

# On the Dynamic Adaptability of Chinese Public Signs

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## Abstract

This study aims to discuss the classification and description of current Chinese public signs and the dynamic adaptability in public signs designing. Based on the survey carried out in Ya Xing Residential Zone Zhengzhou city and Verschueren's Theory of Linguistic Adaptation, the author attempts to analyze that public signs language is a choice-making process in adaptation to the constantly changing communicative context, the main components of which are changed physical conditions, social relationships and settings, and cognitive and emotional needs of the public.

**Keywords:** Public signs, Adaptation, Communicative context

## 1. Classification of public signs

Public signs play an indispensable part in our everyday life which are defined as words or drawings written on a piece of paper or metal, etc in public places performing the informing, warning and advocating functions. Informing type is to provide information and service widely accepted and applied to our life. Warning public signs perform the function of warning, putting demands and restrictions on the relevant addressees who are expected to abide by public norms for the sake of the public. Warning signs include three subtypes: forbidding, requesting and educating which manifest three periodic changes over time. The first period is before China's reform and opening-up. The influence of cultural revolution was not totally eliminated. Public signs relevant to our daily trival lives were also labelled with the Chinese characters like“*严*禁” and“*不*许”. The second period is between late 1970s to early 1990s. After the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the economy of China recovered and grew rapidly. As the living standard of people in China improved, there emerged a need to develop the spiritual lives of the public. In this peorid, requesting subtype appeared to replace the forbidding signs. “*禁*止” and“*不*许” were cancelled and additional explanations were put before the“*请*”. The third period is from early 1990s up to now. With the sustainable development of economy and people's living standard, a civilized and harmonious society is being built. In this peorid, linguistic choices have shown new forms from conventional ones. Educating subtype is taking a higher percentage in public signs such as“*小*草有情 踏之何忍” beside the grassland. Advocating type is very Chinese characteristic calling on people to endeavor for the ultimate goal of building a well-ordered and harmonious society the content of which generally relate to government or local policies. With the development of society, a lot of attention is paid to public signs designing especially warning public signs.

## 2. Public signs analysis based on Verschueren's Theory of Linguistic Adaptation

Public signs penetrate every corner of our lives. It is impractical to collect them all for investigating the overall situation of public signs in China. This research, therefore, focuses on one survey done in the Ya Xing Residential Zone in Zhengzhou city, a mature residential zone of more than 50 acre with 100 apartment buildings where more than twenty thousand people are living. In this independent close social community seen as miniature of a society, a set of public signs set by Ya Xing Property Management Company can be used as separate investigation corpus.

The detailed classification and description of the survey done in Ya Xing Residential Zone disclose to some extent the current situation of public signs which is undergoing changes: Firstly informing signs performs the main function of public signs. With the development of society, Chinese informing public signs have accordingly experienced some changes. These changes include use of bilingual translations and use of graphic symbols with or without Chinese characters; Secondly warning signs have experienced the continuum of directness to

indirectness and direct forbidding subtype takes a lower and decreasing percentage while indirect requesting and educating subtype have a much larger percentage; Thirdly strategic linguistic use such as figures of speech is adopted in warning signs and advocating signs.

According to Verschueren (2000, pp.66-67), language use is a process of making linguistic choices and this choice-making is motivated by the driving force of making adaptation to context for the benefit of satisfying communicative goals. Contextual correlates of adaptation include all the ingredients of the communicative context with which linguistic choices have to be interadaptable: language users (utterer and interpreter), physical world (such as time, space, bodily postures, physical appearance, physical conditions, biological property, material conditions of speech, etc.), social world (such as social settings, institutions, culture, social relationship, etc.) and mental world (such as personality, emotions, beliefs, desires or wishes, motivations or intentions, etc.). Those factors can be considered as the language-external reasons affecting linguistic choice. Public signs language, like other instances of language use, is also driven by adaptation for the sake of satisfying the public signs designer's communicative goals so as to create a more favorable environment for his/her survival. Grounded on the theoretical interpretation, public signs language is interpreted as a dynamic process of adaptation to the communicative context. Specifically, as for adaptation to language interpreters, in public signs designing, the totality of persons including direct addressees and side participants who are present before public signs should be considered. That is why warning public signs have undergone the process of adopting forms of expression to interpreter roles such as the avoidance of imperative sentence structures and use of figures of speech in educating subtype because it is assumed that the majority of interpreters are good citizens. It is contrary to the forbidding subtype all the interpreters of which are those who disobey and violate the public norm which to some extent might disrespect and hurt good citizen's feeling; As for the adaptation to changed physical conditions: use of bilingual signs adapts to the current China which is embracing more and more foreigners and having a closer and closer connection with the outside world. Use of graphic symbols with or without characters gets adapted to the positioning of public signs and the public in the physical world the phenomenon of which is frequently seen in road signs; As for the adaptation to social relationships, direct warning signs are adaptable to the power relationship while requesting warning type and advocating type maintain the solidarity relationship. There are many ways to minimize imposition in public signs designing such as apologizing, admitting impingement, indicating reluctance, giving compelling reasons, begging forgiveness to build a better relationship; Public signs belong to public communication addressed to a certain anonymous public to fulfill the purpose of conveying information and persuading the public to practice the public norm. In order to successfully increase the possibilities of achieving the effects as intended, public signs should be designed in adaptation to the cognition and emotion of the public psychologically. If the public signs designer knows how to adapt to the public's way of thinking and care about the emotional needs of the public in public signs making, the public signs might achieve the communicative goal of informing and persuasion for the better. From the survey, it is drawn clearly that strategies catering to the emotion and cognition of the public such as use of figures of speech are employed to reinforce the power of persuasion which is a good way to attract attention as well as to stir beautiful imagination. Personification, antithesis, pun and humor are all found in public signs language.

