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Commercial Shop Signs in Mafraq City: A Cognitive Semiotic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Drawing cognitive semiotic premises, this study aims to investigate the impact of visual images and verbal expressions. Used in commercial shop signs in Mafraq city in Jordan, on clients and to show how such shop signs semiotically behave in accordance with their sociocultural context. Therefore, the researchers investigate the procedures and the mechanism of designing and using these signs in light of the fundamental assumptions of semiotic models of sign interpretation; namely, Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic approach and Charles Pierce's triadic models with relevance to connotative and denotative meaning dichotomy proposed by Barthes (1987). The data of the study were collected representing 200 shop signs selected from four main shopping streets in Mafraq city, in addition to some interviews with shop owners. Findings revealed that Arabic and English are widely used and purposefully distributed in these shop signs, the content of which includes religious names, family names, geographical places, planets, animals, etc. Furthermore, this study revealed how the visual and verbal signs employed by these shop owners convey two basic levels of meaning, i.e. the denotatively literal meaning and the connotatively non-literal meaning. Consequently, the researchers concluded that through the signs of these shops how Jordanian society is tribally-oriented and how Jordanians are proud of their family names for various socio-cultural motivations. The results the researchers found showed that the shop owners' educational and economical levels, religion, nationality, beliefs, gender, values, social and cultural factors do affect their choices while naming their shops. Finally, conclusions have been set and recommendations have been provided for relevant future research.

Keywords: Cognitive semiotics, commercial shop signs, connotation, denotation, Charles Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure.

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that naming plays a significant role in any given socio-cultural context. We are born with our own personal names; we carry the names of our parents and our ancestors; we always refer to the names of our neighborhoods, schools, towns and countries. In principle, naming is the

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process of associating symbolic descriptions to a particular person, object or property to identify it (Berlage *et al.*, 1996). Abed-el-Jawad (1986) stated that the main purpose of naming is to provide a symbolic system of identification. He adds that "the choice of names in the Arab culture is often a careful mental process that is influenced by linguistic, social, psychological or cultural considerations" (p. 81). He also maintains that names have significant meanings that may imply the name givers' attitudes and beliefs.

In the same vein, commercial shop signs worldwide are vitally used as brand names. Such names in Mafraq play an important role in attracting the attention of the readers. These signs give vitality and activity to the city where shop owners select words, phrases, and images to name their shops because they know that the language has a strong impact on people. Hence, naming a shop is not an easy thing to succeed in attracting the attention of the readers, and using particular words and images are not random in naming shops. Therefore, shop owners choose the most appropriate names for their shops to raise the desire of the customer to buy these products. The language used in commercial shop signs has developed to survey the linguistic landscape of certain areas. Based on that, the study of textual and visual signs can reflect the socio-cultural and linguistic identity of a given area. Johansen and Larsen (2002) confirm that analyzing the images and the written expressions reveals social norms and concrete facts that embody personal attitudes, human behavior and emotional sense.

Shop signs tend to be bold, memorable, and eye catching. They also need to reflect some aspects related to the goods and the merchandise inside the stores. Commercial shop signs are considered a rich semiotic field for researchers because they consist of a complex collection of signs that can be extensively decoded and interpreted by readers as deliberately meaningful messages. Thus, there is a need to understand the underlying meaning of these signs that help the readers to study and analyze verbal and the visual signs wherever they go in an attempt to facilitate cross-cultural communication.

Bearing all these overlapping issues in mind, the researchers in this case study attempted to investigate the shops signs from a cognitive semiotic perspective within their linguistic landscape of Mafraq by randomly taking samples of shop signs from the most popular and crowded shopping streets in Mafraq city (Al-Badou Str., Jerash Str., Al-Baladiya Str. and Eshryn Str.). The pictures of shop signs have been taken using a mobile phone. To enrich the validity and the findings of the study, some interviews were conducted and tape recorded with shop owners to figure out the factors that influence the using of specific names for their shops as (social, cultural, religious beliefs and values, gender, personal interest, and current events, etc). The method used is a qualitative method. The results of study cannot be generalized to all shop signs in Jordan but implications of such results can be so conducive to future research.

