

# Linguistic Landscape: A Case Study of Shop Signs in Aqaba City, Jordan

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## Abstract

This research paper aims at investigating the language of business in Jordan in order to find out to what extent the foreign language, English in this case, has influence on the local language, i.e. Arabic, in business sector and what governs the presence of foreign elements in business language? Is it the type of business, customers, or other factors? Another aim is 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 is to see the present status of English in Aqaba and the attitudes of shop owners towards English as a foreign language.

**Keywords:** linguistic landscape, shop signs, business language, Jordan, Aqaba, attitudes

## 1. Introduction

Due to the recent advancement in communication and technology, our present world has become a global village; communication nowadays is much easier than it was in the last millennium at least. Language plays a vital role in such communication. In any modern society the use of foreign words is inevitable. English is one of the major world languages that have a kind of influence on most of everybody's aspects of daily life. Business sector is no exception. English language is translated, borrowed, or used as it is in business. People involved in business use their shop signs, as they constitute a vital area in their business, to display the names of goods and services they deal with. As for customers, each item displayed on the sign is significant nevertheless the linguistic item. Together, linguistic items and non-linguistic ones constitute an idea for the customer about the nature and the type of business of the shop.

Aqaba 'the Burden' is the only Jordanian coastal city situated at the northern end of the Red Sea. It is the southernmost part of Jordan and one of the major tourist attractions in Jordan which is famous for its warm and rich marine life. However, due to its location and being the only seaport in the country, it is an important city for industrial and commercial activities. The total population of Aqaba by the census of 2007 was 98,400; however, the 2009 population estimate is 108,500. It has one of the highest growth rates in Jordan, with only 44% of the buildings being built before 1990. A turning point in the business history of the city economy was made in August 2000 when the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA) was passed by the Jordanian Parliament. Under which some investments and trades are exempted from taxation resulting in new resorts, housing developments, and retail outlets are being constructed to provide high-end vacation and residential homes for Jordanians and foreigners as well. Therefore, the economy of the city became heavily dependent on tourism and port sectors. The major language of daily communication is the Arabic language, as the case with all other Arab cities and countries, a colloquial form of Arabic, Jordanian Colloquial Arabic (JCA), is used in most informal situations whereas the standard form, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is retained for all formal situations. English is the first leading foreign language used with non-native speakers of Arabic. However, due to its important role in tourism and the fact that two universities out of four in the city are American and British, it is by and large intelligible and welcomed.

Commercial shop signs in Aqaba are part of the country's linguistic landscape. The present study comes into sight from a synchronic analysis of commercial signs in the city in order to document the contemporary situation and status of English in shop names and displays.

## 2. Literature Review

The study of shop signs has been the focus of linguistic research in different regions. Researchers have analyzed shop signs from different perspectives. For instance, El-Yasin and Mahadin (1996) study the linguistic material in 355 shop signs in Irbid (a city in north Jordan) in order to see the use of foreign elements in these signs. They conclude that the use of foreign elements is intended for promotion and they are so widespread that they may eventually be borrowed into Arabic. In a similar connection, Al-Kharabsheh et al. (2008) investigate orthographic translation errors and problems in shop signs in the Jordanian public commercial environment. They aim at empirically investigating the linguistic factors (e.g., word-order, wrong lexical choice, and reductionist strategies), and extra linguistic factors (i.e., sociocultural and promotional) that have caused the translation inappropriateness and unparallelisms, information *skewing*, and, consequently, serious semantic-conceptual problems. They conclude that shop signs in Jordan are transnationally “error-ridden”, due to a variety of linguistic and extra linguistic factors as in certain shop signs there is no relation between the source language text and the target language text while in other shop signs, it is found that the translation was based on the source language text, a case common in many signs they investigated.

