

Sociolinguistic Insights into the English Naming Practices in Urban Transit: A Case Study of Wuxi Metro

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Abstract

As globalization progresses, China's public transportation system has received an increasing number of foreign passengers. In this context, the English naming practices of metro stations play a cumulatively pivotal role in reflecting a city's characteristics. This study examines the linguistic strategies adopted by Wuxi Metro in translating Chinese station names to English, explores how these practices mirror the city's historical and cultural identity, and reviews public perceptions of these names. The research content dominantly comes from the bilingual map shown on Wuxi Metro's official website and the posts on some common social media platforms. It reveals that Wuxi Metro's English names generally adhere to global standards while preserving cultural elements, such as naming metro stations after historical landmarks. Overall, Wuxi Metro uses both translation and transliteration for English station names. Meanwhile, it balances demonstrating a city's cultural identity with keeping the clarity of names. Public feedback on altering the translations regarding nouns of locality is also taken into consideration by Wuxi Metro.

Keywords

Sociolinguistics; English Naming Practices; Translation; Urban Transit; Wuxi Metro

1. Introduction

The study of the relationship between language and society has a long history in China, from relevant descriptions in the pre-Qin classics to modern works on language and ethnology (You and Zou, 2016). With the emergence of representative figures like William Labov and Basil Bernstein, sociolinguistics, which mainly studies how society, including cultural norms and contexts, affects language use, began to emerge as a distinct discipline in the 1960s. "The fundamental starting point of sociolinguistics is the belief that language research must be connected to social reality." (Zhu, 1985, p5) Therefore, English naming practices in public spaces, which are not only functional, but also imbued with tremendous cultural, historical, and polit-

ical significance, are worth studying from the sociolinguistic perspective. Nowadays, the rapid urbanization of Chinese cities has brought about significant changes in various aspects of our daily lives, particularly in terms of transportation infrastructure. Regional culture symbolizes a city's development state, subway station names, in particular, serve as the conveyors of cultural connotations and promotional tools (Yin, 2020). Wuxi, a vibrant city in Jiangsu Province, has undergone significant urban development in recent years, including the construction and operation of its subway system. Since the opening of Line One in 2014, Wuxi Metro has become an essential part of the city's transportation infrastructure. It connects multiple districts and facilitates residents' daily commutes. Analyzing the English naming practices of the stations in the Wuxi Metro system possesses more than just practical value, as these names reveal the city's cultural, social, and linguistic inclinations. They also reflect how Wuxi engages in cross-cultural communication. Consequently, this study aims to analyze the English naming practices of Wuxi Metro from a sociolinguistic perspective, exploring how these practices reflect and shape the socio-cultural dynamics of the city.

2. Literature Review

Based on the topic of this study, previous research findings at home and abroad are analyzed in terms of research on place naming practices from the perspective of sociolinguistics, and research on naming practices in public transportation.

2.1. Research on Place Naming Practices from the Perspective of Sociolinguistics

2.1.1. Foreign Research on Place Naming Practices from the Perspective of Sociolinguistics

Jenkins (1991) pointed out that proper names, especially place names, were sociolinguistically significant and could cross linguistic boundaries. In South Africa, the National Place Names Committee (NPNC) was responsible for managing these names. It dealt with problems such as unusual spellings and places having more than one name. Although the committee worked continuously to standardize names, changes still happened over time. These changes reflected the way language and society continued to shift. Later, in 2000, Bright discussed the controversy around the term "squaw" in U.S. place names. He identified three main reasons for the debate. Firstly, many saw the word as having a negative origin. Secondly, it had a long history of being used as a slur against Indigenous women. Thirdly, some viewed it as offensive in the same way as racial slurs. His study highlighted the sociolinguistic issues surrounding politically correct language and the values associated with words.

Buberwa (2012) explored the sociolinguistic role of place names in Ruhaya, the language spoken in northwestern Tanzania. He argued that these names reflect social and cultural settings. Many of them come from well-known people, special

events, plants, animals, and even parts of the human body. He also stressed the need to study such names as language changes over time, which was key to understanding the structure and meaning of African languages. Then, Shakarboyevich (2024) examined how the toponyms of the Kushrabad district reveal the region's historical, cultural, and geographical identity. He viewed these names as symbols of collective memory and local heritage.

2.1.2. Domestic Research on Place Naming Practices from the Perspective of Sociolinguistics

The earliest relevant domestic research can be traced back to Gu's (2005) study on the relationship between sociolinguistics and geographical names, as well as the influence of society on geographical names in Xinjiang Province. She mentioned that the names of places in Xinjiang Province reflect profound social and historical influences. After 1949, some place names were changed to honor ethnic identities, and historical documents aided in researching name origins, variations, and standardization.

