

A Semiotic Analysis of Store and Public Signs in Iran

Amir Yousef Farahmandi

Assistant Professor, English Department, Paramedical School, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the errors in store and public signs, whether lexical or grammatical and also to look at the problems which exist when translating these signs into English. In fact, it had a critical semiotic analysis of store and public signs. To fulfill the purpose of this study, 19 signs were selected, some of which are store signs. The aim of the study was to show that the English translation of all these signs contained errors, some of which even distorted the meaning and the message given by these signs. In addition, the English translation of all of these Persian signs were erroneous, causing difficulty in conveying the message.

Keywords: Public signs, Semiotic analysis, Store signs

1. Introduction

An important, or better to say, the main aspect of signs is to communicate and to convey a message to the reader. Signs are there to show us what to do, what to buy, how to get to our destination, etc. Writing has traditionally been used to do certain communicational things (Kress, 2010). Of course, different signs may have different meanings in different cultures, but it should not be taken for granted that they are somehow universal, so people with different languages should understand their meaning.

Semiosis is an integrated part of any discourse and/or any given society. It is precisely because semiosis is the making of meaning through recourse to language and other semiotic systems that, as critical realists, we need the tools and skills of critical semiotic analysis (linguistic analysis, discourse analysis etc.) to reflect (critically) on any text (Fairclough, 2010). Most readers will take it as given that a society, its cultures and the representation of their meanings, form a tightly integrated whole, at a certain level of generality at least. If that is so, then differences between societies and cultures means differences in representation and meaning. That is close to commonplace. We know that languages differ and that those differences are entirely linked with differences of histories and cultures. What is the case for 'language' is so for all representation – for *modes* as for *discourses* as for *genres* – and in all communication: patently so with music, with image, with clothing, food, and so on (Kress, 2010).

As far as ‘language’ is concerned, it is believed that languages differ in the way they name the world – in ‘words’ as in syntactic and grammatical forms; we know that lexical fields are close mappings of social practices. To give a banal example, English does not have the word ‘Weltschmerz’ and German does not have the word ‘literacy’. Each may struggle to find ways of bringing the other’s meanings into their culture; in the case of these two examples, with little success so far. Culture is too complex to tolerate difficult transplants readily. On the other hand, we sort of assume that ‘language equals language’: that is, if there is novel in Russian, it ought to be possible to translate it into English (Kress, 2010). In fact, we know that this is practically not quite possible although there are numerous translations in the whole world. In other words, we know that translations do not always convey the exact meaning and the same sense in the target language (L2) as they have in the first language (L1).

Now, getting back to signs, they cannot always be translated accurately; i.e. they are not always translatable and this can be a concern in that if one wants to translate store signs or public signs, for example, they face a real challenge as how to create the same sense those signs make in their first language. Kress (2010) believes that ‘translations’ across modes *within* a culture are both possible and hugely difficult.

2. Literature Review

Unfortunately, not much has been written on semiotics and store/public signs. Most of the literature related to this category is written by Kress (1979, 1993, 1996, 2001, and 2010) and van Leeuwen (2001, 2005). Kress (2010) believes that ‘translations’ across modes *within* a culture are both possible and hugely difficult. He assumes that translations across cultures, whether in the same mode (from *writing* to *writing* – from Russian *novel* to that *novel* in English; from *gesture* to *gesture* – from the ‘French’ shoulder shrug of indifference to an English version) or across different modes are also possible, though always achieved with enormously difficult selection; at a considerable level of generality; and inevitably with significant changes in meaning. In fact, he states that this translation is extremely difficult and that it significantly changes the meaning. Now, the question is what can we do to retain the meaning? The answer is just in meaningful translation and not in literal translation.

van Leeuwen (2005) claims that in traditional semiotics the concept of ‘rule’ plays an important role. The idea is that, just as people can only play a game together once they have mastered its rules, so people can only communicate, only understand one another, once they have mastered the rules of the game of language – and/or other semiotic modes. He then continues that these rules are of two types, lexicon and grammar. He gives an example of the rule that stipulates the position of modifiers in a series of adjectives, that, for example, numeratives come first, so that *the three brown bears* is correct, but *the brown three bears* is not. This is exactly what I have pointed out in this paper. van Leeuwen defines ‘sign’ as “An instance of the use of a semiotic resource for the purposes of communication, for example, the action of frowning, used for the purposes of communicating disapproval, or the use of the color red, for purposes of

warning against some danger.” In fact, communication is an indispensable component of signs; however, in this study, it has been shown that this does not take place and that meaning is not conveyed due to the errors in the signs.

