

Analysis and Standardization Strategies for Japanese Translation of Scenic Area Signs—Centering on Cultural Barriers Caused by Literal Translation

Danlu Shen, Yanjing Hu

Northeast Asia Research Center, Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages, Shaoxing 312000, Zhejiang, China

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Abstract: In recent years, cultural and tourism exchanges between China and Japan have become frequent, and inbound tourism has entered a normal state. As an important linguistic medium for Japanese tourists, Japanese scenic signs are closely related to cultural export and the overall service quality of scenic areas. Zhejiang Province receives a large number of Japanese tourists all year round. This research systematically collects sign samples from well-known scenic spots in Zhejiang, sorts out existing problems and corresponding causes from linguistic, cultural, and sign system perspectives. Combined with the standards adopted by native Japanese scenic areas, this paper puts forward targeted optimization strategies, so as to help improve the quality of cultural and tourism services and facilitate sound cultural communication between China and Japan.

Keywords: Scenic area signs; Japanese translation; Proper nouns; Literal translation; Cross-cultural communication; Standardization

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1. Introduction

Aiming at the common problems of character misuse, grammatical errors, and cultural mistranslation in Japanese signs of Zhejiang scenic areas, especially the word-for-word literal translation of proper nouns such as pavilions, terraces, towers, historical allusions, and classic stories, this research follows the logical framework of investigation, summarization, analysis, and countermeasure formulation. It explores the root causes from linguistic, cultural, and systematic dimensions, and proposes standardization solutions, so as to polish the cultural and tourism image of humanistic scenic areas.

2. Current situation of Japanese signs in scenic areas of Zhejiang province

The research team conducted field investigations on well-known scenic spots in Hangzhou and Shaoxing, including Xixi National Wetland Park, Lu Xun's Former Residence, Shen Garden, Lanting, and East Lake. These scenic areas all receive a steady stream of Japanese tourists and are fully equipped with Japanese signs. Among the surveyed sites, 80% are 5A-level scenic areas, covering comprehensive natural and cultural scenic spots, historical and cultural sites, classical gardens, cultural relics, and natural mountain landscapes. The samples feature rich types and high representativeness. The collected signs include scenic spot indicators, tourist maps, public facility signs, vegetation protection warning boards, and long descriptive texts introducing historical figures. A total of 152 valid samples were obtained. The surveyed scenic areas cover diverse cultural attributes and landscape functions, providing typical research samples for analyzing the prevalent problem of literal translation of proper nouns in Japanese signs.

Classified by sign functions, there are 59 location and navigation signs, where proper nouns account for 71% of the total; 41 public service facility signs and 32 warning and reminder signs; and 20 long-text introduction signs. The statistical results of translation errors are shown in **Figure 1**. Among all samples, 43 signs contain minor errors that do not affect comprehension, accounting for 28.3%; 44 signs have serious mistranslations and cultural misinterpretations, as well as obscurely translated proper nouns, taking up 29.0%.

Three major problems are summarized from the translation results: first, the excessive use of literal translation for cultural proper nouns makes the names of cultural attractions obscure and hard to understand; second, public facility signs suffer from confused wording and frequent Chinese character misuse; third, the translation of long descriptive texts is rough and lacks cultural adaptation. Although simple warning signs are easy to read, more than 80% of historical proper nouns cannot be quickly understood or memorized by Japanese tourists. The cultural communication function of such signs has basically failed.

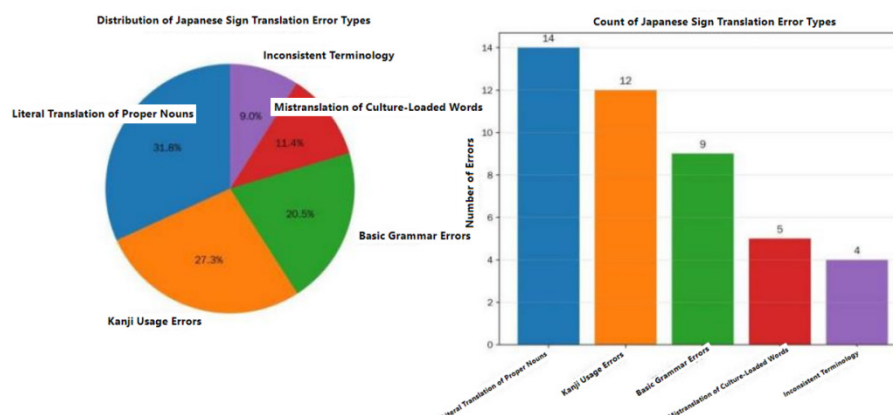


Figure 1. Pie chart of Japanese sign error proportions & bar chart of error types

