



## Analysing Mistranslation in Public Signs Within Linguistic Landscapes



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### Abstract

This study explores the phenomenon of mistranslations in public signage within multilingual environments, drawing on linguistic landscape theory, semiotics, and translation studies. By examining five case studies from diverse regions, the research identifies common sources of mistranslations, including linguistic factors, translation strategies, and socio-cultural influences. The analysis reveals that mistranslations often stem from literal translations that overlook idiomatic expressions and cultural nuances, leading to confusion and potential reinforcement of cultural stereotypes. The study underscores the need for improved translation practices and quality control measures to enhance the accuracy and cultural appropriateness of public signage. The findings contribute to the broader understanding of translation challenges in multilingual contexts and highlight the importance of considering both linguistic and cultural elements in translation practices.

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## 1 Introduction

In today's globalized world, the translation of signs in public and commercial spaces, such as shops and restaurants, is a common sight, no matter where you go. These signs highlight this connection, but can also highlight intricate challenges that come with cross-cultural communication. The translations on these signs can be well presented, but they can also reflect complexities that may relate to mere linguistic errors and those that can relate to deeper socio-linguistic dynamics and cultural misunderstandings.

Mistranslations in signs, whether humorous or perplexing, can distort the intended message and impact the clarity of communication (Munday, 2008). They are not simply issues of grammatical or lexical inaccuracies but often mirror broader cultural nuances and power dynamics between languages (Pennycook, 2010). The semiotic landscapes, where these signs are displayed, represent the intersection of global and local contexts. This intersection is sometimes a fertile ground for mistranslations, which can lead to significant miscommunication (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010) between both the source language and the intended audience.

Translation is increasingly being recognized as an intricate process that involves not only linguistic competence but also a nuanced understanding of cultural performance and contextual appropriateness (Orozco & Albir, 2002; Šeböková, 2010). Today, translation studies have also come to realize such issues and are trying to address such challenges, moving beyond the preservation of semantic and stylistic equivalences to also encompass the cultural contexts of both source and target languages (Bell, 1991). In addition, the study of linguistic landscapes, particularly the analysis of multilingual signage, has gained attention in both sociolinguistics and translation studies, as we will see below. In sum, as societies become more multilingual, accurate translations on public signs are crucial. However, mistranslations continue to be a pervasive issue, leading to misunderstandings, communication barriers, and contributing to the reinforcement of cultural stereotypes. In this paper, I look at the mistranslation in these signs in different linguistic landscapes. The study aims to explore the literature on linguistic landscapes and focuses specifically on mistranslations in non-official public signs. It examines the translation strategies employed in 5 studies on linguistic landscapes and investigates the underlying reasons for these mistranslations (Gorter, 2018).

### *Literature Review*

This study is grounded in the interdisciplinary fields of linguistic landscape theory, socio-cultural dimensions of communication, semiotics, and translation studies. These frameworks provide a comprehensive lens through which to examine the phenomenon of mistranslations in public signage and their broader implications.

### *Linguistic Landscapes*

Linguistic landscape (LL) research began with the work of Landry & Bourhis (1997), who coined the term and defined LL as the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs within a given regional area. Scholars have since emphasized the role of linguistic landscapes in reflecting multilingual societies, language policies, and cultural identities (Gorter, 2006; Shohamy & Gorter, 2008). LL refers to the study of writing on display in the public sphere, including public, commercial, and private signs within a region (Gorter, 2018). This is particularly relevant in urbanized communities where bilingual or multilingual signage facilitates interaction and communication among inhabitants (Coulmas, 2009). The study of LL encompasses any visible display of written language, termed "signs," and people's interactions with these signs (Mensel et al. 1997; Shohamy et al., 2010; Kallen, 2010). In summary, linguistic landscapes focus on the written form of language that is visible to everyone (Torkington, 2009), the medium of the signs, and the area in which they occur (Alsaif & Starks, 2019).

### *Mistranslations and the Role of Culture and Intercultural Communication*

The translation process is deeply intertwined with the socio-cultural dimension of communication. Translation is closely connected to culture and intercultural communication. Hassan (2014), explains that a good translation "carries all the ideas of the original as well as its structural and cultural features" (p. 2), including non-linguistic aspects such as values, beliefs, and traditions. Understanding the cultural values of the translated text is important (Torop, 2002; Muamaroh, 2008; Sugyaningsih & Mardiana, 2017), as such factors significantly influence communication (Salehi, 2012). Translation needs to be perceived as a cultural practice (Hermans, 1999) that involves

communication across cultures (House, 2014). As Hassan (2014) explains, good translation "reconstructs the cultural/historical context of the original" (p. 2).

