

The Language of Shop Signs in Amman and Doha: A Sociolinguistic Study

Tawfiq Omar, M.A.

The Language Center, The University of Jordan

Abstract: This paper examines the language used in shop signs in Amman, Jordan and Doha, Qatar from a sociolinguistic point of view. Most studies tackled the topic within the domain of a single country or territory. The present study compares and contrasts the linguistic landscape of shop signs in two different cities representing two different social cultures namely Amman and Doha. The study will show how these signs reflect the surrounding community of shop owners and shoppers and will shed some light on language choice and the main differences between the language and its forms used in these signs. A focus of the study will be on the use of monolingualism and bilingualism in shops and signs. The findings reveal that the preference of shop names varies according to the socioeconomic and sociocultural background of the shop owners and shoppers to a certain extent. The signs found in shops in these two distinct regions indicate how the multilingual linguistic landscape is constructed, governed sometimes by the patterns of society, ethnicity and power relations.

Keywords: Shop signs, linguistic landscape, sociolinguistics, Amman, Doha.

Introduction

One of the main functions of Sociolinguistics is to research the competences in which language interacts with society. It looks at changes in the structure of the language in response to its different social functions. The study hopes to identify the rules that control and govern the actual use of language within the community by examining and comparing the language used in different shop signs in two different areas in Jordan.

Over the past years, many scholars investigated the language used in shop signs or store fronts or as some like to call it linguistic cityscape or linguistic landscape, which is a subfield of sociolinguistics. Landry and Bourhis (1997:23) define Linguistic landscape as:

“Referring to the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region. It is proposed that the linguistic landscape may serve important informational and symbolic functions as a marker of the relative power and status of the linguistic communities inhabiting the territory.”

Most of the studies examined the variation in shop signs language within single or different regions within one country. The investigation was not limited to shop signs names as linguistic landscape also includes the language of public road signs, street names, place names, commercial shop signs and public signs and that these signs have both informative and symbolic functions (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). The role of signs whether in a street or in busy crowded downtown or even in a very remote area is to communicate a message or messages to viewers. The function of communication is extremely important and probably the most important reason for their existence. Language as a means of communication covers many linguistic, social and

cultural elements. Their benefits are by the dozen. Their informative functions and symbolic considerations are of great importance to shop owners, to shoppers and to the community at large.

Naming which is the central idea in shops and store fronts signs is a process. It is not sporadic or spontaneous. It takes careful considerations from shop owners because they want to communicate something with their customers or targeted shoppers. Naming is important not just because of its esthetic reasons but because of other consideration such as economic or social ones. Linguistic landscape refers to texts displayed in public space which is not neutral but rather a negotiated and contested arena (Smakman & Heinrich, 2017).

The study went cross cultural, abandoning the norm of similar studies, exploring cross linguistic data in different social and cultural settings hoping to find and come up with additional insights on the role of sociolinguistics in naming patterns and language use.

It also seeks to answer the following question: what are the main sociolinguistic factors behind language choice in shop signs in Amman, Jordan and Doha in Qatar.

Significance of the study

The current study is one of the few studies to cross borders examining the sociolinguistic characteristics of shop signs in Jordan and Qatar. It sheds light on the connection between shop signs, language choice and population serving certain goals for advertisers and shop owners.

Literature review:

The language used in shop signs has been widely studied in the literature. Some researchers focused on the linguistic aspects of signs wording, other focused on sociolinguistic aspects others examined the cultural or political aspects. Each scholar focuses on different features such as semantics and phonology and factors either cultural political or social to analyze.

Lusekelo&Alphonse (2018) investigated the language use in public domains in Tanzania. Their paper challenges the suggestion that Tanzania consists of English as an official language with limited domains of use. While it is claimed that ethnic community languages are a vehicular of communication in domains related to informal settings and homesteads, the paper argues for the presence of in linguistic landscape. Their study concludes the dominance of English-only signposts, which is a good testimony that this public domain makes use of English rather than Kiswahili, the official language of Tanzania. The study explored elements such as font-size and font-color and that English words turn more prominent than Kiswahili words. Nonetheless, on the basis of word counts, Kiswahili is significantly used in bilingual signposts than English.

Amer&Obeidat (2014) examined the language of business in Aqaba city in Jordan in order to find out the influence of English on shop owners and on Arabic. Their study explores the elements that govern the presence of foreign elements in business language. Another aim of their study was to find out whether these foreign words/phrases are used elsewhere in the local language or they are specific to certain business contexts. A final aim was to see the present status of English in Aqaba and the attitudes of shop owners towards English as a foreign language. The study concluded that most of the shop signs of the selected sample are found to be

in both Arabic and English and that they constitute more than half of the total number of signs investigated (58.1%). It also revealed that English is used in shop signs in order to attract foreign customers' attention.

