

# A pragmatic analysis of public signs in China

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the linguistic and pragmatic features of public signs in three distinct historical stages of the Chinese society. It then focuses on the new features of public signs, in order to shed light on the characteristics of public language and social life in modern China.

**Key words:** social pragmatic analysis, public signs, linguistic and pragmatic features

## 1. Introduction

Language is inherently public versus private<sup>22</sup>, due to the conventional adoption of linguistic signs.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, we adopt Millikan's (2000: 2) view that "Learning a language is essentially coming to know various public conventions and, with trivial exceptions, these conventions are around to learn only because they have functions." In its communicative function, language joins other types of conventional signs to capture the cultural qualities, moral attainment and spiritual features of a society.

The public sign represents one medium where language and other means of communications overlap or co-occur. Such signs prevail in every corner of cities in China since the recorded history, to provide information, give warnings or advocate specific social norms. As social slogans directed to the general audience, the technique and art of designing public signs embodies the connotations of Chinese culture and the progress of the Chinese society. This paper aims to analyze the historic development of public signs and explore the linguistic features and pragmatic strategies of public signs in today's China to shed light on the characteristics of public language in China.

## 2. Definition and characteristics of public signs

*Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines the public sign as a lettered board or other public display placed on or before a building, room, shop or office to advertise business there transacted or the name of person or firm conducting it. In *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, the public sign is defined as a piece of paper, metal etc. in public place, with words or drawings on it that gives people information, warns them not to do something (such as road signs or no-smoking signs). Public signs include land post, advertising board, shop and slogans in tourist attractions and the other public places.

From the above definitions of public signs, we can infer some basic characteristics. First, as a mode of communication, it is a kind of one-way communication with the general public in which the speaker conveys the information while the audience receives it without possibility of

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<sup>22</sup> "Private" in the sense of Wittgenstein (1953/1999), i.e., not shared by the speaker with any other speaker.

<sup>23</sup> Saussure (1959) defines the linguistic sign as arbitrary in nature, but the arbitrary sign may become conventionalized by being adopted within a community of speakers.

negotiation. Second, they tend to be simple and brief in form: people seldom spend much time reading public signs; hence the designers have to convey their message in the most direct and prominent way to attract the public's attention. The speaker always tries to convey the largest amount of information within the limited space of a small sign. Third, the main communicative purpose of public signs in essence is to persuade, forbid, or warn the public to enact/prohibit the intended action of the speaker in the interest of public welfare. With their illocutionary force of directives, public signs often impose some face threat on the public; therefore, the speaker often endeavors to alleviate the face threat through strategic use of language.

### 3. Diachronic development of public signs in China

As a type of social slogans serving the public, the designing of public signs is marked by times since they conform to specific national conditions and social mentality at that time. From the evolution of public signs, one could witness the political, ethical, and psychological factors involved and the changes in people's life. Roughly the development of public signs in China could be divided into the following three phases in terms of their respective linguistic and pragmatic features.

#### Phase one (before the reform and opening-up policy)

In this period, China pursued the planned economy and political propaganda was prevalent throughout the country. In the cultural arena thousands of years of feudalism still had great impact on people's ideology, for instance, the notion of social class hierarchy still existed in people's mind. Public signs in this phase generally were mainly didactic by nature to discipline people's behavior and maintain the social order. The tone of public signs at that time was rigid, distant or even threatening with the speaker giving commands on behalf of the administrative institutions concerned. Words like “禁止” (Jìnzhǐ/...is forbidden), “严禁” (Yánjìn/...is strictly forbidden) or “不许” (Bùxǔ/Do not...) frequently appeared. For example, in many directive public signs such as “严禁酒后开车” (Yánjìn jiǔhòu kāichē/Drunk driving is strictly forbidden.) and “不许践踏草坪，否则将处以罚款！” (Bùxǔ jiàntà cǎopíng, fǒuzé jiāng chǔyǐ fákuǎn!/Trampling on the lawn is not allowed. Otherwise you will be fined!) the tone was serious and authoritative with an unequal power relationship between the interlocutors. Consequently although the illocutionary forces of these public signs were asking the public not/to take the intended actions, it was very possible that the very opposite perlocutionary act would occur because the public was offended by the cold and blunt tone of the speaker.

#### Phase two (from the reform and opening-up program to the early 1990's)

Since the reform and opening policy in 1978, China strengthened its exchanges with the outside world and gained great momentum in its economic drive. And the material and cultural life of the Chinese people became richer in this period. The designers of public signs began to pay attention to the propriety issue by adopting a more friendly and polite tone. The most typical example is the frequent use of the politeness marker “please” and some explanatory remarks in directive public signs. For example public signs “请保持安静” (Qǐng bǎochí ānjìng./Please keep quiet.) and “为了您和他人的健康，请不要吸烟” (Wèile nín hé tārén de jiànkāng, qǐng búyào xīyān./For the sake of your and others' health, please do not smoke.). These public signs indicate that the speaker realized the face threat to the public incurred by the tough and overbearing

language of the public signs in the past and began to consider the audience's emotions and feelings by showing them respect.

Phase three (the early 1990's - present)

During this period the economy of China continued to develop rapidly and China enhanced its exchanges with the outside world. People's living standard at that time was further improved and they craved for a more meaningful social life. Public language in this period became much more individualized and diversified with the integration of modern culture and foreign cultures into traditional Chinese culture with the advent of the information age. Public signs became humorous, diversified, humanized, marking a more civilized Chinese society. For example, in a shopping center, the label on clothes writes: “别摸我，我怕脏” (Bié mōwǒ, wǒ pà zāng./Don't touch me. I hate dirtiness.) This sign persuades the customer not to touch the new clothes. With the personification in it, it achieves some humorous effect. The public sign “家人盼望您安全归来” (Jiārén pànwàng nín ānquán guīlái./Your family look forward to you to come back safely.) reminds the audience to drive carefully by mentioning the family wishes. The honorific pronoun “you” (“nín”) shows the consideration and respect of the speaker towards the driver coming back from their work.

From the above analysis, we could conclude that some problems existed in the design of public signs before the reform and opening up of China. First, the language of some public signs at that time such as “爱护草坪” (Aihù cǎopíng/Take care of the lawn), “节约用水” (Jiéyue yòngshuǐ/Save Water) and “保持安静” (Bǎochí ānjìng/Keep silence) were too bland and tasteless to catch the audience's eye, so it is very likely that the audience overlooked them and thus they failed to achieve the communicative purpose. Second, some directive public signs such as “不许超速行驶” (Bùxǔ chāosù xíngshǐ/Overspeeding is not allowed) or “禁止横穿马路” (Jìnzhǐ héngchuān mǎlù/Jaywalking is forbidden) are compelling and speaker-centered, impinging on the audience's freedom, therefore posing a serious threat to their negative face.

#### **4. Pragmatic Features of Public Signs in Today's China**

In the above section, the characteristics of public signs in three distinct historical stages of China were explored. With the changes happening in today's Chinese society, public signs exhibit some new linguistic and pragmatic features. The investigation of public signs was conducted in different cities in China which witness great changes with the process of urbanization. Public signs regarding topics of environmental protection, transportation safety and the like, in locations such as streets, parks, residential complex and universities, were collected so as to shed light on different walks of social life in China. In this section, some major new linguistic features of these public signs as well as the pragmatic strategies behind them will be discussed.

##### **4.1 Politeness**

Politeness is a symbol of human civilization present in any culture in the world. In traditional Chinese culture, the concepts of politeness and rituals were highly valued throughout its thousands years of history. Moreover, in modern times, under the influence of democratic ideas from the western culture, people demand more dignity and equality in communication. Since most public signs are directives with face threat to the audience, the speaker will employ

many linguistic and pragmatic strategies to reduce the face threat. Besides the pragmatic markers mentioned above like “请” (please), the speaker also often resorts to indirect speech act or sequence of speech acts to adjust its illocutionary force.

#### 4.1.1 Indirect speech act

According to Leech (1983) people use indirect speech act out of politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987) also hold that indirect speech act is a strategy of avoiding face-threatening acts. Many public signs today contain indirect speech acts to increase the degree of politeness. Consider example (1).

- (1) a. 感谢您对花草的爱惜。  
Gǎnxiè nǐ duì huācǎo de àixī.  
‘Thank you for taking care of the plants.’  
b. 提布袋购物是一种时尚。  
Tí bùdài gòuwù shì yìzhǒng shíshàng.  
‘It is in vogue to use cloth bag when shopping.’

In example (1a), an act of thanking is employed to replace the original act of request. The speaker thanks the audience even before the intended act is performed so the audience is subject to the performance of the intended act because of the presupposition embedded in it. Thus it increases the possibility of the intended act while maintaining the audience’s face. Actually this strategic usage of “感谢/谢谢 (gǎnxiè/xièxiè/Thank you)” has conventionalized in public sign designing today. Many public signs today end with “谢谢合作” (Xièxiè hézuò/Thank you for your cooperation) as in “请不要大声喧哗，谢谢合作” (Qǐng búyào dàshēng xuānhuá, xièxiè hézuò/Please do not speak loudly. Thank you for your cooperation). Example (1b) is an assertion that encourages the fashion of using cloth bags to restrain the pollution caused by plastic bags. The audience could hardly sense any threat to their negative face because of the indirect speech act of the assertion.

#### 4.1.2 Extended speech act

Ferrara (1980) holds that in communication people do not always use one speech act; sometimes a sequence of speech acts may be used to realize the communicative purpose. Wood & Kroger (1994) point out that a speech act is generally composed of a central speech act, an auxiliary speech act and a micro-unit. Among these complicated speech acts one of them is primary and the rest are auxiliary speech acts that help to enhance the acceptability of the intended act. In many public signs today, there is more than one speech act. Consider the examples in (2).

- (2) a. 水是生命之源，请节约用水。  
Shuǐ shì shēngmìn zhī yuán, qǐng jiéyuē yòngshuǐ.  
‘Water is the source of life, so please save water.’  
b. 图书馆书籍是全校师生共同的精神财富，请不要私藏、窃取、污损！  
Túshūguǎn shūjí shì quánxiào shīshēng gòngtóng de jīngshén cáifù, qǐng búyào sīcháng, qièqǔ, wūsun!

‘Books in the library are common spiritual legacies of all faculty and students, so please do not hide, steal or spoil them!’

In the above examples, two speech acts are combined: an assertion and a request. In example (2a) the first speech act is a statement that emphasizes the importance of water to human life, while in example (2b) the significance of books to faculty and students. In these auxiliary speech acts that support the main speech act (i.e., the request), the speaker provides some surplus information which violates the maxim of quantity assuming that we are concise, brief and to the point in communication (Grice, 1975). In this way the speaker highlights the importance of water and books and reinforces the illocutionary force of the main speech act.

#### 4.2 Bonding

In a typical eastern culture like China, collectivism and closeness among people is very important. In public sign designing, the speaker often tries to make the audience feel warm and tender by underscoring the bonding between the interlocutors, thus enacting the intended behavior unconsciously. One of the most frequent devices of showing bonding is the unconventional usage of personal deixis, or shift of personal deixis, which emphasizes the solidarity between the interlocutors by vitalizing the empathetic effect, as in the examples in (3).

(3) a. 用我们的一份努力，换来城市的一片蓝天。

Yòng wǒmén de yí fèn nǚ lì, huànlái chéngshì de yí piàn lán tiān.

‘With effort from each of us, we could have a blue sky in our city.’

b. 我是北京人，我做环保事。(Wǒ shì Běijīng rén, wǒ zuò huánbǎo shì.)

‘I’m from Peking, and I will do what I can to protect the environment.’

According to Levinson (2001) deixis is organized in an egocentric way, that is, the speaker is the central person, but in the some derivative usages of personal deixis the deictic center is shifted to other participants. In example (3a) the sentence is organized from the perspective of the audience (the inclusive pronoun “we”) as if the speaker himself were one of them so as to shorten the psychological distance between him and the audience. Hence the audience would find it easier to accept and perform the intended act. Example (3b) appears during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. The speaker resorts to the social identity of being a citizen of Peking, who is supposed to be more cosmopolitan and broadminded than those in other regions, since capital Beijing is the political, economic and cultural center of the country. The “I”-approach perspective of the whole sentence is achieved by the use of “wǒ” (I) as the subject, activating a sense of belonging of the audience by deeming the speaker as a member of the same group as the audience.

#### 4.3 Sophistication

Although the primary purpose of public sign is practical by nature, the designers of public signs nowadays attach more attention to the aesthetic value of public signs themselves. The language of the public signs also demonstrates the unique artistic taste and distinctive personality of the speaker. Thus the speaker would adapt his style to the tastes of the audience to satisfy people’s aspiration for a loftier spiritual life. To this end, various rhetoric devices are adopted to increase the readability of the text within the limited words of public signs.

#### 4.3.1 Quotation

Traditional and modern Chinese culture is a continuous source in the designing of public signs. Many public signs in today's China are direct or indirect quotations from Chinese literary works, which embodies a rejuvenation of traditional Chinese culture to some extent. For example for many public signs on college campus traditional Chinese cultural elements such as the Chinese ancient poems or lyrics are often involved to form an elegant style tailored to the audience with higher education. Consider the examples in (4).

- (4) a. 轻轻地我走了，正如我轻轻地来。  
Qīngqīng de wǒ zǒu le/Zhèngrú wǒ qīngqīng de lái  
'Very quietly I take my leave/As quietly as I came here'
- b. 谁知盘中餐，粒粒皆辛苦。  
Shéi zhī pán zhōng cān/lì lì jiē xīn kǔ  
'Look at the food on our plate/Every grain of which is from hard work.'