3. Objectives and Significance of the Study

This study intended to investigate both the lexical and grammatical errors that exist in store and public signs in Iran and also to look at the problems which exist when translating these signs into English. In fact, it had a critical semiotic analysis of store and public signs. The aim of the study was to show that the English translation of all these signs contained errors, some of which even distorted the meaning and the message given by these signs. In addition, the English translations of all of these Persian signs were erroneous, causing difficulty in conveying the message.

The present study enjoys significance in that it can provide an insight to the ill effect of poor translations of store and public signs and show how this can affect and, in fact, mislead those who read the English translations, in particular non-Iranians.

4. Method

This study was conducted using 16 store and public signs. The signs included store signs, bank signs, a tourist complex sign, a road sign, a hospital sign, a sign above a garage door, a billboard, etc. Most of them had English translation and a few of them were in Persian whose English meaningful translation would cause a challenge. The types of errors were classified as spelling, lexical, and grammatical errors. Unfortunately, these are among a lot of other public signs which are erroneous and can therefore be misleading or at least embarrassing.



Fig.1

In this picture, which was taken in the transit hall at Mehr Abad Airport in Tehran, the sign of the coffee shop contains a spelling error. 'Mehmandar', the name of the coffee shop, means 'flight attendant' which has been transliterated. The word 'cofee' is misspelled and it should be 'coffee'. Of course, this place is visited by thousands of foreign tourists who may not be misled by the error since it is quite obvious what the shop sells; however, it does not have a good image.



Fig.2

The above picture was taken on a highway in Tehran. The left sign says 'Yadegare Emam Exp., Farahzad'. The word 'yadegar' meaning 'heir' here is not read or pronounced the same way it is in Persian because of how it is spelled, and the term 'emam' is spelled 'imam' in English. Therefore, the whole phrase should be 'Yad-e gar-e Imam'.

The right sign which shows the way to 'Shahrake Ati Saz' is even more erroneous. 'Shahrak' is 'town' and the transliteration is not meaningful to a foreigner. After all, these English scripts are logically written for non-native speakers of Persian. Obviously, Persian speakers would read the Persian script and not the English one. So, it should change to 'Atisaz Town'.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

The three pictures above (Fig. 3, Fig. 4, and Fig. 5) are all bank signs. The first picture was taken on a highway in Tehran and the other ones were taken on Ghasrdasht Ave in Shiraz. In the first one, we see that the name of the bank has been translated and not transliterated, 'tourism' for 'gardeshgari'. Not only that, English word order has also been observed; i.e. in the compound noun 'Tourism Bank', the word 'bank' is after 'tourism'. In the Persian script, the noun 'bank' is

attributed to the other noun ‘gardeshgari’, whereas it is the other way round in English. If we have a look at some of the banks in a country like the U.S., we see examples such as ‘City Bank’, ‘Wells Fargo Bank’, and ‘Bank of America’. In the next two signs, however, the names of the banks have been transliterated which in turn does not make any sense and is not meaningful to a non-native speaker of Persian besides not following the order in English. ‘Melli’ should change to ‘National’ (National Bank) and ‘Keshavarzi’ should change to ‘Agriculture’ which changes ‘Keshavarzi Bank’ to ‘Bank of Agriculture’.

Fig. 6



The above picture (Fig. 6) was taken in Tehran. It shows the sign of a hospital, ‘Day General Hospital’. The word ‘day’ with its definition is not what the word in the Persian name means. The Persian word is the 10th month of the year in the Iranian calendar which, therefore, should be spelled as ‘Dey’ not to make a confusion for a non-native speaker of Persian.

The next picture (Fig. 7) is probably the funniest and the most embarrassing one. It is a packet of dried nuts with the dried nuts shop name on it. The name of the shop is ‘shur o shirin’, ‘shur’ meaning ‘salty’ and pronounced as /ʃʊr/ and ‘shirin’ which means ‘sweet’. So the English translation of the name of the shop is ‘sweet and salty’. However, since ‘shur’ (salty) is pronounced as /ʃʊr/ and English has the word ‘sure’, the latter has been printed on the packet.

The following picture (Fig. 8) is an advertisement for a cement company named ‘Fars Nov Cement Co’. The Persian name is ‘Fars No’ or ‘Fars Now’, ‘no’ meaning ‘new’ whereas the word ‘nov’ is pronounced as /nəv/ or /nɔ:v/ as this is obviously not how the Persian word is pronounced.

Figure 9 is a sign in front of the Oil Company Club on Khakshenasi St. in Shiraz. It says, “befarmaaid aab” with no English translation. Here, we see that one will face a challenge if they want to translate this sign into English, the difficulty being the word ‘befarmaaid’ which means

'help yourself'. One can just translate this sign as 'Water', which of course would be the best translation, but what about the word 'help yourself'? 'Help yourself with water' does not sound accurate and does not make much sense as a public sign.