Jingjing (2013) investigated the language of shop signs of Beijing in order to explore the multilingual environment of China. Her research attempts to analyze the multilingual signs found in the shops of Wangfujing Street in Beijing, and indicates how the multilingual linguistic landscape is constructed under the current language policy of China. The data collected from signs were divided into four groups: Chinese, Chinese-English, other languages and images. The result concludes that the presence of English-only signs in shop signs is an indication that even if English elements are incomprehensible for some, they can be attractive because of the prestige and wealth associated with them and that this is true of other foreign languages used in these shop signs.

Finzel (2012) researched the signs language in the linguistic landscape of Hong Kong. It was shown that English is visibly present in the linguistic landscape of Hong Kong. The study revealed the symbolic sense in some cases of English signs which merely served as a medium to transmit meanings other than the plain message that English was spoken. It could thus be concluded that English was chosen for reasons of prestige. The research draws a line between linguistic landscapes and linguistic competence. The study used open surveys and anonymous survey to collect the data. The study is both quantitative and qualitative in nature that made use of the relevance theory.

In his book, Backhaus (2006) examined the linguistic Landscapes in Tokyo, Japan providing and developing an analytical framework for the systematic analysis of linguistic landscape data. This framework is applied to a sample of 2,444 signs collected in 28 survey areas in central Tokyo. Analytical categories include the languages contained and their combinations, differences between official and nonofficial signs, geographic distribution, availability of translation or transliteration, linguistic idiosyncrasies, and the comparison of older and newer signs, among others. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods, the analysis yields some unique insights about the writers of multilingual signs, their readers, and the languages and scripts in contact. Linguistic Landscapes thus demonstrates that the study of language on signs has much to contribute to research into urban multilingualism, as well as the study of language and society as a whole.

Methodology:

The study examined 150 images of store fronts from Amman and another 150 Images from Doha. The data was taken from real time shop signs in both cities. All shop signs examined are commercial ones varying in the services they provide. Amman and Doha were chosen as cities for the population of the study because of the rich variety of data to be examined and because both are two capital cities that include different socioeconomic groups namely low income, middle income and high income classes. This research will provide an empirical evidence to the topic addressed. In order to attain such goal, the range of research will include qualitative analysis of the shop signs in question. The collected signs will be analyzed and categorized in terms of monolingual signs containing either only Arabic or only English and bilingual signs including both Arabic and English.

The understanding of signs plays an important role in deciding and analyzing the sample collection. To a certain extent, sign language research is conducted in a narrow or certain landscape due to the technical difficulties associated with gathering and collecting the data. In Jordan for instance, almost all studies focused on one geographic location. This study investigates the language used in two distinct geographic locations. Both inhabitants may share the same moral and cultural value but the nature of the population is different due to different economic considerations. Merriam Webster's Dictionary defines a sign as a display (such as a lettered board or a configuration of neon tubing) used to identify or advertise a place of business or a product. It also defines it as a fundamental linguistic unit that designates an object or relation or has a purely syntactic function. The two definitions are interconnected leading to a more logical sociolinguistic analysis of the language used in signs.

The data collected included 300 randomly collected shop signs: 150 shop signs in Amman, Jordan and 150 shop signs in Doha, Qatar. These shops represent a diversity of services, business, companies and facilities. The signs were classified into three major signs. The first category is restaurants and coffee shops, the second category is wear-store signs and the third is services and includes money exchangers, medical centers, companies, food stores, travel agents, jewelers, florists and many others. These signs were analyzed and categorized and this is associated with an examination of multilingualism and the domination of some languages over others (McLaughlin 2012).

The study is qualitative in nature though some quantitative analysis was used to show percentages and to provide evidence to the research question. Textual analysis within the realm of Discourse Analysis formulates the theoretical base. An important language in billboards and shop-signs is shown by the amount of words used. This kind of analysis is found in the discourse analysis by Fairclough (2003): the choice of words and their inscription are guided by the power relations between the different sections of the population in a given country where language use and power relations between speakers can be found. For example, the bilingual language signs are used more in Doha, Qatar than the ones used in Amman due to the stronger power relations between the inhabitants of the city. This will be explained further in this study.

