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## Reframing Cultural Conceptions Through Translation

### A B S T R A C T

The translations of public signs distributed inside and outside Iraqi cities are random and of low quality. These translations contribute to reframing the conceptual image of cities as well as the communities inhabiting them. Moreover, the quality of these translated signs seems to underestimate the gradual development of translation as a profession and an academic field in this country. Conversely, it is unsatisfactory to continue producing and, more importantly, accepting these translations without in-depth revision. This study attempts to evaluate the translation of these signs. It reviews the strategies followed in their rendering from Arabic into English. Primarily, it does not only try to identify mistranslations, but also the impact these erroneous versions have on the viewers' perception of cities. It is a qualitative study that brings Kevin Lynch's (1960) Theory of 'the Image of the City' in Architecture to Translation Studies. The data used in the study come from two main sources: bilingual public signs and the responses of international viewers to a carefully-designed questionnaire. Results show that mistranslations of public signs do have a remarkable negative impact on reframing the viewers' perception of the mental image of Iraqi cities and their inhabitants (including, of course, translators). Revising the available bilingual signs and establishing a high committee responsible for monitoring are among the recommendations offered by the study.

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## إعادة صياغة المفاهيم الثقافية من خلال الترجمة

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## المستخلص

ان ترجمة اللافتات العامة الموزعة داخل وخارج المدن العراقية عشوائية ومنخفضة الجودة. ومن الجدير بالذكر ان هذه الترجمات قد تساهم في إعادة صياغة الصورة المفاهيمية للمدن وكذلك المجتمعات التي تسكنها. علاوة على ذلك، يبدو أن جودة هذه العلامات المترجمة تقلل من أهمية التطور التدريجي للترجمة كمهنة وحقل أكاديمي في هذا البلد. بالمقابل، فمن غير المرضي الاستمرار في إنتاج هذه الترجمات ، والأهم من ذلك ، قبولها دون مراجعة متعمقة. تحاول هذه الدراسة تقييم ترجمة هذه العلامات. و تستعرض اولاً الاستراتيجيات المتبعة في تحويلها من العربية إلى الإنجليزية ، وهي بهذا لا تحاول فقط تحديد الترجمات الخاطئة ، ولكن أيضًا تأثير هذه النسخ على تصور المشاهدين للمدن. اي انها دراسة نوعية تستعين بنظرية كيفن لينش (١٩٦٠) عن "صورة المدينة" في الهندسة المعمارية لتفسير الظواهر السائدة في حقل دراسات الترجمة. تأتي البيانات المستخدمة في الدراسة من مصدرين رئيسيين وهما: الإشارات العامة ثنائية اللغة وردود المشاهدين الدوليين على استبيان مصمم بعناية. تظهر النتائج أن الترجمات الخاطئة للإشارات العامة لها تأثير سلبي ملحوظ على إعادة صياغة تصور المشاهدين للصورة الذهنية للمدن العراقية وسكانها (بما في ذلك ، بالطبع ، المترجمون). ومن التوصيات التي تقدمها الدراسة هي المراجعة الدقيقة للافتات ثنائية اللغة المتاحة وإنشاء لجنة عليا مسؤولة عن مراقبة ترجمة هذه اللافتات.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الترجمة الخاطئة للإشارات العامة ، نظرية السرد ، الصورة الذهنية ، كيفن لينش

## 1. Introduction

For decades, translation has been viewed as a purely linguistic activity, but over time, it has strongly become a more sociologically-bound behaviour. Moreover, the developments erupted in the economy, finance, politics, tourism, etc. have pushed the field of translation to be more inclusive and interdisciplinary. Bearing this in mind, especially after the war on Iraq in 2003, cross-cultural communication between this country and the international community expanded. Customarily, foreigners have flooded into the country for different reasons such as visiting the holy shrines or cultural sites, attending religious events, investing in oil fields, participating in the rehabilitation of infrastructure, and so on. These foreigners have been guided to some degree by bilingual (English-Arabic) public signs located in different places in the country. Any mistake or misunderstanding generated by the language used will undoubtedly have negative effects: some mistranslated public signs might even damage the image of the city wherein they are located or even the whole country.