Trumper-Hecht (2009) investigates the linguistic landscape of Upper Nazareth, Israel, a mixed city of Jewish and Arab. She conducts the study to show how the linguistic landscape can be a site where identity is constructed by the two groups in the city and the “language battle” between Arabic and Hebrew which reflects the overall tension in Jewish-Arab relations. In spite of the fact that Arabic and Hebrew are official languages in Israel, Hebrew has more visibility than Arabic as the majority of the inhabitants are Hebrew speakers who resist the Arab population in general. The author states that in spite of the official orders to add Arabic to all public signs in the city, the visibility of Arabic on public signs has not been improved. She includes also interviews collected from Arab and Jewish participants about the language they wished to see represent landscape of Upper Nazareth. The majority of Jewish respondents want to see Hebrew as the most visible language in the linguistic landscape whereas the Arab informants want to see Hebrew and Arabic and thus displaying more accepted attitude.

Examining the street signs on business names and commercial signs within middle-class and upper-middle-class in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Banu & Sussex (2001) state that in spite of the fact that Bangladesh established Bengali as its national language and decreed it as the prescribed language of posting and signage as a form of resistance to both Urdu and English, instances of English-Bengali alternation on signs represents challenges to state policies and hence constitute *prima facie* examples of how the state is adjusting to the representation of minority languages in the landscape in which English is becoming more persistent in the linguistic landscape of Dhaka. In addition, they note that Bengali script is used to transliterate English as an instance of creativity and adjustment which appears mainly in the middle and upper class neighborhoods as they are more socio-economically privileged areas.

In a study conducted on the linguistic landscape of Taipei, Taiwan Curtin (2009) shows how the linguistic landscape can be a site where particular ideologies are promoted. The study looks at collective national identity, and examines how national identity is indexed in the linguistic landscape by the use of script and orthography. The author concludes that in accordance with the *de facto* official language policy, Mandarin written with traditional Chinese characters was the tremendously represented language in the linguistic landscape of Taipei, and the use of this script indexes a push-pull relation between two different ideologies: a national ideology which supports resistance to a potential reinstatement of Taiwan to China and a “mainlander” ideology which uses the linguistic landscape to mark or index a return to an authentic Chinese national identity and culture.

Lanza and Woldemariam (2009) study the linguistic landscape of the downtown and main shopping areas of Mekele, Ethiopia to see how the linguistic landscape is indexical of linguistic ideologies. The authors state that the majority of signs were bilingual rather than monolingual, and English was found either a second or as the only language on these signs. English frequent use can be due to willingness of the local population to use languages with a growing global sphere of influence. It is also used for decorative purposes and to attract customers as mentioned by some shop owners.

The use of linguistic landscape as a space of instrumentalism has been the focus of a study conducted by McArthur (2000) who investigates the store signs in Zurich, Switzerland and Uppsala, Sweden. He states that in these two cities the local language was the most represented in the linguistic landscape in a haphazard and unstructured use involving a diversity of language mixes. The author concludes that the use of English as well as other languages as an established practice reveals how these languages are used for instrumental purposes of commodification and to convey internationalism rather than to index particular groups and sociolinguistic communities. In a similar study Ross (1997) investigates the use of foreign languages for instrumental purposes

of commodification in the linguistic landscape of Milan, Italy. Ross states that up to 50% of the blocks were in English only in which American English spelling is used and that was due to the appeal associated with American popular culture (films, pop music) and technology. The author states that the use of English in the streets of Milan is not playing the role of lingua franca nor is it used to address tourists; instead, it is used as an attractive and fashionable language having a kind of prestige in spite of the fact that it is not widely understood by the local population. Ross concludes that the use of non-local languages such as English in Milan is not used to index a particular ethno linguistic group but for instrumental purposes of commodification.

### 3. Methodology

This research focuses on the foreign language presence in business sector in Aqaba city in general and on shop signs in particular. Thus, the purpose is to analyze shop signs in terms of language choice (Arabic or English). By ‘sign’ is meant all the linguistic material written to draw 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 as 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. Following these considerations, the four questions that this paper attempts to address and give reasonable answers to are:

- 1) Which functions are performed by English on shop signs of Aqaba?
- 2) Does the language choice depend on the type of shop?
- 3) Are these foreign words used elsewhere in the colloquial Arabic of Aqaba or they are specific to this business context?
- 4) What is the attitude of shop owners towards English as a foreign language?