Newmark (2001) argues that culture is "the greatest obstacle to translation, at least to the achievement of an accurate and decent translation" (p. 328). A translation's goal is, as Darwish (2001) explains, preserving and controlling the original meaning when conveying it to the target language's verbal expression. Ghazala (2008) says that translators "translate meaning, nothing else but meaning" (p. 3), which implies that "neither the word nor the text" but culture should be the unit of translation (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990).

Intercultural communication is, therefore, a major component in translation studies (Fenyo, 2005; House, 2014; Schäffner, 2003; Liu, 2018) as translation introduces "new facts and ideas inherent in the source language culture" (Komissarov, 1991) that result in broadening horizons and promoting respect for other cultures. Translators are seen as mediators between cultures rather than just between languages (Hatim & Mason, 1990; Wafa, 2014).

What can be inferred from all the above information is that mistranslations in public signage, which is the focus of this paper, can have significant communicative and cultural consequences. On a communicative level, miscalculations can lead to inaccuracies and failure to convey essential information, which leads to confusion. Studies, such as those conducted by Backhaus (2006) and Scollon & Scollon (2003), highlight instances where mistranslations have caused practical misunderstandings, such as incorrect directions or misleading instructions, which can be particularly problematic in contexts like transportation or healthcare.

Culturally, mistranslations can reinforce stereotypes, perpetuate cultural insensitivity, and diminish the credibility of institutions responsible for the signs. For instance, Tan (2017) discusses how mistranslations often result from a lack of understanding of cultural nuances, leading to translations that are not only incorrect but also potentially offensive.

Linguistic landscape scholars like Pennycook (2009) and Jaworski & Thurlow (2010) argue that mistranslations are embedded in broader social and cultural contexts, which can reflect power imbalances between languages and cultures and reveal the dominance of certain languages over others. From such a perspective, mistranslations can be seen as indicators of hidden societal issues, such as inadequate language education, limited professional translation services, and or the undervaluation of minority languages.

### *The Role of Semiotics in Analysing Mistranslations*

Semiotic theory offers a valuable framework for analysing the impact of mistranslations in linguistic landscapes. Barthes (1977) and Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) suggest that signs are complex units of meaning combining linguistic and visual elements. Mistranslation disrupts the relationship between the signifier (the word or phrase) and the signified (the concept it represents) (Saussure, 1983), leading to communication breakdowns.

Studies by Sebba (2010) and Pavlenko (2009) emphasize the importance of considering both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of signs in translation studies. A mistranslation not only alters the textual message but also affects the overall interpretation of the sign, especially when visual elements like images, colors, or symbols are involved. This holistic approach is crucial for understanding the full impact of mistranslations in multilingual environments.

Vygotsky's and Peirce's semiotic perspectives view signs as dialogic, to convey meaning to readers who must interpret them. According to Peirce (1998), a sign is "an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects: a sign, its object, and its interpretant" (p. 411). Peirce explains that signs function between two minds, the one that utters the sign and another that interprets it (p. 403). Vygotsky (1978) sees signs as provoking different reflections and responses from users, while Bakhtin (1981) sees them as facilitating the dialogical growth of consciousness. This suggests that signs may have multiple interpretations, and effective communication occurs when interpretations are accepted as a "temporarily shared social reality" (Wertsch, 1985).

### *Translation Studies: Challenges in Achieving Equivalence*

Translation studies grapple with the concept of equivalence, which mainly refers to the extent to which a translated text accurately reflects the meaning of the original text. Nida (1964) introduced the term "dynamic equivalence," which shows the importance of conveying the same impact and or reaction in the target language as in the source language. Nida (1996) considers the translation process from two perspectives, the 'formal equivalence' (where form and content of the source text are preserved), and the 'dynamic equivalence' (where meaning and cultural context are considered). In translations, especially those in public signs, this can be very difficult to achieve, showing that translations must be clear and very precise.

Hassan (2014) notes that "cultural elements are more resistant to translation than linguistic ones" (p. 6), while Ghazala (2008) maintains that translators may need to look "outside texts and contexts" to capture the spirit or message of the original (p. 12). Venuti (1995) explains that translators who try to aim for translations that read as if originally written in the target language may complicate cultural nuances and idiomatic expressions. Pym (2010) shows that there is a good deal of tension when it comes to free and literal translations and that overly literal translations most often can result in awkward phrases or those that are nonsensical altogether.

In conclusion, based on all the above, it can be rightly assumed that there is a need for a practical approach to translation that considers all aspects related to the text being translated, from its linguistic to its socio-cultural dimensions, and that translators need to find equivalents for both the words and the intended meaning found in the original text being translated (Al-Sofi & Abouabdulqader, 2020).

