

PATTERNS OF ERRORS AND MISTAKES IN THE ENGLISH WRITINGS OF COMMERCIAL SIGNS IN BANGLADESH: A CASE STUDY

Muhammad Azizul Hoque¹

Abstract

Commercial signs (signboards, billboards, banners, posters, and the like) are powerful tools for drawing attention of buyers, visitors and passersby at home and from abroad. They also reflect certain aspects of any society's values and structure. Therefore, choice of language or expression in them is of crucial importance. In one hand, catchy and right choice of language in signs magnetizes the buyers and viewers, and disgusts and de-motives them if they contain any faulty, puzzling and wrong choice of language on the other. As far our observation goes, the language of signs, particularly mistakes and errors of different patterns distinctly noticeable in them is relatively an unexplored area in the field of academic research in Bangladesh. Therefore, this paper aims at investigating into the patterns of errors and mistakes observed in the English texts of signs in Bangladesh. We think these mistake and errors mostly occur because of carelessness of the shop owners, business entrepreneurs and sign text writers. Therefore, being encouraged by our study, we hope the concerned authority will make them aware of these mistakes and errors. In order to obtain data, our study has taken snapshots of signs from several roads of Chittagong city in Bangladesh. The data have been analyzed descriptively using observation method and following the qualitative methodology.

Key Words: Errors and mistakes in English, commercial signs, Bangladesh.

2016 GBSE Journal

Introduction

In the last few decades English has been emerged as the widely used international language of science and technology as well as a significant additional language all over the world. It is "the medium of the Second Industrial Revolution; and international science and information, international business world organization and diplomacy, international tourism, aviation and shipping, entertainment such as sports, cinema, television and pop music; 60% of the world's radio broadcast, and 70% of its mail are encoded in English" (Loveday 1996, cited in Al-Athwary 2014,

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English Language & Literature, International Islamic University Chittagong, Kumira, Chittagong, Bangladesh. Cell Phone: +8801818146370 E-mail: mazizhoque@yahoo.com/mdaziz79@gmail.com.

p. 140). In this context, Lawrence (2012, p.70) states, “English has become the lingua franca of the world.” Therefore, it is regarded as the most important foreign language, although it is neither a national nor an official language and still occupies the status of a foreign language in Bangladesh. As a result, English holds a prestigious position in the commercial signs and business activities. But it is observed that the English writings in these signs lack the agreeable standard for several errors and mistakes they contain, whereas the text of commercial signs reflects the values and traditions of a society and they are also indicative to how much a nation is educationally conscious.

In such a situation, if the concerned authority does not make the concerned people aware of the mistakes and errors in these documentary sign texts, the existing problems of these linguistic lapses will remain unchanged. Therefore, this study has explored into these errors and mistakes and discussed some assumed reasons responsible for and further recommendations so that the concerned people’s awareness can be awakened. Thus, this study seeks to address the answers to the following questions:

1. What different patterns of errors and mistakes are seen in the English texts of commercial signs in Bangladesh?
2. Why do the concerned people of signs make mistakes and errors, even after a long exposure to English in Bangladesh?
3. What measures can the concerned authority take to make the concerned people of these signs aware of these errors and mistakes?

Review of Related Literature

Before going to study the literature of others, the present researcher thinks it is important to discuss some terms, e.g. sign, errors and mistakes.

“sign is a characteristic device attached to or placed in front of an inn or shop, as a means of distinguishing it from others or directing attention to it; in later use commonly a board bearing a name or other inscriptions, with or without some ornament or picture” (Oxford English Dictionary 2007). Therefore, the commercial signs are the shop signs, billboards, banners, posters and the like used for business purpose.

According to Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, “an error results from incomplete knowledge, and a mistake is caused by lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness, or some other aspect of performance” (Richards, Platt and Platt 1992, p.127). As it is difficult to differentiate between errors and mistakes in case of the sign texts, we have used both the terms alternately in this research.

As far our investigation goes, not many studies are done in this particular area of research. However, the study by Al-Athwary (2014) and some online posts about these linguistic lapses in some countries reveal that making errors and mistakes in the texts of signs is a worldwide phenomenon.

In a study, Al-Athwary (2014) has examined the inappropriate use of English on bilingual shop signs in Yemen. He thinks the inappropriateness creates many problems in the communication

process and in many case, the signs fail to convey any relevant information at all to target language (TL) readers, which leads to confusion and frustration as well. The empirical analysis has shown that almost one third of the corpus data, i.e. 32.66 % (130 signs out of 398) contains translation errors. Here it is mentionable that all types of errors are categorized under the umbrella of “translation”. That is, any type of error is made within and due to the process of translation. These errors, which vary in their degree of seriousness, could be generally classified into three categories: spelling, grammatical and lexical, with the last having the highest frequency. He assumes the causes that stand behind these kinks of errors comprise translator’s language incompetence, translator’s carelessness, and the socio-cultural differences between English and Arabic. His paper ends with some recommendations which can help avoid the occurrence of such lapses.

In the present study also, similar types of mistakes, i.e. spelling, grammatical and lexical mistakes are observed.

Similarly, giving 20 picturesque examples of funny errors and mistakes in some sign writings, Adams (2012) states that it is funny to see grammar mistakes in America



Sign 1

Sign 2

and she doesn’t know exactly why. She along with all others giggle when they see the very humorous collection of English grammar mistakes on signs in the States and she believes her posts will definitely make the readers laugh. She thinks these posts with funny mistakes are like ‘fingernails’ for all those native English speakers who think they are the “grammar police”.



Sign 3

Her posts present some funny spelling mistakes. In signs (1 & 2), words, e.g. ‘home’ and ‘writing’ are misspelt as ‘ho’ and ‘writting’. Likewise, ‘serving’ is written as ‘severing’ in another post. As the first native speaker of English, she admits there are so many little peculiar grammar rules to remember that can be a matter of headache just trying to keep it all straight. If she gets frustrated with the English language, she wonders how some people who learn English as a second or third

language feel about it.

According to her, writing English can be even trickier than speaking it, since grammar mistakes are so easy to make. She thinks those dang commas and apostrophes can be mixed up by anyone. While conversing with Richard, she thinks it is natural for someone to make English grammatical mistakes. However, she does understand that from a blogging perspective, it is important to get it right if possible to avoid misunderstanding of the readers.

The viewers may be confused for some spelling. They may understand different from what is meant by the posts. The use of **bye** instead of **buy** in the sign 3 is obviously misleading for viewers. The use of ‘to’ instead of ‘too’ in another example may be perplexing for viewers.

Misuse of apostrophe is another commonly observed mistake in her post. Thus, we see, ‘it’s’ is ‘its’, ‘you’re’ is ‘your’ and apostrophe is seen to be used before *s* (sign 4). Misuse of apostrophe is also observed in pluralization, e.g. *no class’es* and *cakes for all occasions: wedding’s, birthday’s, anniversary’s and Christening’s*. Spelling mistakes, misuse of words and apostrophe are observed in the present study too.

In another post, Nashrulla (2013) has presented about 29 humorous spelling mistakes in some commercial signs of India. Thus, sign 1 presents **leadies** and **jent’s**, whereas lunch is **launch** in sign 2. Likewise, **Chaineese Center** provides Chinese food, KULCHAS supplies TESTY food items, **Past Food** is provided in a fast food shop and **Royal Foodwear** is sold in a footwear shop.



Sign 1



Sign 2

Her post also presents an obsolete term like **saloon** for a hair cutting shop which also supplies the service of body ‘masaz’, not

‘massage’. And another shop of this kind **super saloon** (sign 3) provides the service of fachial? and messes? along with cutting of children. The obsolete term **saloon** instead of **salon** is also observed in the present study in Bangladesh.

Similarly, ANUS ENGLISH ACADEMY (without apostrophe before *s*) does the service of English teaching and SCHALORSHIPS SECTION provides scholarship. It is very interesting that both signs are related to academic centres. When vegetable juice is supplied at a Fresh VISITABLE JUICE shop, a cock is provided with biriyani at a restaurant. Mistakes are also observed in sentence construction, e.g. at the back of a truck a sentence goes: ‘In trust we God’. In this research also, similar types of mistakes are observed.