2. Methodology and data

This qualitative study is based on a sample of 200 shop signs which represent different types of services and businesses such as restaurants, offices, money exchangers, medical centers, food stores, jewelry stores, minimarkets and supermarkets, shoe stores, clothing stores, coffee shops, groceries and pharmacies. After collecting these shop signs, the researchers classified them according to their signification and find out the frequencies and percentages of these signs according to their naming systems. Next, the most dominant verbal and visual signs will find out. The data of this study were analyzed qualitatively based on the semiotic framework of Pierce's classification of signs (symbolic, indexical, and iconic) from the perspective of cultural semiotics and connotative and denotative meaning based on Barthes perspective. Then the researchers made some interviews with shop owners to explain the factors and the rationale that may influence their specific choices of such names for their shops. To accomplish the aforementioned objectives, the researchers attempted to give reasonable answers to the following four questions:

1) What do the images and the words in commercial shop signs in Mafraq city represent?
2) What are the procedures for using these signs based on Pierce's classification of signs (symbolic, indexical, and iconic).
3) What are the factors that influence the use of specific names for their shops?
4) What are the most dominant verbal and visual images in Mafraq city?

Although the investigation of shop signs in a semiotic perspective is rarely tackled in Jordan, to the best of the researchers' humble knowledge, this study may fill a gap in the related literature. The significance of this study stems from the fact that understanding the attitudes and the values of Jordanian people, especially in Mafraq city, can reflect some patterns of thinking concerning the choices of these shop signs.

3.   Theoretical background

Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Peirce are great pioneers and scholars in the field of semiotics. Saussure is considered the father of semiotics; he established the basis of semiotics or semiology which has become later the framework followed by other semioticians such as Peirce. So, there is not any contradiction between the two theoreticians. According to Saussure a sign is composed of the signifier and signified, and the relationship between them referred to a signification (Saussure1983:67). The signifier is something that can be seen, heard, touched, smelled, or tasted while the signified is the meaning that the signifier carries (Saussure, 1983:12).

Peirce categorizes three types of signs according to the meaning to make interpretation possible. Firstly, the symbolic sign is a sign that stands for its referent in an arbitrary, conventional way (Sebeok, 2001: 11), so the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary and must be culturally learned. Secondly, an indexical sign is a sign that refers to something or someone in terms of its existence or location in time or space, or in relation to something or someone else (Sebeok 2001:10). An index shows evidence of what is being represented, thus, the signifier cannot exist without the presence of the signified; thus, the image of smoke, for example, indicates the existence of fire. Finally, the iconic sign is based on the resemblance or likeness relationship between the signifier and the signified (ibid: 2001). There is a real connection between signifier and signified. For instance, the photograph in a person's passport is an iconic sign of that person because it is like that person.

Numerous studies have been carried out to investigate the functions of shop signs in different environments based on various theories. For instance, Elyasin and Mahadin (1996) investigated the language used in shop signs in Jordan from a pragmatic perspective to find out the function of foreign names in shop signs. A sample of 355 shop signs displayed on Shafiker-Rsheidat Street (more commonly known as Aidoun Street) in downtown Irbid was analyzed. After analyzing the customers' attitudes toward foreign names, it was found that shop signs using foreign names aim at promoting goods and services.

Mendelson (2003) found that photos depend upon the viewer's analysis and understanding. He confirms that advanced visualizers are able to decode, analyze, and to extract the information from photos since photos are appealing and less complicated than words. On the other hand, those who are not visualizers cannot read or interpret photos correctly. He also takes into consideration the significance of the historical dimension in the analysis process.

Sunwani (2005) studied about 200 shop signs in the city of Bhubaneswar, India. The writer works on the understanding of the use and roles of different languages (Hindi or Oriya and English) in business establishments, and in business advertisements. Further, the study aims at clarifying the meaning of these signs, and the language they use and other related issues. Findings showed that English is the dominant language of shops signs in Bhubaneswar as a widespread language and has all the positive values. By contrast, it was found that in more conservative places, Oriya is the preferred language.