### *Gaps in the Literature and the Need for Further Research*

Throughout the recent decades, we have seen a rise in studies addressing linguistic landscapes from various perspectives, including ideology, identity, policy making, and language use (see Ahmed, 2020; Akindele, 2011; Backhaus, 2006; Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Despite this growing body of research, there is a need for more focused studies on mistranslations in public signage. Existing research often addresses broader aspects of linguistic landscapes or translation challenges in literary or technical texts, with relatively few focusing on the specific challenges posed by public signage. Furthermore, while some research has explored the cultural implications of mistranslations, there is a lack of studies documenting the types of mistranslations and their causes in different linguistic landscapes. This study aims to contribute to filling this gap.

## **2 Materials and Methods**

This study employs a qualitative research design, focusing on the analysis of mistranslations in public signage as documented in five peer-reviewed studies on linguistic landscapes from diverse regions. To identify suitable case studies, a structured literature search was conducted using academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Keywords used included "linguistic landscape," "mistranslation," "public signage," and "multilingual signs." Inclusion criteria required that studies be published in English between 2008 and 2024, include empirical data, and provide documented examples of translation errors in public signage.

Data collection involved extracting relevant textual and visual examples of mistranslations from each selected study, along with contextual information such as the languages involved, location, and intended message of the signage. Each case was categorized based on the type of mistranslation (e.g., literal translation, grammatical error, cultural inappropriateness) and analyzed thematically.

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and underlying causes of mistranslations across the selected cases. Coding was performed manually, guided by key concepts from translation studies and semiotics, such as equivalence, cultural transfer, and meaning negotiation. This analytic process allowed for an in-depth understanding of how linguistic and socio-cultural factors contribute to public signage errors in multilingual contexts.

## **3 Results and Discussions**

The analysis of the examined studies reveals several key issues leading to mistranslations:

- 1) Linguistic Factors: These are errors that relate to grammar, spelling, word order, and lexical choice. They are often attributed to the translator's linguistic incompetence or the use of inappropriate translation strategies.
- 2) Extra-Linguistic Factors: These are errors that relate to the socio-cultural influences, promotional needs, and a lack of contextual understanding. They can impact the effectiveness and accuracy of translations, leading to skewed or inadequate translations.
- 3) Translation Strategies: The choice of translation strategies, such as literal translation, transliteration, or omission, can also result in mistranslations, particularly when these strategies do not align with the target language's norms or cultural context.

Table 1 summarizes the analysis of the 5 individual studies examined.

Table 1  
Analysis of the studies examined

Study	Region/ country	Languages used	Type of Errors	Causes of errors	Impact of errors
Al Kharabsheh et al. (2008)	Jordan	Arabic-English	Word order, lexical choice, and reductionist strategies	Linguistic factors: Inadequate lexical choice, word order; Extra-linguistic factors: Socio-cultural and promotional factors	Skewed information, inadequate translation effectiveness
Al-Athwary (2014)	Yemen	Arabic-English	Spelling, grammatical, and lexical errors	Translator's linguistic incompetence, carelessness, and lack of socio-cultural differences between Arabic and English	Communication obstacles, inaccurate information delivery
Aristova (2016)	Russia	Russian-Tatar-English	Spelling, transliterations, blended words, morphological errors,	Linguistic factors: Word order, morphological case marking errors, misspellings	Perplexing and incorrect translations, compromised readability
Shi (2014)	China	Chinese-English	Spelling, grammatical errors	Linguistic factors: Spelling and grammar	Negative impact on the city's image, perplexed readers
Algryani (2021)	Oman	Arabic-English	Literal translation, transliteration, omission	Inappropriate translation strategies: Literal translation, transliterations, omissions, Linguistic incompatibilities between English and Arabic.	inadequacy and inappropriateness of conveyed meaning, negative impact on communication of intended content, and misunderstanding

The study highlights common patterns across the examined studies. A consistent issue is the lack of linguistic competence or inappropriate translation strategies, leading to grammatical, lexical, and spelling errors, literal translation, or incorrect assumptions about background knowledge. Region-specific factors, such as cultural differences and promotional needs, were particularly significant in studies from Jordan, Yemen, and China, where socio-cultural factors heavily influenced translation adequacy.

The analysis identified common patterns in the observed mistranslations. Many errors stemmed from literal translations that failed to account for idiomatic expressions or cultural connotations. Signs often contained translations that were grammatically correct but contextually inappropriate, leading to confusion or unintended meanings. This observation aligns with previous studies (e.g., Nida, 1964; Venuti, 1995), which highlight the challenges of achieving dynamic equivalence in translation. The consequences of mistranslations were evident in both practical and communicative contexts. Errors in signage led to misunderstandings regarding services or information, echoing concerns raised by Scollon & Scollon (2003), who emphasize the importance of clear and accurate signage in facilitating effective communication in multilingual settings.