Sign 3



Sign 4

The present study observes that there is no direct study on errors and mistakes in texts of signs in Bangladesh. However, there are some studies dealt with print advertisement and code-switching in the writings of signs in which some discussion with mistakes is found.

Ahmed (2011) has done a comparative study between Bangladeshi and Australian print advertisements, reflecting the influence of globalization and cultural imperialism in advertising. Whereas samples of Australian advertisement of newspapers, billboards and signboards of shops were collected from Perth, Western Australia; Bangladeshi print advertisements were collected from Dhaka and newspaper archive of the University of Dhaka. Both the countries create eye catching captions by using code switching, puns, stylistic variations and loan words. From her study, we know that in an Australian advertisement, too, spelling mistakes are present. For example, "Sellabration" is written instead of "Celebration" at a shop named *Impressions Furniture Gallery* which reminds the passers-by of the ongoing sale at the shop. In Bangladeshi advertisement, she observes, Bengalism (influence of Bangla in English) makes the captions sound awkward. For example, the advertisement of "Big Adda BBQ" has the caption "Join us for our Barbecue Party Everyday!", whereas the word BBQ does not need any word as 'party' used here with it. Similarly, advertisement of Midway East Restaurant says: "Opened in new shape", as a direct translation of Bangla which does not sound good. Moreover, this advertisement has spelling mistakes of "Chinees" and "Deligets". Likewise, an advertisement of Bangladesh Hosiery Samity (1973) says "We wish that Narayanganj may regain her lost pride..." whereas this imperative sentence should be "We hope that ..." in English. Captions of this advertisement say "The hosiery industries are extremely conscious about the task of building a Sonar Bangla" (Golden Bangladesh), which is a direct, awkward translation of Bangla. Similarly, an advertisement of Aktel mobile company goes: "No Chinta, Do Furti", as a direct translation of the English sentence "No worry, be happy" to introduce the offer in a funny way. The brochure of BRAC Bank Bangladesh shows direct translation of Bangla phrase "Ekatai jibon moja koro" into "One life. Live Big.". The Bangla phrase tells all to live life to the fullest. Stilted translation of that phrase has not been able to convey the message properly.

Taking some busy areas of Dhaka city in Bangladesh like Kataban, Banu and Sussex (2001), in another extensive study, have explored some shop-names and posters in hybrid constructions of English and Bengali. The names are in English and Bengali script, or both, and English and Bengali proper and common nouns are freely mixed (for example: *Probal Aquarium* mixes Bengali *Probal* [coral] with English *Aquarium*). 'Aquarium' is variously spelt in Bengali / kurijam/, / k rijam/ and / kwarijam/. They observe that shop signs and billboards written in English names present little problem of intelligibility or communication – at least, to those who know English. In the shop *Hoby & Pets/Fixed Price Shop*, the word hobby is misspelt. But in naming, the attempt at creativity is evident. Regarding some pronunciation problems in the hybrid writings of shops they state: "There is an obvious stylishness in the names, once they are recognized, but the original English pronunciation is sometimes so distorted that even local educated Bengalee's may not immediately recognize the original English phrases" (p.54). An excellent confusing example of Bangla and English mixed texts is: /ekani l : f t doi pawa d al (Lit. 'here low fat yogurt available is'). The English words "low fat" written in Bengali and embedded in a Bengali phrase do not so readily yield up their meaning. This example is also syntactically more complex. They observe that the apostrophe, which does not exist in Bengali, has been imported to be consistent with the rules of English punctuation, since the entire name and description for the business are transcribed in Bengali.

It is obvious that the online posts of Adams (2012) and Nashrulla (2013) are not academic research. But they have contributed a lot to the development of this research. The present study repeats their observation of mistakes, but goes further with some other mistakes from Bangladesh context. Some similar types of mistakes observed in Al-Athwary's (2014) study are also found in the present research. But his one focuses on the mistakes due to translation from the context of Yemen. Some of Ahmed's (2011) observation is also found in this study, but her study does not focus on the mistakes and errors. Similarly, the study of Banu and Sussex (2001) concentrates on code-mixing of commercial shop signs. Though some mistakes found in their research repeat ours, their focus is on Bangla and English mixed writings.