3. Problems and cause analysis of Japanese translation for scenic area signs

3.1. Linguistic problems

3.1.1. Chinese character misuse

As pointed out by Xiu Gang, many Chinese and Japanese words share identical or similar characters but differ greatly in semantics and usage ^[1]. The first type is functional character misuse: “Emergency Exit” is wrongly translated as 「輸出」 (export), while the standard Japanese expression should be 「非常口」. The second type is stylistic character misuse: the character 「庁」, which is exclusively used for government offices in Japanese, is improperly applied to ordinary buildings. The third type is non-standard Chinese characters, with traditional and new Japanese character forms mixed randomly. Such basic errors are found in Xixi Wetland and Lu Xun’s Former Residence.

3.1.2. Grammatical errors

Grammatical mistakes mainly lie in auxiliary words, word order, and verb conjugation. First, confusion between directional particles 「へ」 and 「に」, as well as locative particles 「で」 and 「に」. Second, rigid Chinese-style word order that fails to follow the subject-object-predicate structure of Japanese. Third, incorrect verb conjugation and mixed use of sentence patterns for prohibitions such as 「ます」 form and 「てはいけない」 form. Short signs are grammatically incomplete, while long texts are riddled with various grammatical mistakes.

3.1.3. Inaccurate semantics and pragmatic failures

Field surveys reveal that literal translation of proper nouns is the prominent pain point (**Table 1**). Such translations strip off cultural backgrounds and result in empty meanings ^[2]. Literal translation enables readers to grasp the basic meaning but fails to convey artistic conception and cultural connotation. Japanese tourists lack relevant knowledge about Chinese classical gardens and literati culture. When they see literally translated terms such as 「忘憂」 (forget worries), 「棲雲」 (perching clouds) and 「流觴」 (floating wine cups), they can only recognize the characters but fail to understand the implied reclusive philosophy and elegant literati pastimes ^[3]. This widespread phenomenon of cultural loss makes it impossible for original artistic images to resonate in the target language. Meanwhile, translated nouns lose practical functions, leaving tourists confused about the usage of scenic facilities.

Table 1. Comparison of literal translation cases and optimized versions for cultural proper nouns

Chinese Proper Noun	Original Literal Translation	Existing Problems	Optimized Translation	Optimization Reasons
Duoyun Stone (Shen Garden)	断雲石	Tourists cannot learn the love legend of Lu You and Tang Wan	断雲石：陸遊と唐婉の伝説が残る石	Retain original characters plus brief notes to interpret cultural stories and remove comprehension barriers
Liushang Pavilion (Lanting)	流觴の亭	The culture of scholars gathering for the wine cup game is unknown	流觴亭：古代文人が酒を楽しんだ場所	Supplement cultural background to eliminate cultural misunderstandings
Wangzhu Platform (Xixi)	渚を望む台	Rigid wording lacking classical style	水辺展望台	Localized free translation for easy understanding
Classic Red Tourism Scenic Area	赤色観光景区	The word “red” causes semantic misunderstanding and cultural inappropriateness	革命記念観光地	Rewrite for cultural adaptation and avoid misinterpretation

3.2. Cultural problems

3.2.1. Improper translation caused by Sino-Japanese cultural differences

Words related to political culture and social culture are translated in a rigid manner. Literal translation of Chinese red tourism slogans into 「全国赤色観光」 does not conform to Japanese linguistic and cultural contexts. Literal copying of words about traditional Chinese festivals and rituals also leads to failure in conveying cultural connotations and easily causes misunderstandings.

