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## A Multimodal Analysis of Language and Translation Mistakes in Global Protest Signs Related to Grammar

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### Abstract

This study looks at the language, translation, and visual mistakes that can be found on protest signs from movements around the world, such as the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, and climate activism. A lot of people think that protest signs are a good way to show their political views, but mistakes in grammar, translations, and design can make them less effective at getting their point across, especially when they are used in places where people speak more than one language or come from different countries. The study uses a qualitative, multimodal discourse analysis framework to look at 125 protest signs that were written in Arabic and English. There were three main kinds of mistakes: (1) language mistakes, like misspellings and syntax that didn't match; (2) translation mistakes, like translating literally and machines making mistakes; and (3) visual mistakes, like bad typography, layout, and bidirectionality in bilingual signs. The results show that these kinds of mistakes, which people often think are bad, actually have complex semiotic roles. They often show sociolinguistic weakness, emotional urgency, and genuine grassroots support. But in transnational media, these same mistakes could change the political message and cause people to make fun of it, not understand it, or not stand up for it.

The study says that mistakes made during protests shouldn't just be seen as language mistakes; they should also be seen as signs of resistance in their context. It suggests that teachers, activists, and scholars should change how they think about protest language by seeing it as a place where people can negotiate power, identity, and expression.

**Keywords:** Translation, Visual Semiotics, Political Communication, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Protest Signs, Translation Mistakes, Arabic-English Translation and Language Mistakes

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### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Context and Importance of the Study

Over the past ten years, protest groups have used signs and placards more and more to show their opposition, get people to join them, and send political messages to people all over the world. These signs often have short, strong messages that are important, emotional, or ideological. But they also show something surprising: how often people make mistakes when they speak or translate.

People who made protest signs often didn't know how to write well, were in a hurry, or used machine translation, which is why they have grammatical mistakes, wrong translations, or awkward phrases. These mistakes may not seem like a big deal, but they can change how clear, trustworthy, or even funny the message is in a semiotic way. More importantly, they can change or weaken the original political message, especially when signs are translated into other languages in international settings.

Baker (2006)<sup>[1]</sup> says that translation in politics is not just about language; it's also a way of telling stories that can change how we think about events, people, and power (p. 105).

## 1.2 Research Gap

Even though a lot of research has been done on protest language, there is still a big gap in the multimodal analysis of language and translation mistakes in protest signs. Most of the time, research has focused on the language of protest slogans or the cultural significance of movements that resist. Existing research hasn't done enough to systematically record and explain language mistakes, especially when looking at them from a multimodal point of view that includes visual, textual, and typographic elements.

This study tries to fill that gap by looking at protest signs from different movements around the world, like the Women's March, the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, and climate strikes. It is about:

- Mistakes in language (grammar, spelling, and syntax)
- Mistakes in translation (literal vs. contextual Mistakes)
- Visual semiotics looks at how layout, font, and image and text work together.

Fairclough (1995) said that to really understand language in social situations, we need to look at more than just the words. We also need to think about how they fit in with other social norms and visual structures (pp. 17–19).

## 1.3 Research Objectives

This Research aims to:

1. Find and group the most common mistakes in language and translation on protest signs.
2. Think about how these mistakes change what protest messages mean and how people react to them.
3. Look at the pictures and words on protest signs that work with language mistakes to make more than one meaning.

## 1.4 Research Questions

- What are the most common Mistakes in language and translation on protest signs all over the world?
- What do these mistakes do to how people in the area and around the world see the message?
- How do the design and visuals make these mistakes worse or better?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This section talks about the ideas that help us understand mistakes in language and translation on protest signs. It draws on ideas from three fields that are related: translation studies, multimodal discourse analysis, and visual semiotics.

### 2.1 Theories of Translation and Protest Language

It can be dangerous to translate at protests. Unlike literary or technical translation, protest translation is often informal, urgent, and full of emotion. Protesters can use their own bilingual skills or automated tools to make their messages easier for more people to understand, especially in the media around the world.

Baker (2006)<sup>[1]</sup> says that translation can change how people think about political conflict by changing how stories are told. Literal translations, words that don't match up, and leaving out cultural differences can all change the meaning of a protest in big ways. These mistakes can sometimes cause people to misunderstand the protest's goals or hurt international solidarity.

"Translators in politically sensitive situations are not neutral messengers; they are narrative agents whose choices change

the event" (Baker, 2006, p. 105)<sup>[1]</sup>.