Methodology

Based on the nature and the necessity of the selected research area, a descriptive methodology with the qualitative analysis of data has been followed in this research. The analysis has focused on the varied errors and mistakes in the English writings of signs in Bangladesh. In order to obtain data we have had the privilege to collect some snapshots of different signposts, signboards, posters, and posts of vehicles randomly from different places of Chittagong in Bangladesh as representative samples.

Discussion of errors and mistakes in different forms

Almost 22 photographic examples containing varied errors and mistakes have been used for the present study taken from some busy thoroughfares of Chittagong, Bangladesh. These are all surrounded by or leading to middle-class and upper-middle-class neighbourhoods.

Spelling mistakes

One of the multifarious mistakes in the texts of signs is the presence of misspelt words. Thus 'boutiques' is written as 'buticks' in a, whereas 'fairly' is 'fayerly' in photograph 1 and that is used as an adverb before a noun phrase, which should have been 'fair' (adjective).



Photograph 1

Similarly, in some shop signs, 'machine' is spelt as 'machien', 'Safeway' as 'Safewey' and 'cosmetics' as 'cosmatics' in one example and 'commetics' in another example. Thus, a phrase goes behind a bus- "A choice of all generation" with spelling mistake in 'generation'.

Nashrulla (2013) and Adams (2012) also present some spelling mistakes which indicate that spelling mistakes are multinational problems. Moreover, Adams' post also presents that even a native speaking country United States is not free from spelling mistakes in sign texts. The phenomenon is also observed in the study of Ahmed (2011) with Australian advertisements.

Misplacement of words in phrases

Unlike Bangla, English requires determiner-noun agreement. Therefore, because of L1 interference, a bus is named as 'two star' which should have been two stars. Misplacement of

words is also observed in the writings of signs. The photograph 2 reads: 'Road of the King'. Can a vehicle be the road of the king?, rather it should have been 'king of the road'.



Photograph 2

Likewise, in an wall written advertisement of a shoe shop, the combination of Bengali adjective (rural) and English adjective *super* is seen to be used. It is notable that in Bangladesh the word *grameen* has got popularity from *Grameen Bank* and *Grammen Phone* founded by Prof. Dr. Md Yunus. Here it is interesting that both *grameen* and *super* are adjective.



Photograph 3

Misuse of tense

Though CV cannot be 'drop' in a sentence like "Have you dropped CV?", but dropped, still it is drop at an advertisement of *deshijobs.com* behind a CNG taxi (photograph 3).

Misuse of apostrophe



Photograph 4

An apostrophe indicates possessives and contractions but not plurals. We also know that after plural markings, apostrophe is used without *s*. But a signpost of a school shows **boys campus** without apostrophe, and in another signpost of the same institution, apostrophe is used before *s*. The same phenomenon can be observed in the advertisement of a wall writing (photograph 4). The practice is also seen in a Bengali transliterated English name **Medical Student's Ward** (photograph 5). In

another

wall writing of a coaching centre, apostrophe is used absurdly both before and after *s* (Expert's' Tutors). Interestingly, all these examples are the signs of some educational institutions.



Photograph 5

Faulty Pluralization Of English Terms

A photographic example (*Jamuna Stationeries*) shows the word *stationery* which is an uncountable noun is pluralized. Another shop sign shows the use of *stationery* and *paper* (), whereas *stationery* itself includes paper. Likewise, in some furniture shop signs, furniture /fɜːnɪʃə(r)/ is



Photograph 6

written as /fɜːnɪʃər/ instead of /fɜːnɪʃə(r)/, whereas photograph 6 presents Bengali /fɜːnɪʃər/ in singular form, and English furnitures in plural form; though it is an uncountable noun. In some furniture shops, the word is spelt as ‘furnisher(s)’ which means the shops that sells items of furnishing homes.

