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Linguistic Errors in Shop Signs in Erbil City

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the language of business in Erbil city – the capital of Kurdistan region- to figure out how often shop signs fail to convey any relevant information to target language readers. These errors are classified into three categories: spelling, grammar, and word choice with the second having the highest frequency. This study supposes the reasons behind these sorts of errors include translator’s language incompetence, translator’s carelessness, and the socio-cultural differences between English, Arabic, and Kurdish.

Keywords: Shop signs, Translation errors, English, Arabic, Kurdish

1. Introduction

Due to the current unstable situation in most of the governorates in Iraq, most people and businessmen have traveled to Erbil city which is the capital of Kurdistan region. They settle there and make their own business. Within this trend, we have seen a lot of shop signs in different languages; namely, Arabic, English, and Kurdish which is the official language in Erbil. These shop signs play an indispensable role in business since they either encourage consumers to enter the shop or to forget about it at all. That’s why, shop owners make their best to increase the ratio of their sales and to get the notice of buyers. They do so by using catchy signs in different languages but English is mostly used since it reflects the high prestige of the owner. Generally speaking, people tend to appreciate those who speak English and use English in the facades since it is a prestigious language. We can also see English words but in Kurdish and Arabic letters. In this era of modernity and globalization, the language of shop sign is somewhat “loaded” and challenging, so it is not difficult to justify why one should study their discourse (Al-Kharabsheh et al., 2008). The study of signs has started by two men Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) who are the founders of semiotics, the science of signs. The formers has defined the sign as a combination of a concept and a sound image. The latter, however, defines the sign as something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity (Beger, 2004). From the marketing perspective, a

sign is a device placed on or before a premise to identify its occupants and the nature of the business done there or to advertise a business or its products (cited by Al-Athwary, 2014). The representation of a text in more than one language on a sign is called a bilingual (or more broadly a multilingual sign). These multilingual shop signs are not free of mistakes. However, they are error-ridden. Some of these errors take place due to the translation, localization, and adaptation. Translation is the process of producing a text in a target setting for a target purpose and target addressees in target circumstances. Localization is, however, wider than translation and it means taking a product and making it linguistically and culturally appropriate to the target locale. In adaptation, the copywriter (they don't mention the word translator) will always aim to produce a copy in their own language, which reflects the tone and nuance of the original - at the same time creating a refreshing copy, which is culturally relevant (cited by Sotomayor, 2007). Therefore, this study comes into sight. Following the methodology adopted by Al-Kharabsheh et al. (2008), four main types of errors have been identified: orthographic errors affecting the message, transliteration, translation errors and avoidance of translation via recouring to total foreignization demonstrating ignorance at best.

2. Literature Review

Due to the extensive use of shop signs in different languages and colors, and using many textual elements to get buyers' attention, many researchers have been urged to study these shop signs. Amer & Obeidat (2014), in their study entitled by "Linguistic landscape: a case study of shop signs in Aqaba city, Jordan", figure out that in most of the collected shop signs the author translates the Arabic name into English to make information about the goods and services they provide available for Arabic non-speakers and English is used to attract foreign customers' attention. They, on the other hand, find out that some shop owners prefer to use both Arabic and English in their shop signs since the former is associated with globalization, modernity, prestige and for decorative purposes. Arabic in English spelling occupies the second position according to frequency. Arabic spelling is used to represent English words and phrases on some signs. The reason for such representation is the fact that the English word is already used in the local dialect of the city as the case of *dry clean*, *pizza*, and *chicken tikka*. In few cases English only is used on shop signs; in most of these businesses the target customers are foreigners as mentioned by shop owners.

Al-Athwary (2014) in his study entitled by "Translating shop signs into English in Sana'a's streets: a linguistic analysis", has revealed that the current situation of the translation of signs in the streets of big cities still suffers from deficiency and it is not satisfactory. A large number of signs contain errors of different types and varying levels of seriousness. Translation problems found in the shop signs occur in three categories of errors: spelling, grammatical, and lexical, with the last having the highest frequency.