Al-Mousa (2012) studied the linguistic content of 784 shop signs taken from three streets in Kuwait. This study examined the main linguistic features: phonetic, morphological, semantic, and syntactic. Further, she presented the attitudes of a sample of Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti shoppers toward the languages used in these shop signs. Al-Mousa stated that most language choices used in Kuwaiti shop signs are bilingual Arabic- English than monolingual Arabic, and multilingual Arabic and other languages. She clarified that English is considered as a foreign language in the state of Kuwait; although, it is used extensively in shop signs. In addition, Al-Mousa mentioned that the use of foreign languages other than English is "eye-catching" for shoppers in order to convey to them that someone inside the shop speaks their mother-tongue. In terms of language arrangement on the shop signs, the study showed that the Arabic language dominates other foreign languages because it is usually written with a larger font and different color compared to English.

Hussein, Nofal, and Mansour (2015) investigated the languages utilized in shop signs in Amman, Jordan from a sociolinguistic perspective. A sample of 250, 215, 215 shop signs from each of the areas in the capital city of Amman purposively selected namely, AL- Wehdat Camp, Jabal Al-Hussein, and Sweifieh respectively. The results showed that the positive commercial outcomes generated by using foreign names have a crucial role in language choice and that foreign names are more interesting. Furthermore, the analysis indicated that a variety of languages are used in shop signs in Jordan and the attitudes towards the use of languages other than Arabic are positive which clarifies the bilingual and multilingual nature of shop signs in the country. Languages of these signs are mostly Arabic and English; language choice is determined by several factors including attitudinal, linguistic, commercial, and other factors prestige, positive attitudes towards foreign names, commercial interests, type of goods/services provided, and the educational and economic levels of customers.

As for the semiotic perspective, various studies have been conducted to shed more light on this important approach. For example, Al-Zubaidi and Abdullah (2018) investigate the textual and visual resources of shop front advertising signs in two different linguistic and cultural contexts, namely, American English and Iraqi Arabic from a semiotics perspective. The researcher studies twenty signs for each language. The corpus analysis has shown that the verbal and visual resources add parallel within the shop advertising discourse of the two linguistic landscapes under investigation, the analysis of shop advertising signs of the two linguistic landscapes generally tend to use the same textual and visual resources.

The textual and visual resources along with their socio-cultural contexts work altogether to achieve their communicative function of persuading potential customers of the products and services advertised. All of them serve the meanings making and the promotion of the intended advertising goals. The study corpus depends on pictures taken for shop signs, the researchers have used different tools to collect them namely, the researcher's camera mobile, friends' camera mobiles, social media. For analyzing the textual categories of American English and Iraqi Arabic shop signs, Scollon and Scollon's (2003) and Beasley and Danesi's (2002) taxonomies of textual features are adopted. For the analysis of the visual structure of shop signs, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal social semiotics and Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotics are employed.

Kourdis (2013) examined cases of intersemiotic translation in shop signs in Greece. He analyzed this translational choice from the perspective of the inventive advertising techniques that globalization has indirectly made necessary through business competition. Whether written in one or two languages, the signs nearly always include an iconic message which usually is their intersemiotic translation. This study demonstrates that verbal systems are always an essential part of the polysemiotic sign, albeit it's not always in Greek. It also proves that intersemiotic translation in Greek shop signs is based on the extremely use of indices and symbols, according to the categorization of iconic signs by Charles S. Peirce. Finally, color seems to be a valorized semiotic system during this synthesis. All these choices plan to create a semiotic synthesis composed of elements that share common connotations, a minimum of as far as European culture cares.

In the same vein, Qarqaz (2007) investigated shop business signs utilized in Irbid, Jordan. He analyzed shop signs into general categories from sociolinguistic and cultural perspectives to highlight the sources and factors which influence shop owners when naming their shops. A survey of business signs was conducted in four main streets in Irbid. The selected sample comprised of 685 shop names. Results revealed that shop names can be classified into ten categories first names, foreign names, family names, place names, names that are related to nature, names expressing wishes, hopes and values, product names, famous character names, nationalistic names, and religious names. The first names were the foremost frequent names in Irbid representing (28%) of the total percentage, whereas religious names are the smallest amount with (2%) of them.

Dimova (2007) examined the use of English in shop signs in windows as part of the names of businesses and other premises in the city of Veles, Macedonia. Additionally, this study investigated whether the degree of English use in shop signs in a Macedonian city is comparable to those of cities in other countries in Europe, South America, and Southeast Asia in terms of language choice (Macedonian, English, or other languages, such as Albanian, Serbian, Italian, or French). 346 commercial signs along four streets in Veles were selected as the sample of the study because it covers

the majority of small local businesses and is the busiest area in Veles. The signs were divided into three language groups: Macedonian, English, and others. The English type was subdivided into English only, English and Macedonian together, and English is written in Macedonian Cyrillic script. The findings revealed that the frequency of English elements in the shop signs in Veles is extensive, but it was not an established fact whether fitreated the Macedonian language in this incidence means that English has in a business domain.

4.   Analysis and discussion

As mentioned earlier the visual images and verbal expressions analyzed according to their significations to find out the frequencies and the percentages of each verbal sign in four main shopping streets in Mafraq city and to point out the most dominant signs in these streets, so the researchers found that some signs represent Arabic names, some of them represent foreign names, while others represent Arabic and foreign names. Results reported in Table1 below concentrate on the verbal signs used in shop signs in the selected streets.

Table 1.

The frequencies and percentages of verbal shop signs in the four streets.

Sign	Arabic		Foreign		Mixed (Arabic and Foreign)	
Area	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Jeresh street	27	14	13	7	10	5
Baladiya Street	31	16	8	4	11	6
Eshryn Street	38	19	4	2	8	4
AL-Babou street	41	21	1	1	8	4
Total	137	70%	26	14%	37	19%

It is noticed that the Arabic signs are the most common signs in Mafraq city since it is an Arabic city and the citizens are native speakers of Arabic. On the other hand, the signs which represent foreign names are mostly English used in the main shopping streets in Mafraq city. This result is in line with schlock's (2003) findings who concluded that English is the most dominant language in store signs. In addition, table 1 shows that the signs that represent mix names (Arabic and foreign names) are mostly Arabic with English. This combination makes it easier for the local community to understand the shop name (McGregor, 2003). This explanation is more valid for countries where foreign language education is primarily given in translation. (McArthur, 2000) explains that mixing languages on shop signs, apart from trendiness, is as an attempt to revive the local language.

Analyses also show that the most common foreign signs are used in Jeresh Str (13%) because it is filled with various types of modern business and the researchers found that some of the shop owners are educated and youth. On the other hand, 1%of foreign signs are used in Al-Badou Str. which is considered as one of the oldest shopping Str in Mafraq city and it still holds its position until today for decades. So, the researchers noticed that the highest percentage of Arabic signs is in this street; 21% and the most shop owners are the elderly and uneducated.

Arabic signs are the most common signs in Mafraq city as illustrated in figure 1 below. Hence, these signs were analyzed according to their significations based on the semiotics model of signs interpretation; namely, Saussure's dyadic approach and Pierces triadic model of semiotics, connotative and denotative meaning based on Barthes perspective (1987).

Figure 1. The frequencies and percentages of verbal Arabic shop signs in the four streets. Total of Arabic shop signs out of 137.

Figure 1 shows that the shop signs include Arabic signs are divided into eight sub-groups according to the nature of the linguistic items found on each sign: religious names (9,4%), family names (34%), geography names (26,2%), planets names (4,3%), animals names (5,1%), standard Arabic (10,2%),
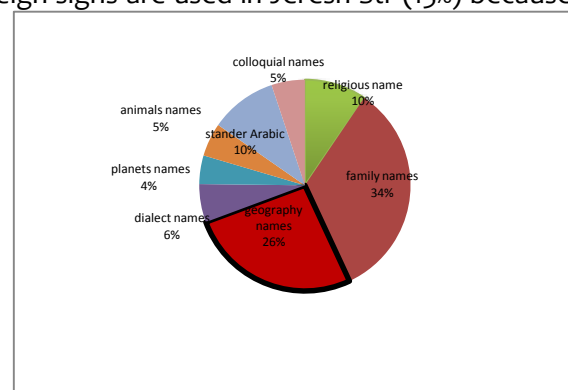
colloquial names (5,1%) and dialect names (5,8%). These results also show that the highest percentage of using Arabic signs goes to the shops which represent family names such as (Abu-kashif, Abu- Nayel, Al-Yamani, Abu-Hjelah, Al- Faory, Al- Shdefat , Al Khazalleh, Al Kawaldeh, and Yazan, etc). In Mafraq city there are many shops that have names of families or names of one of the family members, especially the name of the eldest son. Therefore, this might indicate that Jordanian society is tribal and it shows how Jordanian people feel proud of their family names, whether the name refers to the family itself or one of the family members.