Many bilingual public signs are indeed observed in Iraqi streets or inside and outside institutions, but they are of low quality, and full of spelling or grammatical mistakes. This might lead not only confuse foreigners but also distort the whole image of the country. Such acts of mistranslation may distort the perception of people in the eyes of foreigners. In addition, it could depict translation as being a neglected and unimportant profession and academic field. This issue can be taken as a starting point to conduct a systematic study. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this issue has not been comprehensively investigated,

therefore it is necessary to devote more attention to trying to enhance the picture of bilingual public signs and reduce those naïve mistakes committed while translating them into English. As already mentioned above, the current study adopts a qualitative analysis. On the one hand, it relies on Kevin Lynch's Theory of the image of the city (1960) to show the impact of the mistranslations of bilingual public signs on the foreign observers' perception, hence on the whole image of the city. On the other hand, a questionnaire gauging certain related aspects will be presented to foreigners to investigate the impact these errors have on their conception of cities and their inhabitants. The data of the present study, therefore, comes from two sources: bilingual public signs photos taken via a digital camera from roads, buildings facades, and inside and outside governmental institutions and the responses of foreign viewers to a carefully-designed questionnaire. To that end, a theoretical background involving a review of related literature and Kevin Lynch's model will be first presented.

## **2. Literature Review**

Although it is a recent area of linguistic study, many works have been conducted on bilingual signs and the problems accompanying the process of translation. The majority of such works, however, deal with the issue from a linguistic point of view, i.e., they focus only on the visibility of languages in the public space of a given territory. Aspects such as the number of languages that appear on bilingual signs, the function and structure of signs, and language policies of the concerned authorities in a given linguistic landscape are discussed in detail. On the other hand, some other works deal with the topic from a pragmatic and a sociolinguistic point of view. El Yasin and Mahadin (1996) conduct a pragmatic study of shop signs in Jordan which attempts to find out the function of shop signs in general and that of foreign names used in shop signs in particular. After analyzing the customers' attitudes toward foreign names, the authors conclude that shop signs using foreign names aim at promoting goods and services.

A similar sociolinguistic study on Jordanian shop signs is carried out by Mansour (2013). The focus of this study is on classifying shop signs according to language choice and also on people's attitudes toward using both foreign and Arabic names. Khosravizadeh and Sanjareh (2011) is another sociolinguistic work that investigates the views of people from the two aspects of age and education about the spread of English on shop signs and brand-naming in Tehran, Iran. For the variable of age, the younger generation always associates the use of English with prestige, modernity, and attraction and has a strong desire to use English words and the alphabet than the older generations. Regarding the variable of education, the authors conclude that as the level of education rises the enthusiasm for the use of English fades.

The researcher's interest in dealing with bilingual public signs in the present study differs. Here, the bilingual public signs are analyzed in terms of the perceptual effects they could have on their observers due to mistranslation. Moreover, the effect of these mistranslations on the whole image of Iraqi cities will be deeply investigated.

### 3. Kevin Lynch's Approach in *The Image of the City*

In Lynch's (1960) view, an image can be explained as 'a picture especially in the mind', a sentimental combination between objective city image and subjective human thoughts. The production of environmental images is influenced by a two-way process between the observer and the observed. The observer, with great adaptability and in the light of his purposes, selects, organizes, and endows with meaning what he/she sees. Therefore, the specific image can be different from the different perspectives of observers. Lynch (1960:46-78) found that there are five basic elements that people use to construct their mental image of a city. The main focus of the present study is on public signs that fall under the umbrella of the fourth element i.e., landmarks:

1. Paths are 'the channels along which the observer moves. They may be streets, walkways, transit lines, canals, or railroads'.
2. Edges are 'the linear elements not used as paths by the observer. They are the boundaries and linear breaks in continuity: shores, railroad cuts, edges of development, and walls'.
3. Districts are 'the medium-to-large sections of the city that the observer mentally enters "inside of," and which are recognized as having some common, identifying character'.
4. Nodes are 'points, the strategic spots in a city into which an observer can enter, and which are the intensive foci to and from which he is traveling. They may be primarily junctions or concentrations'.
5. Landmarks are 'another type of point reference, but in this case, the observer does not enter within them, they are external. They are usually a rather simply defined physical object: building, sign, store, or mountain'.