3.2.2. Lack of targeted translation strategies for culture-loaded words

A large number of allusions, historical figures, and ancient architectural terms are used in the names of Lanting, Shen Garden, and Lu Xun's Former Residence. Many scenic spots adopt blind literal translation without unified translation strategies. For example, the phrase "floating wine cups along winding streams" is literally translated as 「曲がった水で杯を流す」, which sounds awkward and totally incomprehensible to Japanese tourists. Relevant studies indicate that culture-loaded words account for a large proportion in Chinese external publicity materials and carry the essence of traditional Chinese culture^[4]. However, the absence of annotations and localized adaptation leads to serious cultural disconnection. Literal translation without reasonable interpretation is essentially cultural distortion rather than cultural dissemination.

3.2.3. Inconsistent expressions with Japanese reading habits

Japanese public signs feature concise sentence patterns, mild tone, standardized honorifics, and neat layout. By contrast, Japanese signs in Zhejiang scenic areas are usually lengthy, blunt in tone, and disordered in honorific usage. Warning signs mostly adopt imperative prohibitory sentences with harsh expressions. Descriptive texts are overly literary and obscure without simplification, which goes against Japanese tourists' preference for concise and easy-to-read content^[5].

3.3. Problems of the sign system

3.3.1. Incomplete translation coverage

Japanese signs are missing in mountainous areas, secondary footpaths, and remote relics of the five surveyed scenic areas. Some warning boards only have Chinese and English versions without Japanese translations^[6]. The lack of Japanese signs is particularly obvious on cliff walls of Shaoxing East Lake and vegetation protection boards in the depths of Xixi Wetland, resulting in incomplete information access for foreign tourists.

3.3.2. Inconsistent translation of identical terms

Within the same scenic area, there is no unified standard for translating identical public facilities. For instance, "toilet" is translated as 「トイレ」, 「化粧室」, and 「バスルーム」 simultaneously. The translated suffixes for mountains, ponds, pavilions, terraces, and attics are random and inconsistent.

3.4. Root cause analysis

3.4.1. Insufficient professional competence of translators

Most scenic area translation work is entrusted to third-party agencies whose staff lack solid Japanese proficiency^[7]. Translators have an inadequate understanding of Sino-Japanese character differences, Japanese honorific rules, and stylistic norms for public signs. They are also unfamiliar with the cultural backgrounds of

proper nouns. Insensitivity to the target language culture leads to excessive literal translation and numerous basic errors.

3.4.2. Absence of unified standards and review mechanisms

At present, there are no local standards for Japanese scenic signs, and no professional review teams in scenic areas. The production process of signs is often simplified as machine translation followed by layout and direct installation, without proofreading, re-examination, and localized polishing. Although relevant norms for Japanese public signs have been promoted, imperfect supervision leads to widespread incorrect and inappropriate translations^[8].

3.4.3. Neglect of cultural needs of Japanese tourists

Designers of scenic signs simply assume that Japanese tourists can understand Chinese characters, ignoring existing cultural barriers^[9]. They fail to add cultural notes or conduct localized adaptation for literally translated content that is hard to comprehend and memorize, running counter to the essential demands of cross-cultural communication.

4. Standardization countermeasures for Japanese translation of scenic area signs

4.1. Linguistic standardization strategies

4.1.1. Correction of typical linguistic errors

Establish a comparison table of frequent errors to rectify character, particle, and wording problems in a standardized way. Unify the translation of “Emergency Exit” as 「非常口」 and “toilet” as 「トイレ」, and eliminate characters exclusively used for Japanese government offices. Strictly follow Japanese word order and abandon harsh imperative patterns. All warning signs shall adopt polite honorific forms. For proper nouns, classify translation methods: retain literal translation for general common nouns, and add notes for cultural allusion terms.

4.1.2. Application of AI-assisted proofreading

Establish a dual mechanism combining manual review and AI proofreading. Compare expressions with native Japanese corpora; apply AI to detect character mistakes and grammatical defects. The AI system can simulate Japanese users’ reading experience and score readability, automatically marking obscure literal translations and reminding translators to add notes or rewrite content, so as to reduce manual errors.

4.2. Cultural optimization strategies

4.2.1. Establish cross-cultural translation principles

Adhere to the dual principles of functional equivalence and cultural adaptation. Prioritize practicality for service signs to make them conform to Japanese expression habits. On the premise of retaining original cultural features, take easy understanding and memorization by Japanese tourists as the core criteria, and reject blind literal translation. Functional equivalence shall take precedence over literal faithfulness to realize optimized translation^[10].

4.2.2. Classified translation strategies for culture-loaded words

Culture-loaded words mainly include historical allusions, literati images, regional folk customs, and classical architectural terms. Literal translation alone cannot realize effective cross-cultural communication and will break cultural connotations. Referring to the standards of Japanese local scenic areas, we formulate three targeted translation strategies for characteristic terms in Hangzhou and Shaoxing:

Literal translation plus brief notes (for historical allusion terms): Retain original Chinese characters for scenic spots with profound cultural heritage such as Lanting and Shen Garden, and add concise Japanese explanations. Literal translation with notes is an effective way to improve readability^[11]. This method retains original cultural images while removing comprehension obstacles for Japanese readers^[12]. Example: 断雲石: 陸遊と唐婉の愛情伝説が残る石.

Localized free translation (for leisure landscape terms): Abandon rigid literal translation for ornamental landscapes without complicated allusions, and adopt commonly accepted Japanese expressions^[13]. For example, “Wangzhu Platform” is translated as 「水辺展望台」 to lower comprehension barriers.

Transliteration plus explanation (for folk custom and specialty terms): Adopt phonetic transcription plus explanations for Jiangnan folk customs and intangible cultural heritage products to avoid ambiguity caused by direct character translation.

4.2.3. Learn from expressive norms of Japanese local signs

Refer to sign standards of historical scenic areas in Tokyo and Kyoto. Adopt modern standard Japanese, split long descriptive texts into short sentences, and attach furigana to proper nouns. Follow the layout rule of “Chinese characters + furigana + brief notes” to fit Japanese reading habits.

4.3. Improvement of the sign system

4.3.1. Build classified terminology database

Establish a special terminology database for the Zhejiang cultural and tourism industry, and formulate unified standards for architectural terms, public facility names, and cultural allusion words by category.

4.3.2. Design classified translation templates

According to the functional characteristics of navigation signs, public facility signs, warning signs, and long descriptive texts, design applicable translation templates while ensuring accuracy and cultural adaptation:

Scenic navigation signs: Adopt the three-tier structure of original Chinese characters + furigana + brief cultural notes. Retain original characters for quick recognition by Japanese readers, add standard furigana to resolve pronunciation confusion, and attach short notes for allusion-related names to realize information transmission and cultural dissemination.

Public facility signs: Prioritize commonly used standard Japanese expressions, and add Romaji for easy recognition^[14].

Warning and reminder signs: Uniformly adopt polite sentence patterns with 「てください」. Abandon harsh imperative language, and use polite expressions such as 「ご遠慮ください」 and 「ご注意ください」 to convey information in a friendly manner, complying with Japanese stylistic norms for public signs^[15].

Long texts for historical introduction: Split lengthy sentences into Japanese-style short sentences, remove obscure literal translations of classical expressions, supplement necessary cultural background information, and bridge cultural gaps.

4.3.3. Establish translation review and update mechanism

Implement a three-level review system: first draft translation → professional proofreading → polishing by native Japanese experts. Conduct regular inspections and rectify obscure and mistranslated old signs. All newly produced signs must go through strict review to put an end to blind literal translation from the institutional level.

5. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the comprehension barriers caused by literal translation of proper nouns for Japanese tourists, and summarizes linguistic errors, cultural mistranslations, and systematic chaos existing in Japanese signs of Jiangnan humanistic scenic areas. Without supplementary explanations, literally translated scenic names are hard for Japanese tourists to understand and remember, greatly weakening the value of scenic signs. Targeted optimized strategies are proposed accordingly: adopt literal translation plus brief notes for historically profound terms to inherit Chinese culture; apply localized free translation for ordinary landscapes to conform to Japanese habits. Meanwhile, improve the terminology database, AI proofreading system, and review mechanism to realize all-round standardization. It is expected to build a high-grade, international Japanese sign system with cultural charm and high readability for scenic areas.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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