The various cases of poorly translated English signs present foreign readers with exotic messages which consequently lead to confusion and frustration. He has mentioned that the reason behind that is translator's language incompetence, carelessness, the socio-cultural differences between Arabic and English, and mother tongue interference. Besides, the high-frequency errors, which deal with incorrect lexical choices and literal translation have come about partly due to the failure of the translators to pay adequate heed to semantic boundaries between lexical items in English and Arabic as well as to the failure to stick to the rule prohibiting verbatim translation of proper nouns.

Al-Kharabsheh et al. (2008), in their study entitled by "lost in translation: shop signs in Jordan", have investigated various types of problems and errors associated with translating shop signs into English. They show that that shop signs in Jordan are translationally error-ridden, due to various linguistic and extra-linguistic factors. The former involves word-order, wrong lexical choice, and reductionist strategies that have proved to result in information "skewing" and consequently giving rise to serious semantic-conceptual problems. The latter includes a variety of socio-cultural and promotional factors that have a great impact on the way shop signs are verbalized. They also figure out that in some shop signs there is no relationship between the source language text (SLT) and its supposed target language (TL) equivalent.

Guo (2012), in his study entitled by "Analysis on the English-translation errors of public signs", has shown that the current situation of the translation of publicity in big cities in China shows up its deficiency. There is no denial that public signs play an important role in daily life, and their English versions contribute great help and convenience to the foreigners in China. Additionally, they also have become an effective way to set up China's international image. The current situation of English translation of these signs is not satisfactory, and various cases of poorly translated English signs present foreign readers with a jumbled meaning. Perhaps the greater problem is the abundance of Chinese-English signs used for directing foreign tourists to and from places. Although there are problems existing in the translation of bilingual public signs, it is still delightful to see that the issue has been brought to spotlight by the academic scene, government and even the general public, and it has already become a public concern which arouses a flaming public interest that it should have deserved for long.

The study of shop signs is not always a matter of text, but it is also connected with the term color and how some colors have different cultural connotation. Al-Adaileh (2012) in his research entitled by "the connotation of Arabic color terms", has investigated the figurative uses of *black*, *white*, *yellow*, *red*, *green*, and *blue*. In reference to the Jordanian Arabic, he has figured that all colors have euphemistic and dysphemistic connotations but while *black*, *yellow*, *red* and *blue* were found to be

predominantly dysphemistic and associated with mostly negative connotations, white is used euphemistically, and mostly has positive connotations, yet *green* is found to be having both euphemistic and dysphemistic connotations.

In coincidence with this study, Christelle (2012) has discussed the translation of advertisements based on Coca-Cola advertisements. She has discovered how colors play a magnificent role in advertising. She has demonstrated that colors are symbolic in advertising. Colors such as red, blue, green and yellow are used in Coca-Cola advertisements to portray fun, happiness, joy and freshness. Furthermore, she has observed that icons such as Eddie Fisher and Santa Claus were used in the advertisements to persuade the audience. Symbols such as happy people, clowns, and even hands were used effectively to persuade consumers.

3. Methodology

This research focuses on the foreign language presence in business sector in Erbil city in general and on shop signs in particular. Thus the target is to analyze shop signs in terms of language choice (Arabic, English, or Kurdish). By “sign” is meant all the linguistic material written to attract the attention to a shop, whether on a typical sign, a shop window, or on a moving door. All that relates to the same store or shop is seen a single sign. These signs are analyzed according to the type of foreign influence they exhibit. The spelling of the English material on these signs is kept as it is whenever referred to throughout this article.

For the purpose of this study, commercial signs of 100 businesses have been randomly collected from different streets in Erbil. The type of business in the sample area include car rental, stores of carpet, real estate offices, shops for clothes and paints, companies, restaurants, clinics, and cafes. The signs are initially divided into four broad groups: signs that have Arabic language only, signs that have Kurdish language only, signs that have English and Arabic languages, and signs that have English and Kurdish languages.

