure 12**). Direct literal translation produces harsh English versions that sound offensive to English speakers; it ought to be revised to “Please Do Not Touch” by adding polite markers to soften the imperative tone. “读者止步” was written as “NO VISITORS” (see **Figure 13**). This rendering is overly stiff and cannot reflect the polite linguistic features of Chinese (Luo & Li, 2006). The appropriate equivalent is “Staff Only”, which objectively states venue restrictions and conforms to Western pragmatic habits.

Public sign norms and relevant translation studies offer clear guidance on tone selection. Direct imperatives suit safety and regulatory signs for efficient warning delivery, while general directional signs should adopt polite wording to create a friendly atmosphere. Safety signs such as CAUTION WET FLOOR and NO SMOKING widely employ concise direct expressions in English, conforming to international conventions.



Figure 11. Sign with overly harsh tone.



Figure 12. Sign with impolite wording.



Figure 13. Sign with cold exclusive tone.

Misjudgment of lexical emotional tones is another typical flaw in university library translations. Without distinguishing word connotations, translators easily create cultural misunderstandings. One university translated “过刊阅览室” into “Outdated Periodical Reading Room”. As a facility-informative public sign, the adjective “outdated” carries derogatory implications of obsolete and worthless, while “过刊” objectively refers to back issues in Chinese. Neutral terms “Back Issue” or “Bound Periodical” are more appropriate (see **Figure 14**). Improper word choice also creates hidden stereotypes. The sign for “母婴室” belongs to facility-informative public signs. Chang’an Academy marked it as “Baby Care Room” alongside the confusing phrase “Men stop”, implying childcare is solely women’s responsibility. If the venue is specially for breastfeeding mothers, “Nursing Room” is the standard expression (see **Figure 15**).



Figure 14. Sign with derogatory connotation.



Figure 15. Sign with gender stereotype.

In short, pragmatic defects arise from neglect of readers' feelings and humanistic care. Rigid literal translation produces harsh wording inconsistent with Western polite communication norms, while misused emotional vocabulary triggers cultural bias and misunderstanding. Such pragmatic miscommunication undermines the inclusive, warm cultural atmosphere that public libraries ought to present.

4.3. Normative Level

Normative defects focus on visual layout and unified terminology of sign systems, mainly reflected in random capitalization, messy typesetting and inconsistent translations of identical venue terms.

English public signs follow rigorous capitalization standards, yet many bilingual signs in Shaanxi Provincial Library suffer from format irregularities. The facility-informative public sign for self-service lending equipment provides two conflicting English texts: "BOOK Self-Service Check In&Out Desk" and "BOOK SELF-CHECK iN&OUT" (see **Figure 16**). The latter incorrectly mixes lowercase "i" in mid-phrase. Chaotic capitalization and random lowercase letters in the two variants break unified signage formatting rules and cause visual confusion. Another facility-informative public sign labels the VIP area as "V.i.p. Room" with superfluous dots, the standard expression is "VIP Room" (see **Figure 17**).



Figure 16. Sign with inconsistent capitalization.



Figure 17. Sign with redundant punctuation.

Typesetting mistakes emerge from careless production: the notice "请在一米线外排队等候" loses the final letters and becomes "IN ORDE" (see **Figure 18**). Emergency exit signs contain garbled text such as "EMERGENCY EXIT ONLY PUSH MERE.CAN CHANNEL". This sign serves as a warning notice, indicating the escape route is for emergency use. Its English text features misplaced punctu-

ation, truncated words and jumbled syntax. (see **Figure 19**).



Figure 18. Sign with truncated word.



Figure 19. Sign with garbled text.

The same facility concept bears multiple inconsistent translations across floor plans, on-site signs and venue partitions. All these items are facility-informative public signs. “男洗手间” appears as “Man toilet”, “MALE” and “Men’s Room” (see **Figure 20**); The “少年儿童馆” sign reads “Children’s Library”, while the actual zone marker is “Children and Youth Library” (see **Figure 21**); The scope of book categories listed on the directional signs is inconsistent with that on the on-site hanging signs. (see **Figure 22**). Inconsistent signs confuse readers and reflect a lack of unified translation review mechanisms in library sign management.