### 4. Data Analysis

Within this part, selected bilingual public signs are first linguistically analyzed in terms of Kussmaul's (1995) model of translation quality assessment which involves describing errors, finding appropriate justification for their occurrence, and suggesting plausible solutions to correct them (for the economy of space, only two examples are presented, other meaningful examples are available in Appendix 1). Words meaning and language errors, namely spelling errors, lexical errors, misuse of tenses, misuse of prepositions, grammatical errors, etc. are the main focus of this linguistic analysis. After that, a face-to-face questionnaire is designed depending on Lior Gideon's (2012) approach to survey methodology in social sciences. The obtained results are commented on following Lynch's approach. Let's begin with analyzing the examples focusing on inappropriate lexical choice and incorrect word order.

#### 4.1. The Linguistic Error Analysis

##### A. *Inappropriate Lexical Choice*

A lexicon is defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary (2022) as (a list of) all the words used in a particular language, subject, or dictionary. Lexical choices are very relevant to translation, as words are containers or carriers of meaning by which the source language (SL) message can be transparently conveyed. Any inappropriate lexical choice might impede the target language (TL) audience's comprehension. This type of translation error is expected to be the highest frequently observed in bilingual public signs. This can be explained by the fact

that selecting correct lexical equivalents involves dealing with linguistic, cultural, and social features of both SL and TL. It may be ascribed to the translator's translation incompetence.

Word-for-word translation is frequently employed in signs at present, leading to English signs that are of poor readability and acceptability. This strategy can be applied to some signs but not to all of them. The other aspect which should be taken into consideration in this regard is the special linguistic construction of bilingual signs. These signs usually include single words, phrases, sentences, or even short paragraphs, like the texts that appear on public warnings, instructions, road markers, traffic signs, travel signs, government slogans, etc. For this issue, the degree of seriousness of errors varies according to what extent to those errors distort, change or even underestimate the whole sign. To illustrate this, it is important to have a look at the example shown in Picture (1):



**Picture (1) Cleanliness Sign**

This example indicates the name of the authority responsible for the translation ( شركة النفط الوطنية، i.e., the National Oil Company), the Arabic instruction, and the English equivalent:

**Source Text (ST):**

نظافة بيئتي - دليل ثقافتي [Nadhafat be'ati daleelu thaqafati]

**Target Text (TT):**

*Cleanliness of my environment*

*My culture guide*

The intended message here is that clean places reflect the level of awareness or education of the people of those places. The translated version is neither grammatical nor semantically acceptable. Grammatically speaking, the translated sentence does not contain a main verb which is the verb to be "is". This grammatical error could be due to the translator's or printer's unawareness of the differences between the source and target languages, or his/her resort to the word-for-word translation strategy which leads to producing an incorrect translation. Semantically speaking, this text includes two inappropriate lexical choices,

namely “*culture*” and “*guide*”. In Arabic, the word “*thaqafa* (ثقافة)” has multiple meanings. The intended meaning in this sentence is “awareness” rather than “*culture*” as it appears on the sign. Since the former is the quality or state of being aware that something happens or exists while the latter is the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time, the two meanings are different altogether and it is not possible to use one of them as a synonym. The second word is “*guide*”, which seems to be a ridiculous choice because it has nothing to do with the meaning of the Arabic word “*daleel* (دليل)”. Here, “*Daleel*” means an indication or a sign, not a guide. The word “*guide*” has a different meaning. It means something with certain instructions that direct people to act in a particular way. A revisited translation of the above example could be: *the cleanliness of my environment is an indication of my awareness.*

Socio-psychologically speaking, such naïve linguistic errors might generate a negative impact on the observers whether they are native speakers or bilinguals. It could also leave a bad impression on its observers about the community where that bilingual sign is spotted. The above example is written on a board placed in one of the most important institutions in Basrah where educated people and maybe foreigners work. Bilingual signs with bad translations like this could distort the whole image of that place in the eyes of its observers. Although the purpose of placing it in front of such an institution is to raise workers’ awareness of the importance of cleanliness, it might contribute to increase environmental pollution caused by visual pollution in the minds of observers.