Liu (2011) investigated whether the "Li" in Lishui's place name should be pronounced with a rising tone or a falling tone. According to the basic principles of Chinese place names, she considered it advisable to use the falling tone, which aligns with local usage, facilitates communication, and promotes economic development. Similarly, Dong's (2015) sociolinguistic study of Harbin's place name "Ha" found it had two phonetic variants: the level tone and the falling-rising tone. Dong noticed that age and occupation significantly influence the choice of tone. In the meantime, educational background has minimal impact on such preferences.

In 2011, Guo conducted a social-linguistic analysis of place names in Shanxi Province and found these names reflect historical changes and societal characteristics. In addition, place names are constantly evolving with city development and modernization. Recently, after examining Yuechi County's place names from linguistic and cultural perspectives, Yang (2023) highlighted their unique characteristics and the importance of preserving cultural heritage. Her recommendations included protecting historical names, planning new names properly, and integrating them into cultural industries for long-term sustainability.

2.2. Research on Naming Practices in Public Transportation

2.2.1. Foreign Research on Naming Practices in Public Transportation

Bowes et al. (2018) developed a user-centered taxonomy for urban transportation applications and presented it at the HCIBGO 2018 conference. Their study aimed to enhance the usability and accessibility of urban transport systems, focusing on improving user experience and efficiency. It emphasized designing intuitive and user-friendly transport applications to cater to the diverse needs of urban commuters. Adami (2020) studied the naming strategies used by the Delhi Metro. He explored how these names were carefully chosen to shape and reflect cultural, historical, and

social identities. Adami highlighted the significant role these names played in shaping perceptions and experiences of urban spaces in Delhi as well.

After analyzing metro station naming strategies in seven megacities, Fraszczyk (2020) and his colleagues found that Tokyo uses the shortest names, while New York has the longest. In addition, they noticed the naming strategies of these cities varied: the adoption of street-based names in New York and Bangkok, the adoption of area names in São Paulo, Cairo, and London, and the adoption of person names in Cairo and São Paulo. They also provided insights and recommendations for new and developing metro systems to guide their naming strategies. Lim and Perono (2023) delved into the station naming conventions within Singapore's Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system, as well as emphasized critical toponyms and daily multilingual interactions. They analyzed how the names of stations mirror Singapore's varied linguistic and historical fabric, stressing the impact of these names on urban experiences and cultural identity. They also called for inclusive naming practices that honor and reflect a city's multicultural environment.

2.2.2. Domestic Research on Naming Practices in Public Transportation

Liu and Zhu (2014) investigated the naming and renaming strategies of Guangzhou Metro stations from a critical perspective. Their study revealed the influence of social, political, and cultural factors on naming decisions. These choices, in turn, reflected broader urban changes and helped form the city's transit identity. Likewise, Shi (2014) analyzed the English translations of Beijing Metro station names, identified various translation strategies, and assessed their effectiveness. Her study stressed that translation affects not only how users understand the names but also how cultural meanings are conveyed. Well-translated names, she argued, can improve public understanding of urban mobility.

A year later, Yang and Guo (2015) explored the naming methods and cultural significance of Wuhan Metro station names. They showed how naming choices reflected local identity and shaped how people viewed the city. In the same year, Xiong and Wu (2015) analyzed the English translations of Nanjing Metro station names, focusing on translation methods and efficacy. They identified strategies such as literal translation and cultural adaptation. Their findings revealed that translation choices influence both user comprehension and the city's cultural presentation. Recently, Tao, Zhou, and Cao (2024) explored subway station name translations in Shanghai and five cities in Jiangsu Province, and used a corpus-based approach to analyze translation tactics. They underlined the need for uniform standards, provided insights into existing practices, and offered guidance for future translations to enhance urban communication.

Based on the above analysis, it is evident that previous studies mainly focused on place naming practices from the perspectives of sociolinguistics and naming practices in public transportation. However, the research on English naming

practices in public transportation from the perspective of sociolinguistics remains limited. In particular, despite the existing domestic studies having investigated the English metro station names of cities like Guangzhou, Nanjing, Wuhan, and so on, there is a dearth of relevant research in the context of Wuxi. Therefore, the English naming practices of Wuxi Metro stations can be analyzed from the angles of linguistic strategies, socio-cultural influences, and community perceptions. Delving into these aspects will have profound and practical implications for urban planning and public transportation station naming strategies. Thus, this study aims to fill this gap by providing a detailed sociolinguistic analysis of the English naming practices employed by Wuxi Metro. Hopefully, it can also shed light on broader implications for language policy, urban identity, and toponymy.

3. Research Methodology

In this section, the research methodology, including data collection methods and research questions, will be briefly introduced.

3.1. Data Collection

In this study, the main research object is the English naming practices of Wuxi Metro. Therefore, the following stations' Chinese names and corresponding official English names of four metro lines are searched for and collated from the bilingual map shown on the official website of Wuxi Metro (<http://www.wxmetro.net/>). To be more specific, there are thirty-six stations in Line One, twenty-two stations in Line Two, twenty-one stations in Line Three, and eighteen stations in Line Four.