### 2.2 Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA)

Protest signs are multimodal by nature because they use text, color, pictures, font, and space to make sense. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001)<sup>[8]</sup> say that multimodal discourse is when different ways of making meaning work together to communicate. If you spell or use grammar wrong on a protest sign, it can change how it looks. For example, you could use bold type, draw pictures by hand, or use color contrast.

Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) lets researchers look at more than just what is said (the text) and how it is said (the visuals). It also lets them look at how mistakes change the meaning of the message.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001)<sup>[8]</sup> say, "The meaning of a sign is not just in its words, but also in how those words are arranged, how big they are, and how they are displayed on the page or placard."

### 2.3 The Politics of Mistakes and Visual Semiotics

The study of signs, or semiotics, is a great way to learn how protest signs work both visually and symbolically. Mistakes can be more than just language mistakes; they can also be visual cues that show urgency, being left out, or even going against the rules of elite language.

Barthes (1977)<sup>[2]</sup> said that pictures and words work together in a "relay function," where each one helps or hurts the other. In this case, a grammatical Mistake might not make the sign less powerful; it might make it seem more real by showing raw emotion or coming from the ground up.

"An image-text combination is always ideological, never neutral, and Mistake may serve to emphasize this ideological charge" (Barthes, 1977, pp. 41–43)<sup>[2]</sup>.

### 2.4 Categorizing Mistakes in Protest Language

These frameworks will be used in this study to group mistakes into:

Grammar, spelling, syntax, and punctuation are all examples of language mistakes.

Literal vs. intended meaning, losing a metaphor or idiom, or not understanding the culture are all examples of translation mistakes.

Mistakes in sight: text that doesn't line up right, fonts that aren't right, and too much visual information.

We will use these groups to look at a bunch of protest signs from all over the world to see how different types of Mistakes change the way messages are sent.

## 3. Methodology

This section dealt with how we got, sorted, and looked at protest signs that had mistaken in the language and translation. It uses a qualitative, multimodal method that draws on parts of corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis.

### 3.1 Data Collection

The dataset has 125 protest signs and placards that were gathered from protests all over the world between 2015 and 2024. Here are some sources:

1. Flickr, Unsplash, and Twitter hashtags are all examples of online photo archives of protests.
2. Stories about protests in the news (for example, BBC, Al

Jazeera, and the Guardian)

3. Posts on social media that have words related to protests in both Arabic and English.

The protests where people spoke more than one language were the main focus.

1. Black Lives Matter (in the US, UK, and all over the world)
2. Women's March (in the US, France, and the MENA region)
3. The protests in Tunisia, Egypt, and Sudan during the Arab Spring
4. Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion are two groups that protest climate change.

### 3.2 Inclusion Criteria

The signs were picked based on:

- There is a mistake in the language or translation (in English or Arabic)
- Having both text and pictures available
- Open to the public and used in a moral way (no private data)

### 3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis had three levels of coding:

#### A. Mistakes in grammar in both Arabic and English

- There are spelling mistakes, like "البلاد حره للابد" missing "ة" in "حره".
- The grammatical gender doesn't match; for example, "كلنا غاضبون و غضبه" (the noun and adjective don't agree).
- Issues with tense or aspect, like "نحن يجوع" instead of "نحن نجوع"
- Syntax mistakes, like using the wrong adjective "القائمة" for a masculine noun in "يسقط النظام القائمة"

Here is an example of Arabic signs with Mistakes:

Table 1

Protest Sign	Mistake	Note
"الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام"	"النظامل" خطأ إملائي في	إضافة حرف زائد
"نحن لا نسكت بعد الآن"	"الآن" → "الآن"	خطأ شائع في التشكيل
"الحرية للأطفال المعتقلين"	صياغة غير دقيقة	هل الأطفال معتقلون أم أولاد المعتقلين؟
"يسقط حكم العسكر، والحكم الفاسدة"	خطأ في التأنيث	مؤنث لحكم وهو مذكر "الفاسدة"

## 4. Findings and Analysis

This section goes into great detail about the mistakes that were found on protest signs. These mistakes fall into three main categories: language, translation, and visual-typographic. There are examples in both English and Arabic that help the conversation, and there are also multimodal interpretations that look at both the text and the pictures of the message.

### A. Examples in Arabic

Table 2

Protest Sign	Mistake Type	Comment
"الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام"	Spelling (extra letter)	Possibly due to fast handwriting or visual misjudgment.
"لا للتعديلات الدستورية"	Spelling (tā' marbūṭa) → (hā')	Common confusion between "ت" and "ه".
"نحن لا نسكت بعد الآن"	Spelling ("الآن" instead of "الآن")	Reflects phonetic proximity but orthographic inaccuracy.
"يسقط حكم العسكر، والحكم الفاسدة"	Gender agreement	"الفاسدة" is feminine, while "الحكم" is masculine.
"الفساد لا نريد هو"	Pronoun misuse	Incorrect suffix "هو" instead of "ه". Possibly dialectal influence.

