Displacement, Separation, and Alienation: A Socio-Cultural Approach toMistranslated Signs!

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ABSTRACT:*Thepresent paper looks at translated signs – ads in malls or in shops and selling stands, in construction sites, in roads and speedways…–froma sociocultural perspective. It argues as it downplays the humorous aspects of these translated signs that translation remains above all an act of communication between social and cultural groups. The translated signs examined in the present paper reveal the effects of displacement, separation, and alienation. They also validate the view that sociocultural approaches to translation reveal more about the movement of individuals and groups of individuals (subjects) than about the movement of texts (source and target languages or objects). Saudi Arabia hosts, like many Gulf countries and perhaps even more, millions and millions of foreign workers. These workers – not counting academics and skilled clerks – are not totally bilingual. Their mastery of both English and Arabic is rudimentary and is essentially geared towards "getting by" or "managing" in complex and fragmented contexts shaped by migration and acculturation.Language – be it source or target language – is, as a consequence, unconsciously toned or subdued to the point that its linguistic norms, variations, and conventions no longer exist. Those who translated the signs we examined appear to be foreigners or migrants. Their socio-cultural context of displacement resulted in what looks like separation and lack of integration. In their new host countries, they remain the same or unchanged. Indeed, being caught in the dilemma of their migration, they neither fully integrated in nor remained fully separated from the language of their host country.*
KEYWORDS:*Alienation, Cross Language Communication, Displacement,Translation,Separation, Signs.*

I   INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.

During the last few months our attention was caught by what looked like funny and humorous signs advertising price cuts and reductions in small stands in local malls and supermarkets in Jeddah (K.S.A) and its surrounding areas. These signs advertised goods and price offers related to watches and other knickknacks. Indeed, to incite potentials buyers, a stand called "الركن السويسرى: The Swiss Corner"- usually found in the corridors of well-known super markets and malls- displayed a sign in both Arabic and English which read: "أشترى ساعة وأحصل على الثانيه مجانا/ *Buy one Hourand Get one Free*". Thisstand was manned by a young man with Asian featuresand who looked in his mid-twenties. When we tried to draw his attention to the anomaly in the sign he displayed, he sounded confused and not able to make head or tail of our remarks.

Moreover, the few words he uttered in Arabic and English testified to his lack of commend of both languages. We made no further comments and as we proceeded with our stroll, we came across another stand, also selling watches, called "The Swiss House/البيت السويسري". This stand displayed the same sign but with a little twist: "تنزيلات: أشترى ساعه وأحصل على الساعه الثانيه مجانا/Downloads: Buy 1 Hour and Get another Free." From the short conversation we had with the stand operator, we found that he was a citizen of a neighboring Arab country and hisfluency in English was extremely poor. The little he knew of English was less than enough for standard basic communication.

Our initial reactions to the above encounters and with the stand operators consisted of laughter and humorous comments. Indeed, humor was everywhere as we made our way to the food court of the same supermarket. We decided to eat ethnic food and while we were looking at the menu, the dishes sounded juicy

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and mouthwatering. However, in the salads'section of the menu, we came across another funny surprise. Indeed, there was among the variety of salads listed a salad that sounded a little strange and funny in English: "Vegetable Problem Salad/ سلطة خظار مشكل." In that very case, the humor resulted from the literal confusion between "problem" in English and "مشكل" in Arabic. What was intended in the menu was " خليط سلطه خضار" in Arabic and "Mixed Vegetables Salad" in English.

As for the signs related to the Swiss watches in the paragraph above, humor resulted in the first case from the confusion between "watch and hour" in English and "ساعة"in Arabic. Indeed, "ساعة " in Arabic can mean two different things: "hour" as a time measurement unit as well as the device we wear to keep track of time. In other words when we ask in Arabic "كم الساعه؟"we mean "what time is it?" in English. However, when we say "ساعه جميله! أى ماركه؟" what we mean is " Nice watch you have! What make is it?" in English. Still, within the context of the first paragraph and in connection with "The Swiss House" sign, humor was also generated from the word "Downloads" in English and "تنزيلات" in Arabic. What was intended by "تنزيلات" in Arabic was, we believe, " عرض أوتخفيض أسعار." "Offers or Price Cuts" should have been used in the sign instead of "Downloads"!

