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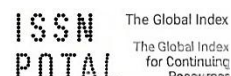
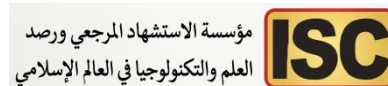
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## Semantic Challenges in Translating Road Signs

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### Abstract

Translating road signs between Arabic and English presents semantic challenges due to their distinct cultural contexts. This study investigates these challenges within the functionalist approaches in contemporary translation studies. Road signs incorporate minimal texts, ellipsis, shapes, colors, etc., all together decide the meaning of the sign and how they function as a specific message to road users. This hybrid nature of road signs is therefore vocative and imperative because they necessitate immediate action upon reception. This research paper utilizes Peter Newmark's communicative approach of translation to demonstrate that conventional translation methods that prioritize word-for-word transfer techniques fail to preserve the functionality of road signs when translated.

**Keywords:** Road Signs , Semantic Challenges  
Communicative Translation ,Vocative Texts , Functional  
Equivalence

### Introduction

This research investigates the semantic challenges that occur when translating road signs within two culturally different languages like Arabic and English. It utilizes Newmark's approaches of communicative translation techniques to evaluate the efficacy of translated road signs from Arabic to English. According to contemporary translation theories, semantic challenges are a central concern to translators since "difficulties may be explained at the level of pragmatics, not by the formal mechanisms of the semantic theory itself , it does not follow that problems in translation can all be dismissed as irrelevant to the problem of semantic" (Kempson, 1999). Therefore, meaning is not a simple word-to-word correspondence across languages. Rather, meaning is embedded in cultural, cognitive, and contextual frameworks that differ across linguistic systems (Wilss, 1982). For Baker (1992), the absence of 'equivalent' is one of the most critical factors that complicates the rendition of the same semantic weight across languages. The problem of 'non-equivalence' can be linguistic where the target language does not have an equivalent match to a word in the source language (Hatim & Munday, 2004). It can also be cultural since words and phrases in one language can encode culture-specific meanings that do not necessarily exist in another language (Schäffner, 1999, p. 61).Consequently, Nida, in his

*Toward a Science of Translating* 1964) and *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (1969), introduced and explained his concept of “dynamic equivalence” to solve the problem of non-equivalence by suggesting that preserving the equivalent effect, sense-to-sense, rather than literal meaning is what matters (Viaggio, 2006). In road signs, texts are regulatory with imperative and vocative nature. As will be discussed, the semantic challenges seem to arise from a range of factors, including regional dialect differences, ununified transliterations, and phonological or inflectional shifts. Therefore, translating road-signs represents one of the most critical examples that bridge both the semantic and functional aspects of the text, yet it requires more adequate space in translation studies (Loddo, 2023). The reason this paper underlines the functional aspect of the translation of road signs is the fact that that they are instructive objects that require immediate and proper behavioral response within a limited time (Oviatt et al., 2019, 608). In contemporary translation theories, including Skopos Theory, the text’s purpose has been addressed as its function that has to be preserved in the target text. Therefore, a functional translation is “far more than just a copy of the source text” (Tipton & Desilla, 2019). As such, functional translation approaches represent a pragmatic shift from conventional form-based approaches, which emphasized literal fidelity, toward a communicative approach that emphasizes the purpose of the target text (Sarcevic, 1997). Therefore, translating road signs should preserve their meaning, function, and cultural conventions to avoid any semantic challenges that may arise from using compressed language, symbols, legal terminology, and culture-specific meanings (Gile, 2009). Road signs translation serves as a multimodal communicative act which combines linguistic meaning, visual semiotics, and legal authority (Amini, 2025). We obtain essential road traffic information from road signs such as place names and route’s exits and numbers. Road signs deliver information to road users which may be unhelpful if the intended meanings are not effectively understood threatening both traffic and pedestrian safety. Signs can be confusing and overwhelming if they are complicated, contradicting, numerous or not appropriate in size. Road signs are “created and standardized according to national conventions, which of course are based not only on the most logical argument or common sense in each society but also on observations and research about behavior” (Federici & O'Brien, 2022). In European countries, road signs are regulated by the uniform signage standard of the 1968 Vienna Convention on Road Signs and Signals (European Conference of Ministers of Transport, 1991). Therefore, similarities are found in the icons, symbols, and shapes of road signs across Europe. In terms of icons, road signage systems use iconic representations of real objects on road signs. For example, an icon of a car could indicate ‘motor vehicle only’ or ‘no motor vehicle’ road depending on other graphic elements such as color and symbols (Taibi, 2016). In Arab countries, designing road signs is often aligned with international guidelines, such as those set by the Vienna Convention on Road Signs and Signals. However, the implementation of these standards can vary due to cultural, linguistic, and regional differences. Several factors including, road sign literacy and language barriers can easily influence these standards (Castro & Horberry, 2004). Therefore, for road signs to be functioning, proper font and size must be chosen carefully to ensure readability for all road users. Therefore, implementing a standardized signage system is not only aesthetic uniformity but also a critical component of road safety and traffic management. Therefore, road signs as a system are not only visual communication practices but also means of mobility practices on roads, which integrate movement, meaning and culture. Mobility involves embodied practices and experiences a specific context of meaning and within social and cultural power. Architecture and urban design