## B. Mistakes in Translation

- Exact translations:  
"Down with the corruption" can also be written as "أسفل الفساد" (literal word-for-word instead of "يسقط الفساد").
- Incorrect translation of an idiom  
Some Arabic signs say "لا استراحة، لا عدالة، لا سلام" instead of "لا عدالة، لا سلام" for "No justice, no peace."
- Loss of metaphor  
Some people think "Silence is violence" means "الصمت هو الضرب" instead of "الصمت عنف".

## C. Visual and Typographic Issues

- The software doesn't know how to do it, so text is written in Arabic from left to right or English from right to left.
- Different scripts  
- For example, "مطلبنا Freedom" (changing between Arabic and English letters)
- Using a font that is hard to read or not appropriate on signs, making the message impossible to read.

## 3.4 Multimodal Coding

We put codes on each protest sign for

1. The text itself, along with the kind of mistake
2. How translation works (machine vs. human reasoning)
3. How things look (color, font, alignment, balance)
4. Notes on sociolinguistics, such as the country, the situation, and how easy it is to see education and power

## 3.5 Ethical Considerations

All of the pictures came from places that are open to the public or Creative Commons. They blurred any faces that needed to be blurred, and they didn't keep any personal information that could be used to find someone.

These language mistakes might make the message less clear and convincing, or they might make it unclear or funny by accident. They could also mean that it's hard to get to formal school or that messages are sent quickly when there is a lot of stress.

## B. Examples in English

Meiseles (1980) <sup>[10]</sup>. looked at how Arabic dialects can get in the way of each other and found that informal or emotional writing often has morphological inconsistencies, especially when MSA (Modern Standard Arabic) is not the speaker's default register (pp. 23–24).

Table 3

Protest Sign	Mistake Type	Comment
"We want justis now"	Spelling	"Justis" → "justice"; phonetic spelling from non-native speaker.
"Your silence mean complicit"	Syntax/Agreement	"Mean" should be "means"; "complicit" needs a verb.
"People dieing for freedom"	Verb morphology	"Dieing" → "dying"
"Stop killing the childern"	Spelling	"Children" misspelled
"No human right, no peace"	Number agreement	Should be "rights" (plural).

People who don't speak English as their first language often use these signs when they try to talk to international media or audiences. People may laugh at the mistakes, but they also show how weak the language is when people protest around the world.

Berman (1985) <sup>[3]</sup>. said that these kinds of differences from normal language use in protest speech are not just "failures," but can show "authenticity, marginality, and the rough edge of lived reality" (p. 283).

### 4.2 Translation Mistakes and Mistranslations

There were a lot of translation Mistakes in the dataset, which was one of the most interesting things about it. Protesters

often try to translate their slogans from their native language into English (or the other way around) so that more people can understand them. A lot of translations don't keep the meaning of idioms, culture, or metaphors, though.

Here are some common problems that come up when translating:

- Taking idioms literally (like "ارحل," which means "Go away" instead of "Step down")
- Using the passive voice incorrectly or losing control over the translation
- Mistakes in machine translation (which are often caused by how Google Translate works)

Here are a few examples

### Arabic: Mistranslated English: Mistake

Table 4

Original Arabic	Mistranslated English	Mistake
"لا عدالة، لا سلام"	"No justice, no rest"	Misinterpretation of "سلام" "rest" instead of "peace"
"الصمت هو العنف"	"The silence is hitting"	Semantic Mistake—mistranslation of "عنف" as physical action
"نحن نطالب بالحرية"	"We order the freedom"	Misuse of "order" for "demand" due to machine literalism

These Mistakes make the message less clear and less powerful emotionally. Also, when the sign is photographed and shared around the world, mistranslation can lead to misunderstandings between cultures.

Venuti (1995) <sup>[14]</sup>. talks about the "violence of translation," which is what happens when language equality gets in the way of cultural differences (p. 20–21).

### 4.3 Visual and Typographic Mistakes

A lot of protest signs not only have mistakes in the text, but also in how they look. Some examples are text that isn't lined up right, bad font choices, low color contrast, or using Arabic script directionality the wrong way. For instance:

- "???"Want We Freedom written in English from right to left
- Arabic is written from left to right, and the letters aren't connected: "ان ان ري د" (انا نريد)
- Too many decorations that make it hard to read, like glitter over text
- The text is too small or too crowded to read

### