

# A Study of Errors in Bilingual Road, Street and Shop Signs in Iran

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## Abstract

*Bilingual signs are becoming a regular feature of our increasingly globalized and inter-connected world. One problem many bilingual signs suffer from is their having different linguistic errors of varying degrees of seriousness. This study was carried out to investigate different linguistic errors, including grammatical, lexical and spelling, errors featuring in a sample of bilingual signs in Iran. To this end, a number of Farsi-English road, street and shop signs were randomly selected and photographed by the researcher. The pictorial data were then subjected to error-identification and error-analysis procedures. Findings suggest that most errors in bilingual Farsi-English signs are lexical ones, though grammatical and other errors also have fairly high frequencies of occurrence in them.*

Keywords: *Bilingual Signs, Linguistic Errors, Iranian EFL*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Overview

In recent years, a number of highly influential factors, including globalization and the phenomenal rise of the English language as the foremost and most-widely-used international language, have led to the increasing use of bilingual signs in different countries (Vaish 2008, Bhagwati 2007).

Today, bilingual signs featuring English and one dominant local or national language can be found in many non-Anglophone countries such as China, Thailand, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Spain, Belgium, Pakistan and Iran Rengel (2004), Gorter (2006), Fu (2008), Hobbs & Postings (2008), Cybriwsky (2011). One notable thing associated with bilingual signs is that many of them contain errors of different types (Shohamy 2008). Elaborating on this point, Richmond(2009) has made important comments:

*Bilingual road signs are making a slow appearance along some highways, but much remains to confuse would-be drivers from abroad. ... keep in mind that foreigners have been jailed for being involved in traffic accidents, even if they were not at fault. (p. 356).*

Qiao (2010), who examined different errors in Chinese-English signs, has noted that errors associated with bilingual signs fall into a number of broad categories including 'spelling', 'lexical choices' and 'grammar' (2010). Echoing this point, Shohamy (2008) has indicated that spelling errors are among the most common errors featuring in bilingual signs. Further, Chiasuanhong (2011) has noted that some signs contain serious grammatical and/or lexical errors and, as a result, are more baffling than helpful to those reading them. Many of the errors which bilingual signs contain can also be considered as 'translation Errors'. Recently, a number of authors have sharply criticized badly or poorly translated bilingual signs and have explicitly called for the rectification of errors they contain regardless of whether they are linguistic errors or translation problems (Kassin, Fein & Markus 2010), Bateman 2010). Perhaps one of the most recent example of a gross and puzzling translation error in bilingual signs can be observed in the case of a sign posted in the Vale of Glamorgan. The sign's translated version reads: "Station Current Closed In Front Follow Entertainment" to warn motorists that road maintenance work is under way in the area and they have to change course. The correct translation of the sign is "Station Road Closed Ahead Follow Diversion" (cited in Morgan 2012). This example clearly shows how the failure to select an appropriate lexical item can profoundly change and distort the original message and turn a bilingual sign, which

is supposed to benefit a greater number of people, into an almost useless laughing stock. In Iran, as stated earlier, bilingual signs featuring Farsi, the national language of the country, and English are becoming increasingly common, especially in big cities and on major roads and thoroughfares (Nijs 2011), Cybriwsky 2011). Up until now, it seems, no published study has focused specifically on the examination of errors of bilingual signs in Iranian contexts. This point, which the review of literature on the topic reveals, coupled with the increasing use of Farsi-English signs in Iran, points to the need for having research in this area.

### *1.2. Purpose of the Study*

The current study had two aims: identifying errors of a sample of randomly-chosen Iranian bilingual signs and qualitatively examining high-frequency errors of the signs. Given the increasing use of Farsi-English bilingual signs in Iran and the dearth of existing literature on the topic, this study enjoys a strong rationale.

## 2. Methodology

### *2.1. Materials*

To collect enough data for the current research study, the researcher used a mobile phone set as a simple picture-taking device with which to document his data. He went to different parts of the Iranian metropolis of Isfahan and a number of counties of Isfahan Province, including Fouladshahr, Felavarjan and Najafabad. He took pictures of many bilingual street, road and shop signs using the mobile phone set. A total of 80 bilingual signs were photographed and used as this study's data.

What is worth noting here is that all the bilingual signs were randomly photographed and no attempt was made by the researcher to examine the signs in terms of linguistic accuracy prior to the analysis of the obtained research data. 50 out of the 85 signs were street signs, 15 were road signs and 20 were shop signs. The small number of road signs is due to the fact that noticing and taking pictures of bilingual road signs while sitting in a fast-moving vehicle was a tricky thing for the researcher to do. To partly overcome this problem, the researcher took a trip to some major roads leading to the metropolis of Isfahan using a cab during two consecutive weekends. Each time he noticed bilingual road signs, he asked the cab driver to stop the car in a safe place, got out of the car and took pictures of them.

### *2.2. Procedures*

The researcher spent four weeks collecting the research data. In the first two weeks, he went to fifteen different places, including tourist attractions, historical sites and large shopping centers, of the city of Isfahan, identified bilingual signs in those places and took pictures of them. He managed to take 70 pictures corresponding to 20 shop signs and 50 street signs. The second two-week period was devoted to the collection of data from bilingual road signs. Given the difficulties associated with this task, the researcher managed to take only 15 pictures corresponding to 15 bilingual road signs during the foregoing period.

After the completion of data-collection procedures, the researcher embarked upon the analysis of research data. First, he examined each bilingual sign in terms of grammatical and lexical and spelling accuracy. Then, he separated flawed signs from the ones which were free from errors and identified the types of errors faulty signs contained. After that, he tabulated the data, computed frequencies of each error category and identified high-frequency categories of errors. Finally, he examined the obtained results by juxtaposing them with relevant highlights of literature.

## 3. Results

The tables below summarize results of the study.

Table 1. *Error Categories and Their Frequencies.*

Error Category	Frequency of Occurrence in Bilingual Signs
Wrong Word Order	6
Literal Translation from Farsi to English	11
Incorrect Lexical Equivalents	21
Literal Translation of Part of a Proper Noun	14
Non-use of Apostrophe to Refer to Shop Names	9
Wrong Spelling	3
Total Frequency of Errors	64

Table 2. *Examples of Errors in Each Error Category.*

Error Category	Example/s
Wrong Word Order	Mosque Al-Quds/ Farabi South Street
Literal Translation from Farsi to English with Inappropriate lexical choices	Uneven Immunity (To refer to 'speed hump')/ Mill Steel (To refer to Zobahan Steel Company)
Incorrect Lexical Equivalents	Fish and Hen Shop (To refer to a shop selling fish and chicken)/ Majid Car Exhibition (Instead of 'Majid Car Dealership')
Literal Translation of Part of a Proper Noun	City Bank (to refer to بانک شهر) / Abrisham City (to refer to شهر ابریشم)
Non-use of Apostrophe to Refer to Shop Names	Azadegan Dry-cleaning (Instead of 'Dry-cleaner's' or 'Dry-cleaning Shop') / Navid Barber (Instead of 'Barber Shop' or 'Barber's')
Wrong Spelling	Well Come to Isfahan! (Instead of 'Welcome to Isfahan')

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

As numerical data presented in table 1 indicate, there were notable differences between frequencies associated with the six error categories. As the table's data show, errors falling into categories of '*Incorrect Lexical Equivalents*', '*Literal Translation of Part of a Proper Noun*' and '*Literal Translation from Farsi to English*' had the first, second and third highest frequencies of occurrence (21, 14 and 11) respectively. The table also shows that errors associated with categories of '*Wrong Spelling*', '*Wrong Word Order*' and '*Non-use of Apostrophe to Refer to Shop Names*' had the lowest frequencies of occurrence (3, 6 and 9 respectively). Also, the total number of errors identified in this research (64), illustrates that a sizeable number of bilingual signs examined in the current study (21 out of the total of 85) were free from errors.