are sources of spatial-cultural meaning in an urban world of dramatic need of communication protocols and artefacts of sharing. Road signs therefore represent collective conceptual meaning or environmental communication (Snell-Hornby, 2006).

### Literature Review

Since road-sign translation is an act of situational design, not linguistic transfer, it requires to integrate cognitive knowledge, semiotics, and cultural studies to produce a functional target text (Paolucci, 2021). Producing an effective target text, when translating road signs, requires the integration of cognitive processes, including perception and attention, and semiotic conventions, including icons, colors, and layouts. Moreover, there are social and cultural aspects that govern road users' interpretation in specific contexts. According to recent empirical findings in studies of applied linguistics, the reception of road signs by users tends to be holistic rather than lexical (Cobley, 2009). During the mid-twentieth century, translation studies, led by theorists such as J.C. Catford (1965) and Roman Jakobson (1959), were influenced by a linguistically structuralist perspective that emphasized literal and formal correspondences (Ferreira & Schwieter, 2022). Catford's *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (1965) established a concept that perceived translation as a replacement of equivalent textual material across languages (Baker & Malmkjær, 1998). Jakobson introduced three concepts of translation: intralingual, interlingual, and Intersemiotic, which were basically established on language as a structuralist and linguistic system (Boria et al, 2019). The 1970s witnessed a shift in translation studies known as the 'cultural' turn, which also incorporated the concept of 'functional' equivalence in translation (Gambier & Doorslaer, 2011). Peter Newmark contributed to this change in basic assumptions. His seminal works, *Approaches to Translation* (1981) and *A Textbook of Translation* (1988), have helped bridge the gap between conventional translation theories and the pragmatic need for new strategies that maintain the functional and vocative nature of challenging texts, such as road signs. Newmark's tripartite typology categorizes texts according to their primary linguistic function: expressive, informative, or vocative (Taylor, 1990). For Newmark, a "vocative text" is necessarily communicative and reader-centered since it is designed to trigger immediate response from the target audience (Hostová, 2017). Newmark's text typology provides the micro-linguistic workings of translating road signs. Based on Bühler's classification of language, Newmark divides texts into three functional groups: Expressive, Informative, and Vocative (Morini, 2013). For Newmark, Vocative Texts are essentially related to readership with an authoritative tone that commands, persuades, or calls for compliance. In this regard, road signs represent a critical manifestation of vocative language. Signs displaying "Stop" or "Speed Limit 90," do not require literary interest but rather a compliance to a legal rule.