There are some verbal Arabic signs which represent geography names, such as (Isfahan carpet, Dubai, halawiat Qasiun, Tajmahal, Izmir, Jeresh, Paris, Al Andalous, Al Shareq). This might show how nationality plays a significant role in naming their shops and how Arab migration influenced the linguistic nature in Jordan. Some shop owners choose these names to link between the quality of the product and the place which is famous for its manufacture.

Some signs represent colloquial Arabic names 5%, which is more popular than standard Arabic language nowadays. It is the language that all Jordanians speak in the streets and houses. Some shop owners prefer using this kind of verbal Arabic sign which is more appropriate in daily communication with customers to attract their attention. It is noticed that colloquialism expanded to include writing with grammatical and spelling errors. Some signs represent colloquial Arabic names such as (Dalae Karshak, qahwaa ghliha wathauqulaha, al khitiar, and Al Beik).

4.1   Signs representing religious names

Referring to the shop signs above, there are many signs that the researchers try to analyze and explain. According to the triadic model by Peirce, a sign involves a relation between three elements: first, a representamen which stands for the (signifier), second, the interprentent which stands for the meaning (signified) and object. The interpretent plays an important role in a semiotic analysis which shows how viewers express their senses. Peirce noted that "a sign . . . addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign" (Peirce 1931–58, 228). Al-Aqsa Mosque as a signifier (a representamen) can carry different interpretations. For example, the image of Al-Aqsa mosque is a sign itself that signifies its object (Al-Aqsa Mosque); then the interpretation of this sign inside the human mind enables us to understand the message conveyed by the image.

On the other hand, according to the three interrelated elements in the Peirce model of the sign, iconic, symbolic, and indexical signs. The image itself is an iconic sign which has likeness features to its objects and their interpretations. These iconic signs reflect that this shop sign represents religious names. Each sign iconically represents the real object in the world and reflects the content of the place. An indexical sign explains how the signifier connected to the signified, and this relation between sign and object is known innately or through learning. The black color indicates the darkness based on our experience of darkness. Black color is the color of the hidden, the secretive and the unknown, creating an air of mystery. It keeps things bottled up inside, hidden from the world. Black color symbolically represents sorrow and grief) Singh, 2006). So this relation between blackness and sorrow helps the receptors to understand the situation of Al-Aqsa Mosque and how the Palestinians suffer from the Israeli occupation.

4.2   Signs representing colloquial names

Shop owners use exceptional images and expressions in naming their shops to attract the attention of customers. When they look at the wonderful images as iconic signs which have likeness features to their objects and interpretations we find a variety of wonderful signs. According to the three interrelated elements in the Pierce model of the sign, the sign above can be interpreted as an iconic sign which reflects the same delicious broasted chicken in the restaurant.

On the other hand, when the customers think about the images of chicken, wings, and a chef with a big stomach as symbolic signs, they will reveal the connotative meaning (the second level of signification) which reflects how life without eating is meaningless. When the researchers asked the shop owners about the reasons for naming their shops, they said that "they want to attract the attention of customers because colloquial Arabic is the most popular these days than the standard Arabic and the customers feel comfortable when they buy from these shops".

