Reading between the lines: Multidimensional translation in tourism consumption

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Move translation from literal dimension to a cultural dimension.
- Introduce translation theory and genre analysis to tourism management.
- Demonstrate the importance of cultural awareness when translating texts.
- Shows linguistic accuracy is superseded by a requirement for cultural sensitivity.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that for translation to enhance the tourist experience literal accuracy is not enough and translations should be culturally sensitive to their target readers. Using the example of museum websites as a form of purposive tourism information designed to both inform and attract potential visitors, this paper analyzes websites of museums in the UK and China. We argue that no matter how accurate a translation may be, if the norms of the target tourist community have been ignored a translation may fail to achieve its purpose and may even have a detrimental effect on the tourism experience. By bringing together translation and tourism theory, we demonstrate when the cultural element of tourism is considered alongside the translation of texts, the need for linguistic accuracy is superseded by a requirement for cultural sensitivity.

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A key element in effective tourism communication is translation of information that tourist destinations provide to their visitors. The effects of translation on this information, however, are under-researched in the tourism literature and similarly there is little discussion of tourism material in translation studies research. Where research exists, focus tends to be on the quality of translation in a literal sense, i.e. the accuracy of meaning or fluency of writing, rather than how the translation conforms to the norms of the target culture (some exceptions are Hu, 2011; Kelly, 1998; Mason, 2004; Snell-Hornby, 1999).

Fundamentally, tourism is a cultural experience (Bryce, MacLaren, & O'Gorman, 2013) and therefore effective communication must be sensitive to cultural sensibilities (Prentice & Andersen, 2007; Pritchard & Morgan, 2001; Ryan & Gu, 2010). Within tourism research, little consideration has been given to the impact of translation or the norms of the target culture when conducting fieldwork. An exception to this is Yang, Ryan, and Zhang (2012) who highlight the importance of appropriate cultural sensitivity when conducting tourism research in China. In this paper we argue that for translations of tourist information to enhance the tourist's experience, literal accuracy is not enough and translations should be multidimensional i.e. culturally sensitive to their target audience and take account of the considerable theory now available in translation studies.

In this paper we use translation theory to explore this theoretical gap in tourism research by examining the translations contained within websites of internationally renowned museums in China and the UK. Museum websites provide a useful context for this research as they are universal, easily accessed and designed to both inform and attract potential visitors. We argue that no matter how accurate a translation may be, if the norms of the target community have been ignored it is a poor translation, and may even have a detrimental effect on the tourist experience. As well as filling this theoretical gap, a further aim of this paper is to allow practitioners to ensure that their translations are accurate and fluent, but vitally also considerate of the target culture.

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1. Tourism and translation issues

Previous research into translation issues in tourism falls into two categories; issues regarding the translation of tourism information, e.g. brochures, guides, websites etc. and the challenges of conducting tourism research that relies on translation. Within multiple language tourism research the focus tends to be on back to back translation of survey instruments or questionnaires (see for example Kim & Morrsion, 2005; Lam, Zhang, & Baum, 2001; Li & Stepchenkova, 2011). An exception is Ryan and Gu (2010) who explored the tensions when engaging with a festival through translation with different perspectives.

Zeng and Ryan (2012) note that conventional linguistic, and possibly conceptual, difficulties of translation cause Chinese research not to be acknowledged internationally. They highlight the example of tourism development specifically targeted at the reduction of rural poverty being known as *fu pin lv you* 扶贫旅游 or *lv you fu pin* 旅游扶贫, which could be translated in English as 'Tourism Assisting the Poor' (Zeng & Ryan, 2012). This is similar to the Western concept of Pro-Poor Tourism (Butler, Curran, & O'Gorman, 2013), but the large volume of literature produced in China has been overlooked due to lack of translations, or even awareness of its existence. Another phrase is similar conceptually but also has a role in promoting human health, therefore Buckley, Cater, Linsheng, and Chen (2008) argue that *shengtai lvyou* 生态旅游 (e.g. in Zhang, G., 1999) is thus a cultural analogue of ecotourism, not simply a translation. Furthermore, due to the difference in these terms both etymologically and culturally, any computerised search using the literally translated words would not yield any results.