Example (4a) appears in the university library which tells the readers to keep quiet while they study in such public places. These are the first two lines of the modern Chinese poem *Saying Goodbye to Cambridge Again* by the modern Chinese poet Xu Zhimo, familiar to and welcomed by most college students. It creates a lifelike image in the audience's mind and gives them a sense of beauty. It caters to the audience of young college students and contributes to build a civilized atmosphere on the whole campus. Example (4b) is found in student canteens of many universities as a reminder for college students not to waste food. These are the original lines of the noted classical ancient Chinese poem *Chuhe (Toiling Farmers)* by Li Shen of Tang Dynasty. With the antithesis of balanced structure and symmetric rhythm it impresses the audience and conveys the maximum of information in an economical way. In addition, the striking size and regular font of the words on the red slogan reinforce the cautioning effects on the audience.

#### 4.3.2 Personification

One of the other prevalent rhetoric devices adopted in public signs in today's China is personification, which gives personal attributes to inanimate objects which makes public signs more vivid and lifelike, as in the examples in (5).

- (5) a. 小草正进入甜甜的美梦，请别惊醒它的好梦。  
Xiǎocǎo zhèng jìnrù tiántián de měimèng, qǐng bié jīngxǐng tā de hǎomèng  
'The grass is in a sweet dream, so please do not disturb.'
- b. 高抬贵手，请不要给课桌纹身。  
Gāo tái guìshǒu, qǐng búyào gěi kèzhuō wénshēn

‘Please spare your hands and do not tattoo the desk.’

In example (5a), the grass is referred to as being an animate object with human sensations and emotions. By personalizing the grass as a helpless being in pain if we step on it, the speaker arouses the compassion of the audience to protect the weak. Example (5b) is found in universities where scribbling and carving on desks is commonplace. Here the desks are personalized as human beings suffering from the pain of tattoos on the body, so the audience might be aware of the inappropriateness of their behavior.

#### 4.3.2 Metaphor

Another frequently used rhetorical device is the metaphor, which turns the abstract into concrete and the bald into interesting. It enhances the readability of the text by introducing images that trigger the audience’s imagination, as in (6).

- (6) a. 幸福是棵树，安全是沃土。  
Xìngfú shì kē shù/Ānquán shì wòtǔ  
‘Happiness is like a tree; safety is the fertile soil.’  
b. 草是世界的地毯，树是地球的经脉。  
Cǎo shì shìjiè de dìtǎn/Shù shì dìqiú de jīngmài  
Grass is the world’s carpet and the tree is the earth’s veins.’

In (6a), happiness is compared to a tree while safety to the fertile soil in which the tree grows. By resorting to metaphor, the speaker vividly depicts an image of a green tree and the soil in the minds of the audience, thus reminding the audience of the inseparability of happiness and safety---safety is the foundation of happiness. Example (6b) compares grass to a carpet and the tree to veins, which portrays a picture of plants on the earth in the audience’s mind and stimulates their imagination of a beautiful world.

#### 4.4 Humor

Humor is also an important feature of public signs today. One of the principles of designing public signs is to attract their attention and stimulate the public interest. By humor the speaker could convey their intentions in an implicit and tactful way which brings them amusement and makes an impression. Particularly in our modern society people live in more and more cramped spaces and undertake great pressure. A humorous public sign could release the pressure in their life and is conducive to establishing good interpersonal relations. One way for the speaker to achieve a humorous and novel effect in public signs is by deliberately violating the maxims of Cooperative Principle, as in (7).

- (7) a. 别追了，本人已婚。  
Biézhūi le, běnrén yǐhūn.  
‘Don’t chase me, I’m married.’  
b. 路考五次不及格  
Lùkǎo wǔcì bù jīgé  
‘Five failures in road test.’



Today in many big Chinese cities, transportation problems are increasingly severe with more and more automobiles on the road. People are prone to get tense when stuck in traffic jams. The above two examples are signs on the rear of cars reminding drivers behind to keep the distance. Example (7a) involves a pun: the Chinese character “zhuī” has a double meaning: “chase” literally and “court (a girl)” metaphorically. The existence of the two meanings of “zhuī” violates the Maxim of Manner, that is, avoid ambiguity. Example (7b) contains a hyperbole exaggerating the driver’s defects in the road test, which violates the Maxim of Quality, namely, do not say what you believe to be false. By deliberately violating the Cooperative Principle, these entertaining and creative signs successfully convey the implicature of not overtaking the vehicle ahead. The cartoon-shaped words or even the image of two pet cats contribute to create the lighthearted and humorous effects.

## 5. Conclusion

Public signs as a kind of social managerial language are omnipotent in people’s daily life to persuade, warn, advocate, or even entertain and enlighten people. In China, public signs present different linguistic and pragmatic traits in different historical periods. The language of public signs is a window to understand the beliefs and values, cultural and historical traditions, and the aesthetic taste of the entire Chinese society. This paper discussed the linguistic and pragmatic features of public signs in different historical stages of Chinese society. The main idea is that the public language, such as reflected through signs, changes in order to keep up with the shifts in democracy, in literacy, and in the standard of living.

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