Our observations were taken to the classroom and were discussedin our sessions of English and American Literature and Culture. We found out that most students had come across similar cases of funny and humorous translations. When we mentioned that "Google Translator" was used in the above translations, hints to other possible implications and possibilities were raised. Indeed, we were coached to think, bearing in mind Alavi (2012. 25), of translation not just as "a matter of equivalence or transfer of semantic meaning from source texts to target texts." Also,and since we were talking about signs – prices, ads, instructions… – we were encouraged to think of the act of translation as not simply dependent on source texts and/or target ones. Other processes or variables; mainly cultural and sociological, appear to govern translations or acts of translations in a host country like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia where millions and millions of foreign immigrant" وافدون أو مقيمون"with different backgrounds or personal trajectories, live and work.

This research paper took shape consequent to the debates generated by the humor and laughter caused by some of the translated signs to which we were exposed and which were shared by the students and the teaching staff. Students and colleagues were asked, consequently, to gather as much translated signs as possible to carry out a research project that would take us beyond the humor and laughter so as to investigate their socio-cultural implications. The first thing we did was googling "funny translated sign in Arabic and English" to find out, first, if the topic was tackled beforeand to see, second, whether these translated signs were available electronically. We were lucky to discover that no serious study targeted these signs. They were only approached to point to their incongruities- incongruities responsible for the humor and laughter they generated and continued to generate. Moreover, we found nothing, absolutely nothing, pertaining to the socio-cultural implications of these translation signs. Consequently, we started our data collection with the appropriate methods, rationale and research questions.

II   DATA COLLECTION AND THE RESEARCH METHODS
a.Empirical Method.

This research paper is mostly empirical in its method. It relied heavily on observation in its collection of data. We saddled ourselves with the task of observing our surroundings in order to collect all the translated signs which fell within the scope of our research and theoretical framework. Also, we posted an on-line request via facebook asking friends and acquaintances to share with us their personal observations and comments on translated signs. We explained why we were interested in these translated signs and for what purpose. We also explained that though we would prioritize translated signs from Saudi Arabia, we had no objections to receiving these translated signs from the other Arab Gulf-countries. Our reason for not objecting to data from the other Arab Gulf- countries was dictated by the fact that the Gulf countries hosted, like Saudi Arabia, foreign populations with varied and various cultural and sociological backgrounds.

Initially, the response we got was a little slow. Gradually however, we managed to gather scores of translated signs. Each received sign generated serious debates. By time, we started to realize that some of the translated signs we gathered were either fake or tempered with. We were a little set back and discouraged. We decided to proceed and go ahead with our collection of as much translated signs as possible knowing that what we would manage to collect would be sorted out through using quantitative and qualitative methods. We were absolutely convinced that through quantitative and qualitative sampling some translated signs would be naturally discarded. As an example, and even prior to our use of quantitative and qualitative methods, we voluntarily discarded the following item:

Indeed, the above item looked tempered with (see the red line and dark traces in front of the name, number, and below 'Blood Group'. Nothing could proveeven sheer good faith or down to earth common sense, that the document was genuine. Another example which was discarded right away was a translated sign showing Shaqra University (جامعة شقراء). The sign showed one of the main entrances of the Deanship of the university where (جامعة شقراء)was translated as (BlondUniversity):

In this case it was easy to verify the sign through logging in to the home page of the above mentioned university. The home page displayed the English translation as one expected it to be. What we concluded from the two discarded examples above was that people were certainly aware of the presence of translated signs with incongruous contents resulting usually in humor and laughter. Therefore, some people often would try to be funny through manipulating these signs or through constructing or fabricating their content. Below is what looks like a manipulated sign where the author appears aware that people often did not do the translation themselves but rely on Google Translator:

As shown in the comment above and as the data we collected also testified, the translated signs we received were, when not tempered with or artificially constructed, subjected to Google translator.

b. Quantitative Method:

Besides using observation as an integral part of the empirical method,we also resorted to quantitative and qualitative methods. These two methods were not used interchangeably since they meant different things, had different implications, and their relevance varied correspondingly. The quantitative method is often used "to quantify attitudes, opinions, and…behaviors." Data collection using the quantitative method involves "online surveys, online polls, and… systemic observations." The aim of the quantitative method is "to quantify a problem" so as to "transform it" into "useable statistics."

c. Qualitative Method:

The qualitative method is "exploratory" in nature. The use of the qualitative method aims at gaining insight into behavioral patterns, opinions, and motivations behind the actions of individuals or groups of individuals. In the case of our present research paper, we prioritized the qualitative method for its above features especially "group discussions", "participations", and "observations." Moreover, our reliance on the qualitative method was also determined by the fact that it yielded relevant and credible results through using a small number of samples.

III   DATA COLLECTIONS SAMPLES AND ANALYSIS:

The samples which remained at our disposal after careful selection and discarding of all the translated signs which looked farfetched, tempered with, or artificially constructed through whatever manipulation techniques, were grouped into two main categories: a) Signs advertising products and prices, b) Signs of general nature related to road information or construction sites.

a. Samples of Signs Advertising Products and Prices:

What we have here looks like a store specializing in selling poultry products especially chicken meat. The sign translated the Arabic word "المذبوحة"using "Murder" in English. Wecannot talk of source text and target text here. All that we have is a translation of segments from Arabic to English. Also, we cannot even talk of semantic meaning or equivalence because "murder" is generic and "مذبوح" is loaded with sociocultural

implications pointing to religious rituals having to do with slaughtering animals and selling "halel/حلال" products.

Google translator appears also to have been used in the sign above without checking whether there is compatibility between the English segments as "Source Segments" and the obtained Arabic segments as "Target Segments". A friend of us provided us with the above sign from a mall in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The sign advertises smoked quality fowl meat mainly turkey. The Arabic translation of the English segments has neither head nor tail. It makes no sense at all. And this is due to the confusion it generates in the mind of shoppers: what is being advertised? Is it smoked turkey? Roasted turkey with honey? Or is it thecarbonized or charred Prime minister of the Republic of Turkey? A total lack of knowledge or mastery of the English language is behind the confusion and lack of meaning generated by the advertised sign!

Let us proceed segment by segment to see how the confusion originated. "Prime" means in English top quality … or best choice. It is translated in Arabic as "رئيس الوزراء" meaning "Prime Minister": the chief or leading minister. "Smoked" means cured or treated with smoke like any meat or fish. It is translated in Arabic as "مدخن" meaning "fumigated or fumed." "Turkey" the domesticated bird from North America for its flesh or meat is confused with the country Turkey. The confusion led to thinking that "Prime"- as we have just pointed out meaning top quality or choice- refers to the political rank of Prime minister! "Roasted" means cooked by dry heat and usually with added fat or flavor. Here the added flavor is honey. In the present sign, "roasted" is translated in Arabic as "تفحم"! The English equivalent of "تفحم" is basically carbonized or charred!

What we have in the sign above is a literal or word for word translation. "مشكلة"is also "معضلة"in Arabic. Both "مشكلة" and "معضلة"signify "problem", "fix", or "impasse" in English. The accurate translation must be "Mixed Nuts."

This sign advertises meat products obtained from domestic animals: rabbit meat, poultry, fowls, etc. Many translation problems can be noticed in this sign. First, there is a problem with the translation of the Arabic word "محل". As we know, "محل"can mean in Arabic various things depending on its context. In this precise context where we are dealing with a shop or a store selling poultry, rabbit meat, fowls, etc., the term "محل"refers to "place" in English. Therefore, the English translation "Abdullah's Meat Store" pure and simple can do the job.

The sign above was posted in the vegetables and fruits section in a famous local mall in Jeddah. Here, there is something totally wrong in the Arab translation of the English segment "Green Onion Leaves." The problem resides in the translation of "leaves"- the plural of leaf. In the Arabic translation "leaves" was understood as the present of the verb "to leave" conjugated in the present tense with pronouns like "he" or "she". "Leaf" is "ورقه نباتية"in the context of the sign above and it refers to a leafy batch of onions as a " سلعه نباتيه". Here Google translator appears to have been used without checking whether there iscompatibility between the English segment as "Source Segment" and the obtained Arabic segment as the "Target Segment". A problem like this appears to be, as we gathered from casual conversations, a common occurrence and almost a behavioral pattern. The Arab segment could simply be translated "بصل أخضر ورق".