Findings and analysis:

General findings indicate that both Arabic and English were used in shop signs in Amman and Doha. Both cities represent their countries commercial and cultural focus. However, the social aspects, though might be considered quite similar in both cities due to bonds of language, religion and ethnicity that connect inhabitants together, had an impact on the language use in shop signs. Ethnicity and power relations though had an impact on the other direction in both cities especially on the use of monolingualism or bilingualism in shop signs reflected in the choice of shop owners towards the use of either languages or both in their stores' front signs. The study reveals that Arabic and English are the languages of communication in the public domain of shops naming and that sociocultural, sociolinguistic and socioreligious orientation play a role in language choice of these shop signs.

First of all, the research comes up with some interesting results in terms of the bilingualism and monolingualism used in store naming in both cities. In Amman, as table 1

below shows, 80% of restaurants and café shops owners chose to go monolingual and just 20% bilingual.

Amman city	Monolingual	Arabic only	English only	Bilingual
Restaurants & cafés	80%	40%	60%	20%
Wear-stores	90%	13%	87%	10%
Services	72%	89%	11%	28%

Table 1. Number and percentage of shop signs in all streets in terms of language choice

Let us keep in mind that when shop owners decide on a name for their business, they take into account their target shoppers. Their aim is to attract that community to become their customers and buy from them in a surrounding competitive market. Their decisions are not sporadic or spontaneous. ‘Buffalo Wings & Rings’, ‘Burger Makers’, ‘Shuffle Waffle’ and ‘Brothers Eatery’ to name a few allude certain class of customers. Customers who know what buffalo wings, French fries are and what eatery means. Most of the English signs were photographed in somewhat prestigious locations in the capital Amman. The Arabic monolingual and the bilingual signs are directed to the common public. The names are simple and straightforward in many cases. Images 1 and 2 below show an example of an Arabic, English monolingual and bilingual shop signs in Amman respectively.



Image 1: a restaurant in Amman

Image 2: a restaurant in Amman



Image 3: a restaurant in Amman

As table 1 above shows, around 90% of wear-stores signs went monolingual also with around 87% for English only signs. The 13% of wear-stores signs that were in Arabic were for Islamic attire stores or discount stores as images 4 and 5 below show:



Image 4. Islamic attire store in Amman



Image 5. Islamic attire store in Amman

The reason for Arabic monolingualism in Islamic attire stores seems to be expected especially taking into account the sociocultural and the sociolinguistic aspects behind naming. The target market for such stores would be Muslims and since the majority of the population of Amman who would visit these stores are Muslim Arabs. The naming came only monolingual and in Arabic because international Muslims shoppers are not targeted and even if they do exist they are a small percentage that does not affect the naming choice. When the researcher asked the owner of one of the Muslim attire store on why he didn't include English in the sign, the response was "for whom?". The notion that English is prestigious to use in shop signs lost its validity at the expense of cultural, religious and social reasoning. In the two images above, the names of stores themselves have no linguistic meaning. They are just family names of shop

owners. Many names in English are brand names that shop owners chose to keep as is in English without including any Arabic script.

When it comes to service stores in Amman, and as mentioned before such stores include money exchangers, medical centers, companies, food stores, travel agents, jewelers, florists among many other services. Figure 1 above shows that 72% of the store signs are monolingual with around 89% of signs are only in Arabic. This figure is quite the opposite of the one found in English only wear-stores. A good reason for this might be due to the fact that most of wear-shops owners try to attract shoppers through using English to show that their products are elite and prestigious which can be reflected in the name if we take into consideration that most of expensive labels and brand have English names. As for service shops, of which 89% are in Arabic, the socio factors of the nature of users play a role here. Most of the services shops target local residents who are mostly speakers of Arabic. The aim is competition. They avoid using English as this may shun or repel customers since English is associated with prestige and this by default may mean expensive prices. Fairclough (2003) demonstrates that social differentiation can easily be examined in texts. The ones in English only probably had the intention in mind. The researcher examined the price of an item in two of these shops. The item in an English only front was 3 Jordanian Dinars higher than the shop with only Arabic sign. A tire or car workshop, as some images show, would not use English in their signs because they do not have an existing English speaking community. Most of these shops are located in complexes in certain areas that foreigners can identify easily even if no English is used. If an auto repair shop had an English sign, this would mean higher prices definitely as it is targeting specific customers. Images 6 and 7 below show two service stores signs in Amman.



Image 6: a service store in Amman



Image 7: a service store in Amman

The interesting data comes from Doha in Qatar. The naming scheme and the monolingualism vs bilingualism ratios were quite different. As table 2 below shows, the percentage of monolingual signs in the data collected was zero. In the case of restaurants and cafés, 100% of the signs collected were bilingual using Arabic and English inscriptions. The same applies to service stores and wear-stores where again the percentage of shop signs that are bilingual was 100%.