3.2. Research Questions

In light of the insights gained from the above literature and collected data, this study proceeds to investigate the following three research questions:

- What linguistic strategies are used in translating Chinese station names to English in the Wuxi Metro system?
- How do English naming practices in the Wuxi Metro reflect the cultural and historical heritage of the city? What are the sociolinguistic implications?
- How do residents and visitors perceive the English names of Wuxi Metro stations?

4. Analysis of Naming Practices

In this section, the English naming practices of Wuxi Metro will be analyzed according to the research questions from three perspectives: linguistic strategies, sociolinguistic implications, and public opinions.

4.1. Linguistic Strategies

4.1.1. Translation and Transliteration

On the one hand, some station names might be directly translated to provide meaningful and contextually appropriate names in English, namely, a station named after a famous location or landmark might use the corresponding English name. For instance, the term “Bund” of Jiangyin Bund Station is widely associated with waterfront promenades, particularly the famous Bund in Shanghai. Using “Bund” in the translation immediately reminds foreign visitors that “Jiangyin Bund” is a similar type of attraction or place, facilitating their understanding of what they will see at this station. Furthermore, “Civic Center” is widely recognized and used internationally to describe similar facilities in different countries and cultures. By adopting this translation, what passengers can find at this station becomes more easily understandable and accessible to English-speaking tourists. Such a translation also aligns with the English station names of similar constructions in other Chinese cities, such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou. This consistency helps to establish a common understanding among English-speaking audiences, making it easier for them to comprehend the local context.

On the other hand, some names may be transliterated, which can be conducive to retaining the phonetic sound as well as the historical meaning of the original Chinese name. This strategy is often used for names that do not have a direct English equivalent or where the name itself is essential to preserve. Viewed from the results of manual statistics, such a naming approach is prevalent in the context of Wuxi Metro. Specifically, among the English station names, 61.11% (twenty-two out of thirty-six stations) of Line One’s, 63.64% (fourteen out of twenty-two stations) of Line Two’s, 57.14% (twelve out of twenty-one stations) of Line Three’s, and 44.44% (eight out of eighteen stations) of Line Four’s, adopt transliteration. The frequency of transliteration of station names is highest on Line Two, followed by Line One, Line Three, and Line Four in descending order. Transliteration ensures that the pronunciation of station names is similar to or even the same as their original names, and helps reduce misunderstandings or confusion caused by inaccurate translations. Using Rongxiang Station as an example, by transliterating the Chinese name, the cultural significance of this area (a place with two provincial-level intangible cultural heritages and six municipal-level intangible cultural heritages) is preserved and stressed, and the original pronunciation is also retained. Besides, through transliterating Sheng’an, a large village that had already formed during the Ming and Qing dynasties (then called Sheng’an Village) with a substantial population and a rich historical background, Wuxi Metro preserved the spelling of this place as a witness to history.

4.1.2. Clarity and Simplicity

Globally, metro station names are generally easy to pronounce and remember, namely, avoiding complex or lengthy names that could be challenging, especially

for foreign passengers. Thus, simplifying names while retaining their essence helps make the metro system more user-friendly.

Among the English names of Wuxi Metro Line One, 61.11% (twenty-two out of thirty-six) consist of only one word, 30.56% (eleven out of thirty-six) consist of two words, and 8.33% consist of three words or above. Similarly, in the case of Metro Line Two, 63.64% (fourteen out of twenty-two) are made up of merely one word, 31.82% (seven out of twenty-two) are made up of two words, and 4.55% (one out of twenty-two) are made up of three words or above. Concerning the English names Metro Line Three, 52.38% (eleven out of twenty-one) are composed of one simple word, 23.81% (five out of twenty-one) are composed of two words, and the remaining 23.81% (five out of twenty-one) are composed of three or more words. Last but not least, in terms of Line Four, 44.44% (eight out of eighteen) use just one word, and 27.78% (five out of eighteen) use two words, whose percentage is the same as those using three or more words. From the above analysis, it is apparent that Wuxi Metro predominantly adopts one word or two words as station names. Using one or two words makes station names more accessible to a diverse range of passengers, including those who may have limited language proficiency or are not native speakers. Additionally, in the fast-paced environment of public transportation, concise names can be quickly understood by passengers, reducing the cognitive load and helping them find the correct destinations more efficiently.

Moreover, Wuxi Metro follows a consistent translation pattern for airport and railway station names. These are rendered as “XXX Airport” or “XXX Railway Station.” Examples include Sunan Shuofang International Airport, Jiangyin Railway Station, Wuxi Railway Station, Wuxi East Railway Station, and Wuxi New District Station. This naming approach clearly indicates the function of each location. It helps passengers easily identify these stops as major transportation hubs.