4. Analysis and Results

The analysis of the data has shown that there are different errors in the collected shop signs. Following the methodology adopted by Al-Kharabsheh et al. (2008), four types of translation errors are identified: orthographic errors affecting the message, transliteration, translation errors and avoidance of translating via recouring to total foreignization demonstrating ignorance at best.

4.1. Orthographic errors

Orthographic errors are cognitive errors consisting of the substitution of a deviant spelling for a correct one when the writer simply doesn't know the correct spelling of a particular word or forgot it or misconceived it (ThambiJose, 2014). One can find two important characteristic features of orthographic errors.

1. They generally result in a string which is phonologically identical or very similar to the correct strings.

For example, prefer instead of prefre.

2. Proper names, infrequent words (uncommon words) and borrowed words are particularly prone to orthographic errors.

For example, datem instead of datum.

The spelling in English depends upon the phonemic/phonetic representations. Having a quick glance at the shop signs in Erbil city, it is not difficult to realize spelling mistakes, which involve wrong spelling of a word, or missing or adding of one or more letters in a word. Misspelling found vary from the simple to the serious ones. To illustrate this category of errors, consider the following example:

- 1) LORIS Parfume
- 2) Chat coffe
- 3) FisHouse.
- 4) LABoss LUAY.
- 5) ROYAL FOR CURTANIS
- 6) International Developmant Bank
- 7) Cosmetiques
- 8) Tabuu
- 9) Koton
- 10) Vertu (Boutique Erbil)

Misspelling in examples (1) & (2) are simple and occur because they are written as they are pronounced, hence we get *parfume* for *perfume* and *Coffe* for *Coffee*. The mistake in the third example, however, is striking since the dropping of (*h*) and the

deletion of the space result in *Fishouse* instead of *Fish house*. This mistake creates a kind of confusion to the foreigner and he cannot figure it out unless mental effort is exerted. In example (4) the mistake is really serious since the shop owner tries to put two names to the lab. These are *boss* and *Luay* in a way to show the leadership of his shop. Also, anyone reads the sign, he will figure out that it is a good place to make some blood tests. In reality, however, it is a studio for taking photos. Therefore, the sign here is really misleading. In example (5), the mistake is also serious which reflects the unawareness of the shop owner of the English translation and it also reflects the fact that most of the English speakers in Erbil tend to insert “I” before that last consonant in the word in pronunciation.

There is something else that attracts the attention of the researcher that most of the furniture shops’ owners tend to use the word *mobilya* instead of furniture. This word is neither English nor Kurdish which is the official language in Erbil city. It is, however, mostly used by Egyptians. This means that either the shop owners are watching Egyptian series a lot or it is easier than furniture for them. The last five examples emphasize the point that shop’s and bank’s owners tend to write what they read. They also reflect the irresponsibility and carelessness of owners forgetting the point that these signs might be read by foreigners who might have a bad impression on Erbil.

4.2 Grammatical Errors

Most of grammatical deviations are simple and straight forward and don’t seriously affect the conveyed message. These include inappropriate use of the plural form, and the wrong word order. At the same time, there are instances of signs in which target text structure seems odd and somehow disturbed. It refers to the insertion of the superfluous preposition *for* in target translation. They also include the wrong word order and the wrong part of speech as follows:

- (11) 4 U for covermobil
- (12) Femin
- (13) Price صيرفه
- *Price (exchange)
- (14) Opal Optik
- (15) Koton
- (16) Coffee prince
- (17) The future embracing the heritage.