### **B. Incorrect Word Order**

Word order refers to how language syntactic constituents are arranged. Each language has its word order which distinguishes it from other languages. On the one hand, the English sentence starts with the subject followed by a verb and then an object as in “*Ali ate an apple*”, on the other hand; Arabic starts with the verb followed by a subject and then an object as in “*akala Aliu tufahatan* (اكل الولد تفاحة)”. In fact, word order highly influences the meaning of a sentence i.e. word order and meaning are interrelated. Any change in this order while translating inevitably affects the way information is organized and consequently results in deforming ST messages. For Arab learners of English, word order might be the most challenging issue they may encounter. Most errors done by them are attributed to the fact that they are highly affected by the Arabic word order. The texts in Picture (2) are good examples to illustrate the above points:



**Picture (2) Shatt Al Arab Local Government Sign**

This sign indicates monolingual and bilingual texts. Our emphasis is on bilingual ones.

ST:

قائممقامية قضاء شط العرب [Qaem maqamyet Shat al-arab]

TT:

Governor Shat al-Arab

The above example contains not only word order errors but also inappropriate lexical choices and some other grammatical ones. For example, the noun phrase “governor Shat Al-Arab” is intended to refer to a governmental institution located in the Shatt al-Arab district. First, the proper noun “Shat al-Arab” functions as an adjectival to modify the head noun “Governor”. It explains that this institution provides services to the citizens living at Shat al-Arab exclusively. In this case, it should be placed at the beginning followed by the head noun. Second, the word “governor” itself is not a good choice in such a context because it refers to a person rather than an institution. Further, it refers to the chief executive or head of the state-level government who is responsible for a wider area and a larger number of people in a country. As long as Shat al-Arab district is a part of the governorate, it should be, then, ruled by a mayor whose scope of power is lesser than that of the governor. As we are speaking of an institution rather than a person, the mayoralty is the best choice to be used in this case. A revisited translation of example (1) is “Mayoralty of Shat al-Arab”.

#### 4.2. The Questionnaire

Within part, the degree to which mistranslations of public signs impact the cultural conception of cities is measured. A closed-ended survey is first designed. It consists of 20 questions underlining certain relevant aspects. The respondents are asked to choose one of three variables; agree, neutral, or disagree. There is no time limit to hand in the questionnaire sheets. The sample consists of 20 international respondents from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, i.e., they are all native speakers of English, who are working at the time of the survey (May 2022-August 2022) with companies like Shell, Schlumberger, Halliburton. LUK Oil, Exxon Mobil, Mercy Corps, and Daewoo Engineering. They are males whose age ranges between 25-45 years. The minimum degree they hold is a Bachelor's. They should have traveled within Basrah Governorate territory, particularly the city centre. As their work locations vary - which means that they cannot be gathered at the same place to respond to the survey at the same time - their response time is not unified. After they have instructed about the test, its components, and its value, they signed a consent sheet. They were handed the survey sheet. All have responded within 5-15 minutes. The sheet indicated the following questions:

1. *Bilingual public signs are available in my city, i.e. Basrah*
2. *They are accessible.*
3. *They are very important, especially to me as a foreigner.*
4. *Both the texts in signs and their translation are readable.*
5. *I always read the translations of texts in signs.*
6. *The translation method used is consistent.*
7. *English terminology employed is unified.*
8. *Texts in signs are human-translated.*

9. *The translations are accurate.*
10. *There are no spelling mistakes in the translations.*
11. *There are no grammatical mistakes.*
12. *There are no lexical mistakes.*
13. *Mistakes are tolerable.*
14. *The translations are culturally sensitive.*
15. *Sign designers are aware of these mistakes*
16. *Mistranslated signs are corrected and relocated.*
17. *These signs influence your evaluation of the translation profession in your city.*
18. *They influence your evaluation of education in general.*
19. *They emphasize the incompetency of decision-makers responsible for preparing and situating the signs.*
20. *They deform the mental image of your city.*

The responses received are then statistically treated. The results are shown in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: The Results Obtained from the Foreign Respondents**