Figure 10 is a box of fried chicken. Interestingly, it comes from a famous fast food restaurant in Shiraz which may have customers who are non-native speakers of Persian. The word 'fried' is spelled as 'freid'. One hypothesis may be that it is because 'ei' sounds /ai/.



Fig. 7

Fig. 8





Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

Figures 11 and 12 show a sign above a garage door on Ordibehesht St. in Shiraz. It says, 'A respected and cultured driver does not park his/her car in front of a residential building'. The translation does not make sense in English as a public sign in front of a residential building. As mentioned earlier, according to Kress (2010), we sort of assume that 'language equals language': that is, if there is novel in Russian, it ought to be possible to translate it into English. In fact, we know that this is practically not quite possible although there are numerous translations in the whole world. In other words, we know that translations do not always convey the exact meaning and the same sense in the target language (L2) as they have in the first language (L1).

Fig. 12



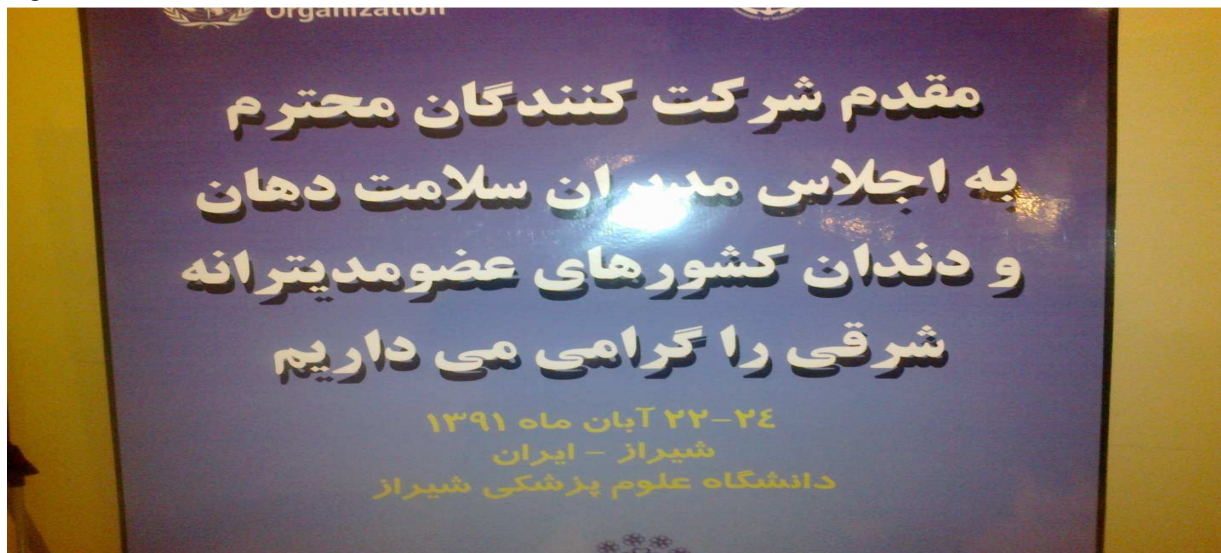
Figure 13 is a banner at a wedding reception in Tehran. It is an advertisement for a catering company named 'Golden Rose'. The problem is with the word 'Ceremony' which, in fact, should change to 'Catering' since the Persian word says 'tashrifat' which means 'catering' and not 'ceremony'.

Figures 14 and 15 contain the most number of errors. These were banners at Homa Hotel in Shiraz during the days (Nov. 12-14, 2012) the Inter-country Meeting of Oral Health Managers of Eastern Mediterranean Region was held. In Fig. 14, there is a banner which says, 'We welcome the attendees to the Meeting of Oral Health Managers of Eastern Mediterranean Region'. The English translation of this message in Fig 15 contains numerous errors, both lexical and spelling. First, since we have a lot of compliments and euphemism in Persian, most of which make no sense in English, 'the attendees' has been translated into 'honorable attendees'.



Fig. 13

Fig. 14



Next, it is not clear why the second part contains so many errors. Nowhere in the Persian script does it say what there is in the English translation. Also the misspelled word ‘consultaion’ which should be ‘consultation’ is not in the Persian sign. It is worth mentioning that this meeting had at least 12 guests from foreign countries.

Figure 16 is the picture of a real estate agency on Saheli St. in Shiraz. Since the Persian name includes the phrase ‘aazhaans-e maskan’, ‘aazhaans’ meaning ‘agency’ and ‘maskan’ meaning ‘housing’, there is a literal or word-for-word translation rather than conveying the sense of the original. It should change to ‘Hmoon Real Estate’ or ‘Hmoon Real Estate Agency’.

Fig. 15



Figures 17 and 18 show the sign of a tourist complex named 'Saraay-e Sadra' in Sadra, a suburb of Shiraz. The word 'tourism' should change to 'tourist'. Obviously again, there are both local and foreign tourists who visit this place and 'tourism complex' does not make sense in English and is erroneous.

Fig. 19 is the sign of an emergency cashier, or, indeed, outpatient cashier at Khalili Hospital in Shiraz. Although the term 'ERgency' does exist (ER stands for Emergency Room and ERgency denotes 'emergency' or 'urgency'), it is clear that this is a misspelled word in the sign. Furthermore, 'cash' is incorrect. It should be 'cashier'.

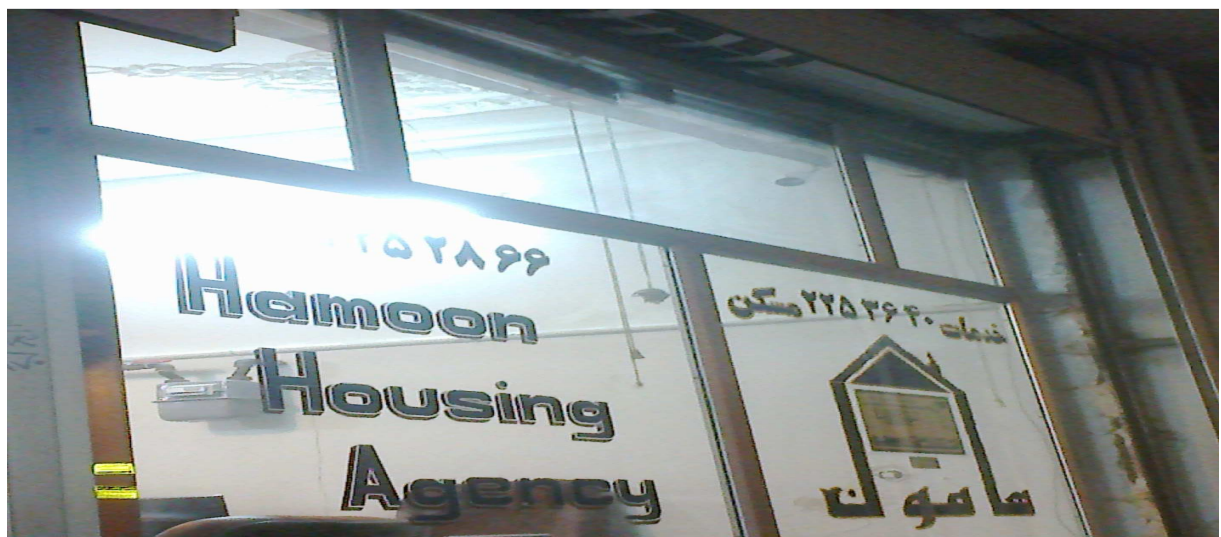


Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19

5. Results and Discussion

To sum up the final results of the study, this study attempted to investigate and have a critical and semiotic analysis of the errors in store and public signs in Iran, the errors being of spelling, lexical, and/or grammatical type, and it also tried to have a look at the problems which exist when translating these signs into English. Regarding the latter consideration, it revealed that the English translation of all these signs contained errors, some of which even distorted the meaning and the message given by these signs. In addition, the English translation of all these Persian signs were erroneous, causing difficulty in conveying the message.

In semiotic language, signs are translated into another language so that those who are unable to get the message in the first language understand what it means. In other words, signs are translated with the hope that they convey the exact meaning and the same sense in the target language (L2) as they have in the first language (L1). The signs in this study were all in Persian and obviously a native speaker of Persian does not need to read the English translation. So the single main reason for translating them from Persian into English is for non-native speakers of Persian to know what message they convey. Unfortunately, however, this is not the case for a large number of public signs in Iran. They are translated with numerous errors and not only the message is distorted, but they are also somewhat embarrassing since they are public signs seen by many tourists.

6. Conclusion

Although the data collected in the study may be limited, one can make claims regarding the generalizability of the findings. The signs discussed in this study were among a lot of other omnipresent signs which had various kinds of errors. It can be concluded that those who post these signs are obviously unaware of the correct and accurate translation of them. They certainly need to consult an expert in order to have a flawless translation and also to convey the exact meaning in the target language. Moreover, there were signs with no English translation whose literal translation would be very challenging. In this case, only meaningful translation would be possible.

7. References

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