(18) Live olive (Aleppo soap)

(19) Kitchen tasty

Example 11 shows and reflects the interference of the mother tongue (Arabic or Kurdish) by using cover mobile, not the other way around. It also has an orthographic error which is the deletion of the final (e) in the word (mobile). This is a common mistake in the collected data coming out from the point that anything not pronounced shouldn't be written. In addition, it has another common mistake which is the deletion of the space between (cover) and (mobile). Example 12, has a serious mistake. The translator means (femininity) which has to do with women's dresses and stuff, but he fails in expressing such a meaning by choosing a misspelt word. Example 13 expresses how much the translator is in lack of professionalism. He has combined two languages in two words. He has also chosen the wrong word which is (price) instead of (money). Example 14 reflects the wrong use of the part of speech. It is also sending a disturbed message. If the translator means (optician) so we, as costumers, should expect finding a person for checking the eyesight. On the ground, however, we find just a place for selling medical and sun glasses. It also has another common mistake which is the use of (k) instead of (c) that is repeated in example 15.

Example 16 also includes the false word order which reflects the mother tongue interference. The same mistakes is repeated in 19. Example 17 reflects the translator's language incompetence by deleting the verb – be- and using the gerund alone. Example 18 also reflects translator's language incompetence by using a noun after a verb where he must use an adverb.

4.3 Transliteration Errors

Transliteration is the task of converting a word in one language into a sequence of characters from a different language while attempting to best approximate the native pronunciation. Transliteration is essentially a translation problem, from the set of sounds in one language to those from another language. This phonetic translation process is made more difficult by the fact that the model may need to additionally incorporate the translation between the written representations of each language and the phonetic representations (Berwick, 2009). Transliterating shop signs by using Roman characters are of no use to target language readers and performs only one purpose intended by shop owners which is showing modernity and prestige.

Similar to grammar errors, some of transliteration errors are slight and have no effect on the conveyed message of shop signs. The focus will be on the diacritization (vowelling) and gemination (consonant lengthening) which are related to the transliteration process and usually lead to more serious translation problems. It will also

pay attention to the addition of (ی) although it is not available in the original sign due to the intensive effect of the mother tongue.

(20) Rawah pomegranate

Rawwah

(21) کۆمپانیای بۆن فۆیاج

BonVoyage company

(22) British international Institute

سهنتهری بهریتانی نیودهولتهتی

(23) Ashna restauran

خوار دنگه‌ی ئاشنا

(24) هۆتیلی ئاکار

Akar Hotel

In example 20, the semi-vowel (w) in Rawah needs to be geminated or doubled in order to get Rawwah ‘Amazing’. Errors related to gemination are serious enough since gemination in Arabic serves an important morphological and semantic function. The non-existence of gemination renders the word meaningless. It is also clear that example 21 has been transliterated wrongly due to the absence of (fatha) in the Kurdish language and the use of (أ) instead. Also, in the Kurdish language the (ی) is used to substitute (of). There is (ی) in (کۆمپانیای) and there is no (of) in the original shop sign, though. This has been repeated in the three quarter of the collected data as you see in 22, 23, and 24. This reflects the point that there is a grammatical rule in the Kurdish language which states that we must use (ی) even if we don’t have it in the original copy because in the English language this (of) can be understood implicitly but in the Kurdish language it is a must for using it explicitly. Example 22 reflects another error which is the use of (center) instead of (معهد) for (institute). This reflects the unawareness of the translator and his lack of information. The last error can be listed under informativeness errors.

Translating some shop names are sometimes interesting as well as problematic. This phenomenon refers to cases which involve a mixture of transliteration and translation as it can be revealed by the following examples.

(25) Al-Njoom Rest.

(26) Sara Spencer

(27) Pasha Palace Hotel

هوتيل قصر پاشا

The striking error in the 25th example is the lack of diacritic (or short vowel) (i) in Njoom for Nigoom ‘stars’. Missing this diacritic in the transliteration process brings about the emergence of initial consonant clusters which are not permissible in the Arabic syllable system. Example 26 represents the trick played by the shop owner to attract a lot of customers. He tries to attach Spencer to Sara to make it like (Marks & Spencer) the well-known department store in Britain. Example 27 reflects another transliteration problem which is the deletion of (أل) from (پاشا) which is an integral part of this Arabic noun.