For the purpose of this study, commercial signs of 278 businesses were randomly selected from different streets in Aqaba, and a number of interviews were carried out with shop owners to know the reason why they used English language on their shop signs. These two techniques are used to assemble the sample of the present study. Aqaba was selected for its location and it is not being the capital because previous studies suggest that shop signs in capitals are more Anglicized than those of other cities (cf. Friedrich, 2002; Schlick, 2003; Thonus, 1991). The types of business in the sample area include (but are not limited to) car rental, jewelries, minimarkets, boutiques (shoe shops, clothes shops), liquor stores, restaurants, banks, Internet cafés, grocery shops, pharmacies, souvenirs and gift shops, and stores for furniture and electronic appliances. The signs were initially divided into two broad groups: signs that have Arabic language only and signs that have either English only or English with Arabic. Signs with Arabic language only constitute 38% of the total number of signs collected. They are not dealt with in this research as the aim of the research is to investigate the English language status on shop signs. Thus, the second group is the focus of the research; however, they are divided into four language use groups: English only, English and Arabic, English in Arabic script, and Arabic in Roman script.

### 4. Analysis and Results

As mentioned earlier the aim of this research is to investigate the linguistic material on shop signs, so the whole data are organized into categories. Shop signs available in this research fall into four categories according to the nature of the linguistic item found on each sign. They include: Arabic in Roman script (22.6%), English and Arabic (58.1%), English in Arabic script (5.2%), and English only (14%) (See Figure 1 below).

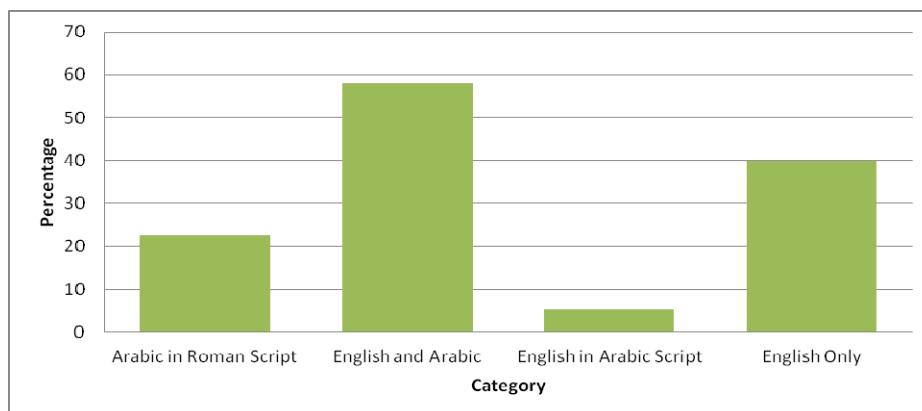


Figure 1. Signs major categories

#### 4.1 Arabic in Roman Script

This category includes Arabic words that are orthographically represented in Roman script. These Arabic words are classified into two groups: personal names and lexical words (see Figure 2). The orthographic representation is a kind of transliteration in which Arabic sounds are represented by their English equivalents in which few changes are made in cases where Arabic sounds have no English equivalents. For example, the Arabic ع (a voiced pharyngeal fricative sound) is represented by the English letter ‘a’ as in *Alawneh* العلورنه or by an apostrophe as in SA'AD سعد and NA'EEM SAQER نعيم صقر. Another important alternation is the omission of the Arabic definite article as in *Alawneh* العلورنه and KHATIB الخطيب in which it appears in the Arabic word on the sign; however, the definite article is retained in other transliterations.