4.2. Sociolinguistic Implications

4.2.1. Cultural Identity and Image

To cater to international visitors and enhance the city’s global image, Wuxi Metro employs dual-language naming, including both Chinese and English. This practice facilitates navigation for non-native speakers while showcasing the city’s openness and inclusivity. The adoption of English names in the Wuxi Metro signifies a shift towards a more globalized and modern urban identity, which also reflects a broader trend where cities integrate elements of international languages, primarily English, to project a cosmopolitan image. These naming choices influence how the public views the city. The inclusion of English metro station names suggests that Wuxi is forward-looking and ready to engage in global networks. It also reflects the city’s economic ambitions and desire to present itself as modern and internationally connected.

Beyond practical benefits, using English in public transportation can be seen as a form of cultural diplomacy. It reflects Wuxi's openness and hospitality towards international visitors. By making the metro system more accessible to non-Chinese speakers, the city presents itself as welcoming and globally minded. This effort may also improve Wuxi's international reputation and help build positive global ties.

Some station names highlight local heritage and culture. For example, Nanchan Temple Station is named after a historic Buddhist temple that dates back over 1200 years. This station exemplifies Wuxi's deep cultural roots and religious significance. The temple is also a popular tourist attraction, and the station's name serves as a beacon for visitors seeking to explore the city's cultural heritage or experience Buddhist culture. Similarly, Huishan Ancient Town Station takes its name from an ancient town with origins in the Southern and Northern Dynasties. This site is closely linked to Wuxi's historical and cultural roots. The English name helps foreign tourists easily recognize it as a key cultural destination, especially for those interested in traditional water towns south of the Yangtze River.

4.2.2. Social Integration

Using English names on the Wuxi Metro ensures that the transportation system is accessible to a diverse population. Foreign visitors can find their destinations with ease, which lowers the risk of confusion due to language barriers. This clarity allows them to participate more fully in local life, both economically and socially.

For the station names associated with parks, plazas, canals, and roads, Wuxi Metro takes a thoughtful approach. It combines the Chinese pronunciation of place names with translations that reflect the function or nature of the site. To name a few, Yingyuehu Park, Sanyang Plaza, Xibei Canal, and Shimen Road. These translations maintain the cultural and geographical meaning of the original names while offering clear descriptions for international passengers. This approach facilitates social integration by making it easier for foreign passengers to understand the significance of these locations. By using English in this way, Wuxi Metro fosters social integration. It creates a shared space where both residents and visitors, regardless of language background, can feel more informed and included.

4.3. Public Opinions

Apart from the theoretical aspects, it is also critical to analyze public opinions on Wuxi Metro's English naming practices. As a result, this section collects and uses the typical comments on common social platforms like Weibo and Douyin as an example.

Initially, the English name of the current Wuxi East Railway Station was Wuxidong Railway Station, which was consistent with the English name of a nearby railway station on the Beijing-Shanghai High-Speed Railway. However, some passengers noticed that the word "dong," which retains its Chinese pronunciation, might cause

confusion or inconvenience among foreign visitors. Thus, to enhance the overall passenger experience and avoid misunderstanding, this station's name has been displayed as Wuxi East Railway Station on the latest map shown on the Wuxi Metro official website and in each relevant station.

5. Conclusion

From the above analysis, a brief summary can be drawn as follows: to begin with, when translating Chinese station names to English, two main strategies are used: translation and transliteration. Translation provides meaningful and contextually relevant names in English, such as "Bund" for Jiangyin Bund Station, and the adoption of internationally recognized terms like "Civic Center" to facilitate comprehension. Meanwhile, transliteration preserves the original Chinese phonetics, as seen in 44.44% to 63.64% of stations across different lines. This method maintains the original pronunciation and highlights cultural significance, like in "Rongxiang." Most English names are also kept short, usually one or two words, to ensure clarity and ease of memory for foreign passengers.

Besides, English naming practices in the Wuxi Metro reflect the city's cultural and historical heritage while promoting a modern and global image. By incorporating English metro station names, Wuxi signals its openness to international visitors and enhances its cosmopolitan appeal. Historical station names like "Nanchan Temple" help preserve cultural memory while making it accessible to tourists. This bilingual approach lowers language barriers and supports social inclusion, encouraging a shared sense of place among residents and visitors alike.

Finally, public responses to English station names have not always been entirely positive. For instance, initially, names like "Wuxidong Railway Station" caused discussions online due to the unchanged Chinese pronunciation of "dong." This feedback from platforms like Weibo and Douyin, possibly prompted a revision to "Wuxi East Railway Station" to improve clarity and passenger experience. This case reflects Wuxi Metro's willingness to enhance the accessibility and understanding of station names for international visitors.

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