### Semantic Challenges in translating Road signs

So far, in case of translating road signs, translation should transcend traditional linguistic conventions dealing with road signs as vocative and directive texts. The following examples show that semantic ambiguity can be caused due to linguistic nonequivalence between the source text and the target text, which results in the source text's loss of function or purpose. An example of this linguistic incompatibility is clear in translating the phrase ممنوع الوقوف that is often translated to "No Standing" on signs. Although this translation is semantically sound, however, within an international context, it may be misunderstood, and therefore, lose its imperative function as a "No Parking" sign, which is dynamic or functional translation. Translating "School Zone" into "منطقة المدرسة" is another example of a literal translation that affects the sign's purpose

or function, which is to warn drivers from speeding. In Iraqi contexts, a phrase like قضاء أبي غريب (Qadha' Abi Ghraib) is rendered as Abu Ghreib in local dialect. This example, already common in almost all Arab countries, represents the linguistic distinction between Modern Standard Arabic, used in all formal contexts, and the country's national dialects. In standard grammar, a vowel sound may change within a noun based on its position, Abu Ghraib becomes Abi Ghraib, if attached to a word like Qadha' (district). In a semantic translation, the sign keeps this grammatical inflection and becomes Qadha' Abi Ghraib. Another word used in Iraqi signage system is الجبايش, which is transliterated as Al-Jabayish while it is pronounced Al-Chibayish in local dialect. This example marks an established semantic and phonological challenge, resulting from changing the /ج/ sound into /Ch/, in the southern dialect for instance. Since the main goal of the sign is to help navigate a physical landscape, the English translation should override the written letter Jeem /ج/ to reflect the actual pronunciation of the word. A communicative translation would render the sign as AL-CHIBAYISH or simply CHIBAYISH. When the Arabic sign that says "ممنوع الدخول" (Mamnoo' al-dukhoor) is translated to English, to preserve the semantic fidelity, it becomes: *Entering is absolutely forbidden*. The source text favors a nominal sentence structure that is imperative and authoritative by utilizing a passive participle (Mamnoo' / Forbidden) and a verbal noun (al-dukhoor / entering). This conventional translation is semantically aligned with the original. However, the English translation, the standard sentence structure is more informative than authoritative. To preserve the original rhetoric and guarantee immediate reader compliance, the English translation needs to convert the noun phrase of the source text into a direct, standard imperative DO NOT ENTER or rather "No Entry" which is more effective and authoritative.

An Arabic sign such as "خطر: منطقة حركة رافعات شوكية" is informative and descriptive. It warns users to avoid a hazardous environment of slow-moving industrial machinery. If translated conventionally to preserve the semantic aspect of the original, it might become *Danger: Forklift Traffic Area*, a translation that replicates the source's syntactic structure but does not naturally sound as a warning to a target reader. From a communicative perspective, this translation is wordy and may cause a cognitive and therefore a behavioral delay. Instead of using a four-word phrase, two can suffice: CAUTION: FORKLIFTS. There are other signs that function more than just directing road users' behaviors. For instance, navigational signage system, which heavily relies on names of locations and landmarks, among other things, is designed to facilitate spatial orientation. Seen within Newmark's framework, semantic challenges may emerge because of transliteration. A road sign that displays a name of a place is mainly an informative text. Still, it has a specific function which is to mark a destination firmly. In the context of Arabic-to-English translation, semantic failures on navigational signs rarely often stem from inconsistent graphemic transliteration. This may result in a specific geographical location or destination being spelled differently on various signs, such as Jeddah or Jiddah on a highway in KSA. Therefore, there is a need to adopt a universally standardized system across international road networks to avoid typographical variance that can cause semantic challenges for the target road users who may perceive the two different spellings as two distinct geographical destinations or locations. Applying Newmark's communicative approach to translation, signs of places' names are both informative and vocative, hybrid signs. Therefore, in translation, the user's expectation must be prioritized over linguistic uniformity.

## Conclusion

Modern translation studies have evolved during the late twentieth century, from structuralist and linguistic equivalence (Catford, Jakobson), to functionalism, where the purpose of the target text directs the translation process. This study's functionalist perspective shows how translating road signs between English-based and Arabic-based contexts posits some semantic challenges due to several factors such as literal translation, regulatory cultural conventions, and transliteration. Therefore, conventional literal and word-for-word translation strategies may satisfy the linguistic accuracy but would impact the imperative and functional nature of the original. Newmark's insights regarding communicative translation approaches reveal that semantic challenges in translating road signs arise from the lexical and structural economy that must be applied to maintain the source text's function.

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The researcher declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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