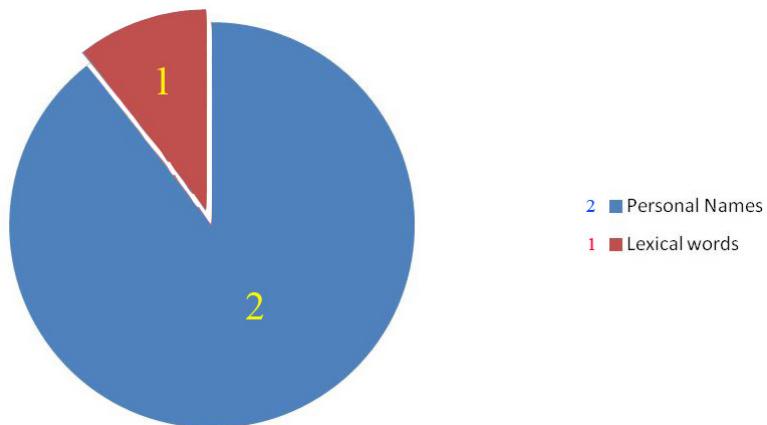


Figure 2. Distribution of Arabic in Roman script signs

The second group includes words that have cultural values and they lose their meaning if translated; so they retain their Arabic pronunciation such as *Mansaf* in Lamb Mansaf ‘a popular Jordanian dish’, and *Sayadeh* in Fish Sayadeh ‘a Jordanian fish dish’, and *SHEKH-ALHARA* ‘chief or head of the district’ in SHEKH-ALHARA Restaurant (see Figure 3). As the meaning suggests, these words are found on a restaurant sign.



Figure 3. Arabic in Roman script sign

#### 4.2 English and Arabic

The presence of English and Arabic on the same sign is the most common feature in the selected sample of the study; it constitutes 58.1% of the total sample (see Figure 1). However, according to the linguistic material on these signs, the following groups are identified (see Figure 4):

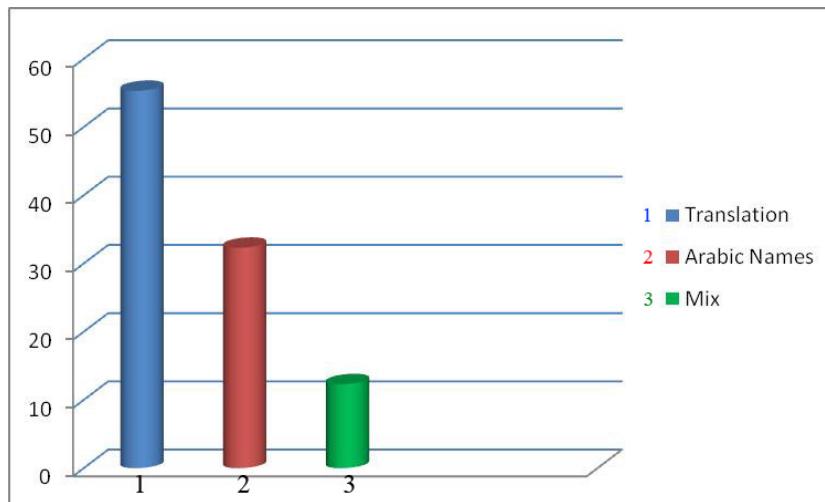


Figure 4. English and Arabic signs

#### a) Translation

The majority of English-Arabic signs belong to this subcategory. The presence of English is nothing but a partial, if not complete, translation of the Arabic material such as: مطعم الكابتن, sailor: Captain's Restaurant, مأكولات بحريه: SEAFOOD, GREEN MEADOWS TRAVEL & TOURISM, اهلا العقه للغوص تحت 7 Wonders Travel & Tourism, مشاوي مشكله الماء: ahlan Aqaba Scuba Diving Center, سامر للمشروبات الروحيه: SAMER LIQOUR STORE, محمص ROASTER, تجارة عامة: GENERAL TRADING, صيدلية: PHARMACY, مكتبه: LIBRARY, تحف الخليج: Gulf Jewelry, and تجارة عامة: Gulf Souvenirs. As it can be seen from these examples, the literal translation is made to give the customer a clear idea about the nature of the goods and services provided by each shop or center. It also indicates that their customers are not only local but foreigners as well.