Table 2, which provides examples of errors detected in each of the six error categories, provides a general picture of the extent to which bilingual signs' textual contents deviated from correct forms and how serious the errors were. One problem which flawed bilingual signs pose is confusion and lack of comprehension on the part of foreigners who are not familiar with Farsi and pay attention only to English contents of the signs they have exposure to in Iran. So, it is arguable that gross errors in bilingual Farsi-English signs, such as the translation of 'سرعت گیر' as '*Uneven Immunity*', are bound to confuse foreigners visiting Iran and need to be corrected. To qualitatively analyze the high-frequency error categories, a couple of points need to be mentioned and borne in mind. The first point is that the making of incorrect lexical choices is very common in translation and constitutes one of the major obstacles to having a clear and comprehensible translation (Luttikhuisen 2000), Leonardi (2007), Goutte, Cancedda & Dymetman (2009). The second point is that literal translation of L1 items into L2 is bound to lead to problems. This is perhaps the easiest type of translation and many are tempted to resort to it, but the problem with this approach is that it often fails to take into account semantic boundaries and distinctions between L1 and L2 items (Wills 1982), and does not work when the items translated reach the "literal/figurative boundary" (Low 2010). The third, and final, point is that proper nouns should not be translated from L1 to L2. In this regard, West's (2011) words are notable; "Proper nouns (names) are the same in most languages, and therefore, they are not translated" (p. 251). So, it can be said that the literal translation of some

proper nouns are not only wrong and unacceptable, but also totally unhelpful in translation as it generates bizarre items that can be more confusing than helpful. If, for example, 'the Dead Sea' is translated into Farsi as 'دریای مرده', it will lose its status as a proper noun and can confuse the reader of the translated material.

Taking the above points into consideration, it can be stated that high-frequency errors detected and examined in this study, which deal with incorrect lexical choices and literal translation, have come about partly thanks to the failure of translator/s to pay adequate heed to semantic boundaries between lexical items in English and Farsi as well as to the failure to stick to the rule prohibiting verbatim translation of proper nouns.

Understandably, most translators use different bilingual dictionaries which help them do their work more efficiently. The problem with many of these dictionaries, however, is that most of them fail to illustrate and explain the semantic boundaries between words which are similar in meaning (Wilss 1982). To give an example, Aryanpour's (1984) Persian-English Dictionary, which is widely used in Iran and has been reprinted many times in the past three decades, has provided many English equivalents for the Persian words 'حفظ/نگهداری' including; "preservation, immunization, safeguarding, defending, sheltering, custody, care, guarding, memory, memorizing" (p. 314). If one is not adequately aware of the existence of substantial semantic differences between the equivalents provided above, he may easily make wrong lexical choices and use one of the words wrongly in his translation. The case of the translation of 'سرعت گیر' as 'Uneven Immunity' is perhaps a clear example of both ignoring semantic boundaries between words and translating an item verbatim. Another word, which is bound to lead to the making of incorrect lexical choices in translation is 'نمایشگاه'. Aryanpour's bilingual dictionary (1984) has provided the words "theatre, fair, place of exhibition, exposition, exhibit, show place, showroom" as English equivalents of 'نمایشگاه'. In many bilingual signs, the word 'exhibition' has been used as the lexical equivalent of 'نمایشگاه'. But, as we know, 'exhibition' refers to a place where exhibits are put on display and cannot be sold to visitors, while 'fair' refers to a place where exhibits can be put on display and are sold to potential customers (see Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2007). So, referring to a car dealership as 'a car exhibition' can distort the original message and confuse reader of the translated version of the message. What can be concluded from this study is that despite the increasing use of Farsi-English bilingual road, street and shop signs in Iran, a large number of signs contain errors of different types and varying levels of seriousness. Further, high-frequency errors, as stated before, mainly deal with selecting wrong lexical equivalents and translating proper nouns. Given the existence of a fairly large number of errors in Iranian bilingual signs, there is a need for their treatment and rectification. Also, given the lack of any published article on this research's topic, there is room for future research to focus on this topic and examine larger, more diverse samples of bilingual signs from different parts of Iran to enrich this area of research.

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