<b>Cod e</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
1	Bilingual public signs are available in my city, i.e. Basrah	18	2	0
2	They are accessible.	16	3	1
3	They are very important, especially to me as a foreigner.	17	2	1
4	Both the texts in signs and their translation are readable.	15	0	5
5	I always read the translations of texts in signs.	15	4	1
6	The translation method used is consistent.	3	2	15
7	English terminology employed is unified.	2	3	15
8	Texts in signs are human-translated.	7	8	5
9	The translations are accurate.	1	4	16
10	There are no spelling mistakes in the translations.	2	4	14
11	There are no grammatical mistakes.	1	2	17
12	There are no lexical mistakes.	0	1	19
13	Mistakes are tolerable.	0	2	18
14	The translations are culturally sensitive.	11	2	7
15	Sign designers are aware of these mistakes	3	0	17
16	Mistranslated signs are corrected and relocated.	1	4	15
17	These signs influence your evaluation of the translation profession in your city.	16	4	0
18	They influence your evaluation of education in general.	15	3	2
19	They emphasize the incompetency of decision-makers responsible for preparing and situating the signs.	18	1	1
20	They deform the mental image of your city.	18	1	1

The first aspect gauged is the availability of bilingual public signs as well as their accessibility. The majority of the sample (18 respondents, i.e. 90% of the total number) do agree that the concerned authorities are keen to distribute these signs inside and outside Basrah to direct viewers, especially foreign visitors. They also accept that these signs are accessible. The importance of the signs to foreign visitors is reflected in the sample's response to Question 3, wherein 17 respondents (i.e. 85 % of the total number) emphasize their immeasurable significance. Moreover, they affirm the readability of the signs and that 15 of them (i.e. 75%) always read the provided translations. However, the sample's dissatisfaction with the suggested English versions is apparent in the responses to Questions 6 to 14. Though they seem to be unsure that the translations are done by a human, they do accept that these versions are inaccurate and inconsistent. They agree that the translations indicate spelling, grammatical, and lexical mistakes (this observation is in accord with what has been presented in the linguistic error analysis part). In their feedback on Question 15, 17 respondents (i.e. 85%) believe that the concerned authorities are unaware of these mistakes because they would have otherwise replaced the mistranslated signs. They do, however, emphasize that no action has been taken to amend the mistakes. As can be seen above, the respondents' reply to the last four questions is very significant: it underlines the role the mistranslated signs can play in reframing cultural conceptions of cities and their inhabitants, translators in particular. The occurrence of mistranslations and the reluctance or rather the absence of workable remedies do have an impact on the value and contribution of the educational system in general as no initiative to amend these mistranslations or alert decision-makers has been taken. Finally, the deformation of the image of the city through these mistranslations is confirmed, as 18 respondents (i.e. 90 %) underline that the erroneous versions can reframe cultural conceptions of the city and its inhabitants.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Out of the above reflection, it can be concluded that:

1. Bilingual public signs placed in Iraqi streets to inform or direct visitors are of low quality, as they indicate errors of different types such as spelling, grammatical and lexical.
2. These errors may be caused by translators' language incompetence, lack of revision, and absence of translation monitoring institutions.
3. The mistranslations of the signs contribute to the foreign observer's misunderstanding of the intended message, hence to confusion and frustration.
4. They also give the impression that the translation profession and training in Iraq are below the expected average. That is to say, the cultural conception of translators and their trainers is deformed.
5. More importantly, they impact the foreign observer's evaluation of the intellectual recognition of the city and its inhabitants, especially intellectuals, as s/he could not accept the fact that the citizens can live in a city whose streets are distorted by these mistranslated signs.

To overcome or at least lessen errors in the translation of public signs, and therefore to enhance the image of the city, it is recommended that:

- 1- The task of translation of public signs should be done by professional translators who have excellent knowledge of the linguistic and extra-linguistic aspects of both the source and target language. Those translators can be freelance, well-known translation companies, or translation advisory bureaus.
- 2- Much attention should be given to the processes of revision and editing of the translated signs to avoid all types of errors. These processes must also be done by professional translators or translation companies. Furthermore, these two processes should not only focus on linguistic issues but also on the register and style of translating these signs.
- 3- Translators should have a sense of responsibility towards the translation task of public signs. They have to take this task as seriously as any other translation task, and they have to deal with it with a high level of professionalism. Although a public sign may not contain more than one sentence, however, it is still not an easy task.
- 4- Lastly, for the translation task of public signs to be more consistent, robust, and follow professional standards, the local authorities should have some kind of censorship over that task. This can be done by forming a board of translation experts and specialists.

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Appendix 1: Selected Bilingual Public Signs in Basrash Governorate.