Translation in tourist publications occurs in a literal dimension with a focus on back to back translation as poor translation has been shown to have a negative effect on tourist choice, for example, it is seen as a barrier to participation in tourist activities (Allison & Hibbler, 2004; Yang, 2009) and can make destinations unattractive (Chen & Hsu, 2000). Recently there has been a focus on using technology to improve the accuracy of translation rather than a wider engagement with translation practices (for example Ho, 2002; Li & Law, 2007). Little reference is made to using experts in translation or acknowledging the existence of translation theory or methods. The implicit assumption within the literature is that translation is a stock process that must be executed in a bureaucratic fashion without critical thought or consideration to the developments within translation theory itself. From a translation perspective, much of the tourism literature's engagement with the process is presumptuous and unsympathetic to the broader implications and effects associated with translated text. The adoption of rigorous translation theory within tourism research has the potential to deepen our knowledge of the tourism experience itself as well as offer practical contributions to its operationalisation.

2. Translation theory

At its simplest translation refers to the relationship between source text (ST) and target text (TT). This intertextual relationship was formerly explored through the concept of equivalence. One of the leading figures in this field defines translation as "the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)" (Catford, 1965, p. 20). Although equivalence is an easily applied concept, it has been criticized widely among translation scholars for naively assuming symmetry between languages as if all translators need to do is to find the 'right' word (Snell-Hornby, 1988; Wang, 2003).

More recent translation research has considered translation as a process rather than a product. The process of translation is not to find the corresponding words in another language, but involves a series of decision making and consideration of the uses and users of the translations. Hu (2003, 2011), for example, in his theory of ecological translation advocates that adaptation and selection are a "translator's instinct as well as the essence of translating" (Hu, 2003, p. 284). As to what constitutes the base for selection and adaptation in the translation process, a common view is that the purpose of the translation should govern the decision-making (e.g. Nord, 1991, 1997; Zhang, M., 2005). This moves away from linguistic equivalence to the functional theory of translation, which advocates that a translation should be assessed in accordance with how appropriately it fulfills its intended function in the target context, rather than how faithfully it relays the source text meaning. In this paradigm translation is defined as "the production of a functional target text maintaining a relationship with a given source text, that is specified according to the intended or demanded function of the target text" (Nord, 1991, p. 28).

The Functional theory of translation broadly categorizes two approaches: documentary (which relays the ST meaning to the TT readers, and the readers are often aware that they are reading a translation); and instrumental (which retells the ST to the TT readers, and the readers may think that what they read was originally written in the target language). Under the two broad categories, a spectrum of forms of translations is presented in Table 1, according to the distance from the source text.

The form of translation mostly applied to tourism information is equifunctional translation in the instrumental approach, in which the TT maintains the function as the ST but not the form of the ST. The equifunctional approach is often adopted because the ST and the TT tourist texts usually share the same goal, i.e. to attract and inform tourists. Although the means may be different across cultures and languages, the ultimate goal is the same. Furthermore, the translations are usually expected to function as an original text rather than informing the readers of what is in the source text. To produce a translation as if it were written originally, the translators need to be sensitive to the conventions or norms in which the translation will be situated. Several studies have compared the norms of English and Chinese tourism texts, and highlighted differences in various aspects, such as sentence structures (Wang, 2012; Xiong & Liu, 2011), rhetoric style (Ye, 2008), and culture-specific lexis (Kang, 2005; Liu & Li, 2008; Wu, 2004). Jin (2004) comments on how the bureaucratic procedure involved in the translation of official tourism texts can be an obstacle and argues for a different mindset when dealing with tourism translation. To date, however, most studies comment only on linguistic differences at the text level, little attention has been paid to how a text achieves its function in the social context. For this reason translation scholars have developed the concept of genre analysis (e.g. Hatim & Mason, 1990, 1997).

Genre is defined as the conventionalized form of texts which are derived from conventionalized forms of occasion; they encode the "functions, purposes and meanings embodied in those social occasions" (Hatim & Mason, 1990, p. 241). To achieve equifunctional translation, the translator needs to seek "equivalence" at the genre level, rather than at the linguistic level. To take the translation of tourism brochures as an example: if the aim of a translation is to achieve the same function as the source text, when the translation is presented to the target readers they should easily recognize the text as a tourism brochure, based on their experience with other tourism brochures in their mother tongue. This means that the translator may have to remove some parts of the source text or to add some features which are typical of the genre in the target language. Unlike the literal view of translation which takes the source text as the yardstick for translation decisions, translation in this functional view places less emphasis on the source text and more on the purpose of the translated text