To sum up, it can be said that transliterating shop names in the way shown in all examples above is not only wrong and unacceptable, but also totally unhelpful in translation as it generates exotic items that can be more confusing than helpful.

4.4 Inappropriate Lexical Choice

This type of translation errors has been repeated in the collected data. The reason behind that is the lack of the translator’s and owner’s awareness. The choice of a catchy shop sign is not a matter of writing any English word. Beside the linguistic, cultural, and social features, it must be chosen according to the habits, traditions, and the religion of place residents. The following examples reflect the absence of all these considerations.

(28) Harveys furniture store

(29) German restaurant and beer garden

(30) Barista Coffee

Example 28 has used the word ‘Harveys’ which is a company for selling wine in Bristol. This word has nothing to do with furniture store and it reflects the shallow information of the shop owner. Example 29 has chosen “German”, and there is no German dish, though. It also uses “beer garden” which an exotic expression to the culture and the tradition of the people of Erbil city. Example 30 has chosen the word “Barista” which means a person serving in a coffee bar. This word is a little bit awkward and it is not acceptable a lot. Besides, the wrong lexical choice is used which is “coffee” instead of “café”.

4.5 The Translation of Proper Names

Proper names are specific names assigned to places. So any name given to a business store and appear on a shop sign is dealt with as a proper name. It is a well-known fact that proper names are not usually translated. The main reason behind that is that proper names have no connotations and are the same in most languages. The problem with this category of errors is that most of the shop names are translated literally which is considered as an error and against the above mentioned rule.

(31) (hotel qasar basha)

Pasha palace hotel.

(32) جمعية الامل

Al-Amal hope center.

Here, the translator resorts to the literal meaning of the shop signs while the appropriate translation of such proper nouns is the use of transliteration technique. These errors are not much common in Erbil city but they are confusing. In example 31, the source sign implies that the hotel is big, prestigious, and providing five-star services but the target translation means it is only big and might the intended meaning not come to the reader's mind. Example 32 has two errors which is the repetition of the word (أمل) as transliterated and translated. Once the translator has used (Al-Amal), there is no need to translate it. This reflects the carelessness of the translator. This tendency reflects the desire of the shop owner to show abreast to modernity and, in turn, to boost sales.

4.6 Culturally-Based Translation

Jensen (2009) says that differences in culture pose several challenges to the translator. The most obvious problem is probably what is sometimes called cultural words which are words or phrases that are difficult, and often impossible, to translate. They are difficult to translate because they are deeply rooted in the culture and values associated with the source language but are not part of the cultural context of the target language. Often, the translator will have to paraphrase them, come up with an inaccurate 'equivalent' or even coin a whole new word in the target language as you see in examples 34 and 35.

Al-Athwary (2014) says that signs in the public space cannot be denied as one of the main carriers of ethnological culture, and the meaning of the signs should not only implicate the entity but also connote the notion of culture. As a result, shop signs translation from Arabic or Kurdish into English is not only a bilingual activity, but also a bicultural activity.

(33) Altin Saray (Restaurant and café)

Golden castle (restaurant and Café)

(34) مینی مارکیٹی چاوی چاوم

(35) چیشخانہ وکبابی جەرگی جەرگم

As mentioned above, a single lexical item can sometimes destroy the general intended message of the shop sign due to first the socio-cultural differences between SL and TL and second due to the odd linguistic structure of shop sign texts which don't exceed the form of words, phrases, and compounds, a linguistic property makes each word enjoy a greater semantic status than it would have in other larger texts. In 33, for example, the translator refers to the transliteration strategy instead of the translation one thinking that this kind of buildings is not part of the western culture and, consequently, has no English equivalent while it is.

4.7 Informativeness Errors

Errors caused by loss or change of information in TL message are usually classified as mistranslation on the cultural level. Al-Kharabsheh et al. (2008) call this approach "reductionist" by which some information are lost due to translator's carelessness or due to spatial considerations governed by the size and the cost of sign compelling the translator to be short and brief in the translation of shop signs.