Inappropriate Use Of English Terms

Some English terms are not used appropriately in some sign texts in Bangladesh. Examples of this kind are department stores and hotels. In the photographic example Shwapno Bazar Departmental Store (photograph 7), it is observed that Deaprtmental Store is written. It is also seen that the term is used being indifferent to whether they have various



photograph 7

departments selling a great variety of goods or not. Even the term is used for ordinary grocery shops which don't have



photograph 8

multiple departments. It seems terms like departmental store are also used in India. Because in a book written by two indian writers the term has been used in an exercise (Sharma & Mohan: 94).

Sometimes some English terms are used to draw the attention of the people, especially the clients; though the terms are not found in English. ‘Perfectina Beauty Parlour’ is an example of this kind. It seems ‘Perfectina’ is meant as feminine gender of ‘perfect’, which is an adjective.

Naming restaurants as hotels is also common in Bangladesh. **Tayabia Hotel Restaurant and Birani House** is a restaurant which does not provide any lodging, but meals, whereas we know hotel is a commercial establishment providing lodging and usually meals for guests. On the other hand, for providing lodging, the practice of writing (residential) beside or below ‘hotel’

is observed. Hotel Diamond Park Abashik /residential) is such an example in which meal is not provided. It is generally observed that by ‘hotel’ the owners mean a shop that provides rice, by ‘restaurant’ they mean a shop providing snacks and tea. The shop that provides only rice is named as ‘hotel’ and the shop providing both rice and snacks are named as ‘hotel and restaurant’. Like in India, as found in the picturesque presentation of Nashrulla (2013), ‘saloon’ is an obsolete term commonly used here for hair cutting shop, e.g. photograph 8. In English, generally ‘well’ is used as an adverb and as an adjective complement of any subject or object. But ‘well’ has been used as a pre-modifier (adjective) of a noun (food) in photographic example 9. We know ‘Well Food’ is a sister concern of ‘Well Group’ which is also named following the same mistake.



Photograph 9

Findings

Thus, the above discussion presents the following findings:

- ✓ misspelt words;
- ✓ misuse of apostrophe and apostrophe s;
- ✓ misuse of tense;
- ✓ faulty pluralization of English names;
- ✓ inappropriate use and misplacement of English terms and
- ✓ the use of obsolete English terms.

Conclusion

In looking into reasons behind the occurrence of these errors and mistakes in the sign texts in Bangladesh, this study observes that carelessness, lack of knowledge and less involvement of well-educated people and the like are responsible. As these documentary posts are indicative to how a nation is aware of linguistic lapses while in writing on signs, we think necessary steps should be taken by the concerned authority, especially the Govt. of Bangladesh to make sign owners aware of mistakes and errors in the writing of signs. Sign owners also should make any educated people involved to check and balance the texts of signs.

References

- Adams, D. (2012). Funny Grammar Mistakes on Signs in America. *Bit Rebels*. Retrieved on 19 August, 2016 from <http://www.bitrebels.com/lifestyle/grammar-mistakes-on-signs/>
- Ahmed, S. (2011) Interpreting Bangladeshi and Australian Print Advertisements in Dr. Suna Aildere and Dr. Nurettin Ceviz (Eds.), Papers: The 10th International Language, Literature and Stylistics Symposium volume 1, (pp.21-39). Ankara: Gazi University.

- Al-Athwary, A. A. H. (2014). Translating Shop Signs into English in Sana'a's Streets: A Linguistic Analysis. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. 4 (12), 140-156.
- Banu, R. and Sussex, R. (2001). Code-Switching in Bangladesh. *English Today*, 17(2). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lawrence, C. B. (2012). The Korean English linguistic landscape. *World Englishes*, 31 (1), 70–92
- Nashrulla, T. (2013). 29 Spelling Mistakes from India That Will Make You Laugh, Cry, And Gag. *BuzzFeed*. Retrieved on 20 August, 2016 from <http://www.buzzfeed.com/tasneemnashrulla/29-spelling-mistakes-from-india-that-will-make-you-laugh-cry#.mgXnyPGwW>
- Oxford English Dictionary. 2007. Oxford University Press
- Richards, J. C., Platt, J. and Platt, H. (1992). *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (2nd ed). Essex: Longman Group UK Limited.
- Sharma, R C and Mohan, K. (2007). *Business Correspondence and Report Writing* (3rd ed). New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill Publishing Company Limited.