4.3   Signs representing animals names

The Oxford English Dictionary (2010) defines the word "animal" as "a living organism which feeds on organic matter, typically having specialized sense organs and a nervous system and able to respond rapidly to stimuli". Animals are one of the most important living organisms on earth. There are many types of animals some of them creep; some walk; some swim; and some fly as they are characterized by their many types, shapes, and characteristics. Birds are one of the most beautiful animals that many people enjoy watching. Birds vary in their colors, feathers, nature, and characteristics. The world of birds is a world filled with secrets, mercy, and cooperation, so many people love birds and raised them.

These images have different kinds of signs that can be summarized according to Peirce's model as follows:

a. Iconic signs: canary and falcon are iconic signs that refer to real objects in the world and each icon represents an idea and message to the customers. Each icon has a likeness feature to its object and its interpretation.

b. Indexical signs: there is no doubt that birds indicate transcendence, achieving goals, emigration, and travel. On the other hand, a beautiful view with a quiet look indicates pet birds such as the canary, but the strong look and black color indicate predatory animals such as a falcon.

c. Symbolic signs: all words can be considered symbolic because of their arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. The interpreter understands the symbol based on previous knowledge and experience. Canary bird with its wonderful colors as a symbolic sign represents hope, calm, love, and optimistic. The image of a couple of canary birds

symbolically represents the strength of their love relationship. On the other hand, Falcon symbolizes courage, frankness, generosity, pride, dignity, and freedom.

Culturally, the signifier (representament) of the yellow color sign represents positive and negative signified. For example, the yellow color symbolizes wealth because it is the color of gold and the sun; however, the yellow face represents a negative indexical sign of illness. This contradiction means that the color itself can be a neutral sign so it must be connected to another sign (signifier) to reflect a specific meaning (signified). This analysis can be in conformity with Peirce (1931) who confirms how signs cannot be understood without context.

4.4   Signs representing foreign names

The researchers can analyze the images according to the two levels of meanings, the first level is the denotative meaning that reveals what everyone can see in the images, and the second level of meaning is connotative meaning that is based on our cultural and social background, so the connotative meaning will not the same for all viewers. The image of a half-eaten apple as an iconic sign reflects the first level of meaning that is interpreted as a bite out of an apple. Something that everyone can experience. If anybody ever had an apple he has probably bitten into it and that's what you get, and the second level of meaning the (interpretant) that is based on the viewer's background knowledge refers to an American's company that designs and manufactures consumer electronics and computer software products such as the I-phone mobile device.

On the other hand, the images of emojis are clearly shown on commercial shop signs that have been widely used instead of words. For example, an emoji of a smile as an iconic sign has likeness features to its object and its interpretation. An indexical sign explains how the signifier (representament) is connected to the signified (interpretation). The emoji of a smiley face as a signifier indicates happy feelings. Emoji can be classified as symbolic signs that can be interpreted as the extensive use of smart phones and social media such as "yahoo" and "whatsApp". Emojis are everywhere these days, so they are used in text messages, emails, and social media in order to add tone and clarity to our communication. They can be used in an infinite number of ways and their meanings up to those who use them. People prefer to use them on social media as they know that pictures sometimes worth a thousand words.

5.   Conclusion

The researchers have found that there are various differences in the variation of shop names in Mafraq city starting from the old shopping Str., (Al-Badou Str), to the most modernized Str., (Jerash Str). These differences can be observed through various types and a content-based diversity of shop signs. It is found that the largest group of the shop signs of the selected sample are Arabic signs with (67%), and the highest percentage of Arabic signs represents family names with (34%); this might indicate how shop owners are proud of their tribal backgrounds and family names. The study also concluded that the connotative meanings of the signs revealed the cultural and social background that can help clients and researchers understand the meaning of these signs. Furthermore, the study concluded that many factors affected the use of specific names for shops by conducting some interviews with shop owners. The answers revealed several socio-cultural factors such as the shop owner's educational and economical levels, religion, nationality, beliefs, gender, values, social factors and cultural factors. Based on the previous discussions and analyses of verbal and visual images of commercial shop signs, the researchers recommend that future research study different aspects of

shop signs from some other different perspectives of socio-semiotic or psycholinguistic motivations to explicate and to offer multi-dimensional and deeper analyses.

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