The sign above was spotted in a store specializing in selling ready-made clothes, "abaa-عباءه" or gowns for women, head gears, etc. Here the mistranslation is the result of a lexical confusion related to the meaning or implication of the Arabic segment " تنزيلorتنزيلات".What was intendedby "تنزيلات" was no doubt "Price Cuts or Special Offers" in English. Yet, Google translator was used and the result was "Downloads".

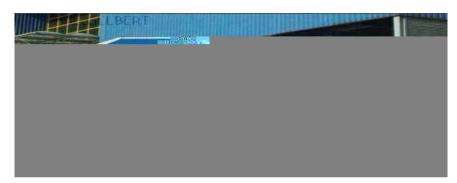**a.   *Signs of General Nature, Roads and Construction Sites.***

This sign seemed intended to warn drivers and road users about a change in roads from being levelled or outstretched to being slanting or sloping. Though the translation seems to make sense, it is, by all means, the result of a simple transfer of meaning and a sheer equivalence. "أمامك هبوط"means also in Arabic " أمامك منحدر". It could have simply been translated as follows: "Deep Slope Ahead".

The landscape of the above sign showed a work area. The sign was meant to warn workers as well as passers-by about possible danger resulting from electrocution due to the existence of underground high voltage cables. Neither the English translation nor the Arabic one makes sense. One is left puzzled and a little bit amused by guessing what the sign actually intended to mean.

This sign was spotted in a public facility. It was meant to give directions to visitors, customers, and patrons of all sorts. We focused on the bottom part of the sign where the Arabic segment "السلم"was translated by the English one "Peace". "السلم"in Arabic could meandepending on the vowelization and vocalization of the letters in the word- "تحريك حروف الكلمات", either "peace" or stairs.Clearly, themistranslation resulted from a lack of knowledge of the Arabic language and of the rules which govern it.

This sign was supposed to indicate a public parking lot. The Arabic segment "للعموم" was mistranslated into "for Uncles". What caused the mistranslation was literal equivalence in English. Again, Google translator might have been used. It is interesting to note, at this level, that the comment in Arabic " و الخوال وين بصفوا؟؟ " indicates a certain public awareness among those who carefully and critically read the signs and reactedto their mistranslations not just with humor!

IV   RESEARCH RATIONALE AND QUESTIONS.

The present research paper subscribedto the view that socio-cultural attitudes and parameters play significant roles in the act of translation. Our focus on translated signsshowed that the act or process of translation was, in its crudest dimension, a basic communication system between potential buyers, stand operators, and shoppers in general. The translated signs appeared to have been done by individuals whose mastery of source language and target language was extremely poor. Translations were often literal and plain acts of equivalence. Google translator did some of the translations and the results were funny and incongruous. The following three questions framed the present paper:

- What were the impacts of socio-cultural backgrounds and personal trajectories in the act of translating signs?
- At what level did these socio-cultural backgrounds and personal trajectories appear?
- What were the implications of those socio-cultural backgrounds and personal trajectories on readers and on the receiving audience in general?

V   CONCLUSION AND FINDINGS

The different sample signs used in this research paper led us to conclude that they were translated by individuals who are "untrained bilinguals" with no linguistic skills or competence. Being "untrained bilinguals", the "translators" neither mastered English nor fully commended Arabic.All they did was translating "signs by means of other signs" in a different language. As a consequence, language-either source or target language- was unconsciously toned or subdued "مطوعه" to the point that its linguistic norms, variations, and conventions no longer existed. Those who translated the signs appeared to be foreigners or migrants. Their socio-cultural context of displacement resulted in what looked like a lack of integration. In their new host countries, they

remained the same, separated, and unchanged.Indeed, they remained caught in the dilemma of their migration. Being aliens and alienated, they neither fully integrated in nor remained fully separated from the language of their host country.

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