#### b) Arabic Names

According to frequency, this subcategory comes after Translation under English-Arabic signs. It includes Arabic personal names written in Arabic and English such as Talhaodeh, Samer, GHASSAN, ALZGHOOL, KHAMIS AL DEEB, FAWZI RADWAN, KHATER, Taher Abdeen, HAMADAH, ALZATARI, AL-DWEEK, HILLAWI, RAWAN, and Al Ibraheeme. Usually, it is the name of the shop owner which is included in the commercial name of the business, so it is presented in English to keep the name of the shop official in both languages as much as possible; however, some names have gone under modification to adapt English spelling, or pronunciation.

#### c) Mix

The signs of this subcategory include both languages but this category differs from the previous ones in the sense that on the same sign English is used to indicate some of the services or goods provided by the shop and Arabic is used to indicate other services or goods provided by the same shop. For example, on one sign we find SILVER & CARPET and تعبئه الرمل الملون. The Arabic linguistic material is 'filling coloured sand' which has nothing to do either with silver or carpet. Instead, it provides another service the shop provides. Another example is 'Coffee Shop' in English and 'مدينة العصائر' 'the juice city' in which Arabic and English materials have nothing to do with each other except that they are different services provided by the snack shop.

#### 4.3 English in Arabic Script

This category includes English words written in Arabic letters. In Figure 5, the word PIZZA is written in English and in Arabic spelling.



Figure 5. English in Arabic script sign

Other examples include: تکا شکن LIQOUR STORE, درای کلین Dry Clean, and تکا چیکن TIKKA CHICKEN. Such method of presentation is used in few cases when either the Arabic equivalent is not available or not common. For instance, the words pizza, tikka and dry clean are used as they are in the local dialect in Jordan in general and in Aqaba in particular; their presence in English is more common than the presence of their Arabic equivalents, a fact that influences the shop signs' linguistic style.

#### 4.4 English Only

English is to some extent familiar in Aqaba as some shop signs are found to be in English only. In this category most shops have their business intended for tourists. Such businesses include: car rental, minimarket, liquor, souvenirs, gifts, photo shops, hotels, computer, shoe shops, internet, book shop, and jewelry.

### 5. Conclusion

It can be concluded that most of the shop signs of the selected sample are found to be in both Arabic and English; they constitute more than half of the total number of signs investigated (58.1%) as shown in Figure 1. In most of them the author translates the Arabic name into English to make information about the goods and services they provide available for non-native speakers of Arabic. As stated by some shop owners, English is used on their shop signs in order to attract foreign customers' attention. However, other shop owners stated that they use English beside Arabic because the former is associated with globalization, modernity, prestige and for decorative purposes. Thus, English receives a positive attitude as a foreign language since it improves their business. Arabic in English spelling signs occupies the second position according to frequency as a result of a tradition of naming shops, restaurants, etc. in Jordan and in the Arab World in general; in such tradition the owner's name is included in the name of the business; thus, in translation it is transliterated using English spelling. 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(s) is already used in the local dialect of the city as the case of *dry clean*, *pizza* and *chicken tikka* discussed above. In a few cases English only is used on shop signs; in most of these businesses the target customers are foreigners as mentioned by shop owners.

The frequent use of English words in this business context indicates that these items are eventually going to be loanwords into Arabic sometime in the future as they might be more familiar to local people and be regulated according to the local dialect linguistic system. English is a favorable language that receives a positive attitude and becoming more familiar language in the city as it is a means of attracting tourists' attention at least in this business context. More research is needed in similar contexts such as street signs, billboards, local newspapers, radio programmes and TV stations in order to see the overall presence of the foreign element in the city.

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