### 3. Conclusions and suggestions

The survey done in Ya Xing Residential Zone to some extent is the miniature of the overall current situation of public signs in China. Verschueren's Theory of Linguistic Adaptation provides a more comprehensive and explanatory approach to study the dynamic process of language use from physical, social and mental perspectives, which can better illustrate the subtlety and complexity of linguistic choice-making in public signs designing. Analysis based on the conclusions drawn from the survey and theoretical interpretation proves that public signs designing is a dynamic process of adaptation to the changing communicative context. It is hoped that this research can arouse the awareness of the importance of studying Chinese public signs, for either the public signs designer or the linguist or the translator.

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Table 1. Detailed survey of Ya Xing Residential Zone

Types	Public signs	Location
Informing (directing)	1.地下车库 安全入口/进口	地下车库口
	2.新加坡鱼尾狮喷水雕塑	实物景观旁
	3.中华文化浮雕	实物景观旁
	4.荷兰风车	实物景观旁
	5.天鹅湖	实物景观旁
	6.香樟大道	实物景观旁
	7.法兰西星光大道	实物景观旁
	8.出口 入口 ENTRANCE EXIT	东 西 南 大 门 小区广场
	9. 垃圾箱 可回收 不可回收	各单元楼前
Informing (prompting)	1.电缆有电 注意安全	配电房
	2.低压配电箱：注意安全 小心触电	配电房
	3.减速慢行 注意行人	路口
	4.注意安全	道路两旁
	5.民警提示：外出请将门窗关好，预防被盗，请将电、气设施关闭，以防火灾	各单元楼前
Warning (forbidding)	1.高配重地 闲人莫入	配电房
	2.私家车库门前 禁止停车	地 上 车 库 门 口
	3.监控重地，闲人免进	东 西 南 门 口
	4.燃气设施 严禁烟火	单元楼旁
	5.止步 高压危险//	配电房
	6.谢绝从此进入/外出	东 西 南 门 口
Warning (requesting)	1.请勿嬉水	水景两旁
	2.公共绿地，请勿践踏	道路两旁
	3.请勿垂钓	水景两旁
	4.遵照《中华人民共和国道路交通安全法》第四章第五十六条“机动车应当在规定地点停放。”小区内路面禁止停放机动车辆。请您将车辆停放在车位或地下停车场。谢谢合作	道路两旁
Warning (educating)	1.请珍惜小草的生命	道路两旁
	2.请勿折断小草的臂膀	道路两旁
	3.请别摘掉向您微笑的花	道路两旁
	4.花有意难开口 人有情莫动手	道路两旁
	5.预将花归己，君请思后人	道路两旁
	6.绿色给您带来春意	道路两旁
	7.青青的草 怕你的脚	道路两旁
	8.小草有情 踏之何忍	道路两旁
	9.绿草茵茵 关爱是金	道路两旁
	10.芳草萋萋 爱心依依	道路两旁

	11.爱惜小草 维护家园	道路两旁
	12.青青一小草 需您万般怜	道路两旁
	13.小草也在长 踏入想一想	道路两旁
	14.呵护花木 关爱生灵	道路两旁
	15.草绿 气新 花香	道路两旁
	16.爱我 护我 别踩我	道路两旁
Advocating	1.高高兴兴上班去，平平安安回家来	地下车库
	2.社区因我而精彩，我因社区而光荣	东西南门口
	3.小区是个家，温馨靠大家	道路两旁
	4.共同创建一个优美整洁，生活方便，文明安全的居住环境。	道路两旁
	5.爱国、爱家、爱小区、遵纪守法，文明居住	道路两旁