According to Suksaeresup & Thep-Ackrapong (2009), errors can occur in the translation process during “the reading of the text” (“Miscue errors” and “the translator’s wrong assumption of the background knowledge”) and “in English lexical meanings” (“errors in propositional meanings” and “Errors in translating expressive meaning”). Miscue Errors are incorrect guesses or misinterpretations during reading or translating text. These often occur with beginner translators or those with poor reading skills. Examples include translating "program" as "performance" or "county" as "country." Such errors, though not explicitly termed as such in the examined studies, could relate to issues found in Al-Athwary (2014), where spelling and grammatical errors were noted. Errors in “the translator's wrong assumption of the background knowledge” arise from a translator’s lack of the necessary background

knowledge or context to accurately interpret the source text. This is evident in Shi (2014), where cultural and contextual misunderstandings affect translation quality. Errors in propositional meaning relate to the relationship between words and their meanings or descriptions. For instance, translating a word based on incorrect context, such as "right" in various senses (e.g., "right" versus "left" or "right" versus "wrong"), as observed in Algryani (2021). Aristova (2016) also notes morphological errors and mistranslations involving misunderstandings of propositional meanings. Finally, errors in "translating expressive meaning" can occur when translating idiomatic expressions or terms of address by focusing solely on their literal meanings. For example, translating terms of endearment or politeness incorrectly can lead to misinterpretations of the intended tone or relationship. Examples are found in Algryani (2021) and Al Kharabsheh et al. (2008), where translation strategies led to miscommunication due to errors in expressive meaning.

The study underscores the impact of cultural sensitivity on translation quality. Mistranslations frequently occurred when signs did not consider the cultural background of the target audience. Signs that used culturally specific references or humor without proper localization tended to misrepresent the intended message. This finding supports Chen (2024) and Tan (2017), who argue that mistranslations can reinforce cultural stereotypes and contribute to misunderstandings.

This study contributes to the body of literature on linguistic landscapes in public spaces. It aligns with other studies (e.g., Baharuddin et al., 2024; Faulk, 2020; Shohamy et al., 2010) that call for approaches examining the presence and use of language in urban spaces and stress the need for biculturalism in creative translation in today's semiotic linguistic landscapes (Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes, 2013; Roeder & Walden, 2016; Hatoss, 2019). As Al-Sofi & Abouabduqader (2020) explain, translating text requires consideration of context and implied meaning, using strategies such as addition, omission, paraphrasing, borrowing, and transliteration to overcome obstacles when target equivalents are lacking. At the end, as Torop's (2002) asserts, "culture is a translation, and ... translation is culture" (p. 603).

The findings suggest several implications for improving translation practices in the linguistic landscape. First, there is a need for improved translation practices in public signage to enhance clarity and cultural appropriateness. Rigorous review processes and quality assurance measures, including reviews by native speakers or experts in the target language, are crucial to reduce mistranslations. This recommendation aligns with Pym (2010), who advocates for greater attention to the translation process and quality control. Second, emphasis should be placed on the faithful representation of target languages, considering the nuanced meanings between cultures (Li, 2019 & Yuqi, 2020 as cited in Meng et al., 2023) because "the successful promotion, display, and diffusion of authentic ... culture... is vital to recognize and address the cultural dissonances that might manifest between various societies" (Meng et al., 2023). Finally, future research should explore the prevalence of mistranslations in different multilingual contexts and assess their impact on understanding.

A more extensive meta-analysis of studies on linguistic landscapes is needed to examine how mistranslation practices over time influence the quality of public signage and the public perception of the areas in which they are found. Further research could also investigate the effectiveness of various strategies for improving translation quality and cultural sensitivity. By addressing these areas, future studies can build on previous research and contribute to the development of more effective practices for managing multilingual communication in public spaces.

## 4 Conclusion

Mistranslations, no matter what the cause of these mistranslations are, have negative ramifications. The analysis of mistranslations in public signage across various linguistic landscapes, as seen in this study, underscores significant challenges in achieving accurate and culturally sensitive translations. The study reveals that mistranslations are frequently caused by inadequate understanding of cultural contexts, linguistic nuances, and inappropriate translation strategies. These errors not only impact communication effectiveness but also contribute to communication barriers that can negatively impact public perceptions.

*Conflict of interest statement*

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

*Statement of authorship*

The author has a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The author has approved the final article.

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