Doha city	Monolingual	Bilingual
Restaurants & cafés	0%	100%
Wear-stores	0%	100%
Services	0%	100%

The research into this, comparing the results from Amman, is quite interesting. In Amman, the majority of stores names are monolingual either in English or Arabic, but in Doha, a remarkable finding that all of the shop names in the collected data are bilingual. Not a single photo from the data collected was for a monolingual shop sign. Doha in Qatar is a multi-ethnic society with inhabitants of different social, cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds. Shop owners addressing all possible customers chose to go bilingual as they this a necessity rather than a luxury. In Doha, Arabic is the official language but English is the second official language or the official language undercover.

Images 8, 9 and 10 represent three examples of shops from Doha (a restaurant, a service office and a wear-store respectively).



Image 8: a restaurant in Doha



Image 9: a service office in Doha



Image 10: a wear-store in Doha

Through examining wear-stores for example, all the shops were in English and Arabic script. Even shops one might expect at least to be monolingual were bilingual again reflecting on the point that the language used reflect the diverse components of the society. Contrary to the ones in Amman, two Islamic attire stores in Doha has Arabic and English inscriptions. Doha has many non-Arab Muslims so it seems natural that these stores follow the norm in a capitalistic city of having a bilingual shop sign. Images 11 and 12 below represent the finding.



Image 11: an Islamic attire store in Doha Image 12: an Islamic attire store in Doha

Stores that are brand names that many assume is known to the majority especially living in a capital city had Arabic names next to them in a kind of transliteration to the rand. Stores like 'Calvin Klein', 'Victoria's Secret' and 'GAP' for instance have Arabic inscriptions alongside. The two images below illustrate this.



Image 13: a bilingual wear-store sign in Doha Image 14: a bilingual wear-store sign in Doha

In service stores, bilingualism was used. Barbershops, supermarkets and veterinary shops used both English and Arabic in their store fronts. Let us remind ourselves that sociolinguistics deals with relation between language and society, between the uses of language and the social structures in which the users of language live. Language is not only used to communicate meaning but also to maintain a social relationship (Spolsky, 1998). This is quite clear in the choice of bilingualism in shop signs where the social and demographic structures are taken into account. The dominance of English in some shops in Amman viewing it as prestigious and thus attracting certain customers is not found in shops in Doha where dominance is to both languages though some stores used small fonts and inscriptions of Arabic next to the bold large fonts of English names. The

Power relations that govern residents of both cities are clear. Stronger power relations can be found in Doha where money, diversity of financial resources and ethnicity play a huge role in governing and directing such power relations. Arabic is used because it is the language of the state and Arabic is used because it is the language of international trade and commerce. It became like a trend to use both Arabic and English in a way that one might think it is part of a formulated language policy for shop sign to us such variation in naming choice. Even in

bilingual signs, language dominance can be present. This can be present in font color or size used in one language compared to the other. Fairclough (2003) argues that quantitative textual analysis may involve comparing different types of text in terms of the average number of words per text, the relative frequencies of different parts of speech such as nouns, verbs and prepositions. Almost all photos taken in Doha seem to have a balanced power relation between Arabic and English as both languages were displayed equally in terms of text font and color that actually reflect the power relations that govern users. Images 15 and 16 below show a balanced power dominance shop signs.



Image 15: a restaurant in Doha



Image 16: a restaurant in Doha

In Amman, English and Arabic in bilingual shop signs tended to have a shifted power relation. In peoples' minds, English is associated with power, authority and prestige but Arabic also managed to maintain some sort of power relation. Different and varied shops in Amman chose to show dominance for English at points and at other times for Arabic. Images 17 and 18 are an example of a shifted power relation.



Image 17: a restaurant in Doha



Image 18: a restaurant in Doha

Conclusion:

The focus of the paper is language uses in names of shop signs in Amman and Doha and the social factors that control and guide the language used. The paper investigated the state of monolingualism and bilingualism in the composition of shop names. Analysis of the data collected reveals that although Doha is a multi-ethnic city where you expect the dominance of English over Arabic or other languages, yet this is not the case. There seem to be an equal power relation between Arabic and English. That not a single shop sign in Doha was monolingual was an interesting finding reflecting either a governmental or socio-personal ideology. In Amman at the other hand, the majority of shops signs were monolingual where English was preferred except in service shops. This is an indication of the status of English in peoples' minds weather in daily social interactions or in businesses and livelihood from both markets of Amman and Doha revealed the sociolinguistic variation in shops naming in the two cities. Detailed studies on the account above and comparisons between the language used in shop signs in Amman and Doha might shed more light on the sociolinguistic factor behind language choice affected by society's norms.

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