(36) Jame3 Anwa3 Alal3ab

Space toon

(37) کۆمپانیای بۆن فویاج بۆ فرۆکهوانی وگهشت وگوزار

Bon Voyage company

(38) Jame3 Anwa3 Alkhubaz w Almu3ajanat

Bakery and more

(39) Jame3 Anwa3 Almalabs Alshabbiya likila Aljinsen

Dockers

The sample examples show incomplete messages conveyed in TL. In (36) the translated item does not tell us that this store is dealing with all children's games unless you have an idea that the name (space toon) is a name of channel on TV for Cartoons. The situation is even worse in (37). The source version of the shop sign says that this company delivers a lot of services for tourism and flying. Moreover, the French name of

the company may increase the perplexedness of the foreign reader; he or she may think that this company just deals with arranging flights to France. The same thing occurs in 38. Rendering the shop name *Bakery and more* into TL alone would not help compensate the lost information. The worst thing takes place in 39 in which nothing in the TL name can help customers that this shop is for smart casual unisex clothes.

The improper omission of such information is motivated by the shop owner's desire to appear more fashionable regardless whether "this any English" has conveyed the intended message or not.

5. Conclusions

This study has revealed that the current situation of the translation of signs in the streets of the capital of Kurdistan -Erbil- suffers from deficiency and is not satisfactory. Translation problems found in this sample of this study are mainly spelling, grammatical, and lexical. These errors cause a kind of misunderstanding and confusion for foreigners. Reason lay behind these errors include translators' language incompetence, translators' carelessness, socio-cultural differences between English, Arabic, and Kurdish interference. In other words, most of the errors that deal with the incorrect lexical choices and literal translation have come about partly because of the failure of the translator to pay sufficient attention to semantic boundaries between lexical items in English, Arabic, and Kurdish as well as to the failure to stick to the rule prohibiting verbatim translation of proper nouns. In order to avoid such errors, it needs paying great attention by translators, communicators, shop owners, and the local authorities as well.

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Appendix

Orthographic errors
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) LORIS Parfume 2) Chat coffe 3) FisHouse. 4) LABoss LUAY. 5) ROYAL FOR CURTANIS 6) International Developmant Bank 7) Cosmetiques 8) Tabuu 9) Koton 10) Vertu (Boutique Erbil)
Grammatical errors
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) 4 U for covermobil 2) Femin 3) Price صيرفه *Price (exchange) 4) Opal Optik 5) Koton 6) Coffee prince 7) The future embracing the heritage. 8) Live olive (Aleppo soap) 9) Kitchen tasty
Transliteration errors
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1)Rawah pomegranate Rawwah 2) كۆمپانىي بۆن قۇباج BonVoyage company 3) British international Institute سەنئەتى بەرپتانی نیودەولەتى 4)Ashna restauran خواردنگه‌ی ئاشنا 5) ھۆتېلى ئاکار Akar Hotel
Translation and Transliteration errors
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Al-Njoom Rest. 2) Sara Spencer 3) Pasha Palace Hotel ھۆتېل قصر پاشا

Inappropriate lexical choice
1) Harveys furniture store 2) German restaurant and beer garden 3) Barista Coffee
Translation of proper names
1) (hotel qasar basha) Pasha palace hotel. 2) جمعية الامل Al-Amal hope center
Culturally based translation
1) Altin Saray (Restaurant and café) Golden castle (restaurant and Café) 2) مینی مارکیتی چاوی چاوم 3) چیشخانه وکبابی جهرگی جهرگم
Informativeness errors
1) Jame3 Anwa3 Alal3ab Space toon 2) کۆمپانیای بۆن فۆیاج بۆ فرۆکهوانی وگهشت وگوزار Bon Voyage company 3) Jame3 Anwa3 Alkhubaz w Almu3ajanat Bakery and more 4) Jame3 Anwa3 Almalabs Alshabbiya likila Aljinsen Dockers