Figure 20. Inconsistent translations.



Figure 21. Sign with inconsistent naming.



Figure 22. Sign with conflicting information.

In conclusion, severe normative chaos exists in Library's public signs. Such disarray hinders accurate information delivery and reveals insufficient overall planning for sign translation and production, which requires systematic standardization.

5. Suggestions for Improving the Quality of English Translation of Public Signs in Library

Based on the defects observed across 22 collected signage samples, this section puts forward targeted, differentiated solutions for three distinct types of problems.

First, uniform and rigorous translation specifications must be formulated (Guo & Zhong, 2018). All libraries shall follow national and local standards, combining their own spatial layout and service processes to compile exclusive public sign translation manuals. The manual shall clearly stipulate unified capitalization rules, punctuation formats and fixed translations of venue terms to eliminate inconsistent renderings of phrases. It shall also define clear boundaries between Chinese pinyin and English text to avoid random mixing, ensuring visual consistency within and across libraries, and upgrading the overall professional image of public cultural spaces.

Second, standardized translation relies on complete institutional supervision. To eliminate spelling errors and layout defects caused by hasty sign manufacturing, staff should strengthen training for personnel engaged in the production of Chinese-English public signs, enabling them to master English proficiently and complete sign production work with higher quality (Xue, 2024). Random mass production without auditing shall be prohibited. In addition, regular inspection and update mechanisms shall be launched for existing signs. Special staff or foreign language volunteers shall conduct periodic reviews to revise misspellings, missing letters and outdated descriptions. Long-term dynamic supervision can rectify existing defects and guarantee the accuracy of newly produced signs, maintaining libraries' rigorous academic image as cultural communication hubs.

Third, launch categorized professional training to root out fundamental linguistic and pragmatic translational errors. Libraries shall organize targeted training for translators to deepen their understanding of the vocative function of public signs. Translators need to distinguish between informative-dominant and vocative-dominant sign types. When translating warning, prohibitory and directional texts, they shall avoid blunt imperative expressions and adopt polite wording conforming to Western communication habits. Meanwhile, cross-cultural awareness

training shall be strengthened to help translators identify lexical emotional connotations and cultural pitfalls, preventing problematic translations. Only accurate, culturally appropriate translations can deliver information smoothly and realize humanistic public service values.

In summary, rectifying library signage defects demands coordinated progress on three fronts. Only the coordinated implementation of the three dimensions can eliminate various translational errors, realize integrated information delivery and behavioral guidance, and fully demonstrate urban cultural soft power.

6. Conclusion

Public sign translation is far more than simple code-switching; it represents deep integration of cross-cultural communication and public service. Instead of fragmentary error correction, systematic governance is required to resolve prevalent translational chaos. Establishing standardized translation rules eliminates root-level inconsistencies; complete pre-production auditing and regular inspections strengthen process control; cultivating translators' awareness of vocative functions and cross-cultural competence consolidates fundamental translation capacity. Only comprehensive optimization can eradicate defective sign language.

The current study also has limitations. First, the sample selection was based on accessibility rather than random sampling, potentially limiting generalizability to smaller community or private libraries. Second, the analysis relied on theoretical frameworks without direct feedback from foreign readers, whose actual comprehension of these signs remains to be empirically verified. Future research should address these limitations by employing random sampling to include a wider range of library types, collecting direct feedback from foreign readers through questionnaires or interviews, and extending standardized suggestions to other public cultural venues. Additionally, the integration of artificial intelligence technology with human proofreading also presents a promising direction for improving translation efficiency and accuracy in public sign management.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, L.J.Y. and W.J.Y.; methodology, L.J.Y.; software, W.J.Y.; validation, W.J.Y.; formal analysis, W.J.Y.; investigation, W.J.Y.; resources, L.J.Y.; data curation, W.J.Y.; writing—original draft preparation, W.J.Y.; writing—review and editing, L.J.Y.; visualization, W.J.Y.; supervision, L.J.Y.; project administration, L.J.Y.; funding acquisition, L.J.Y. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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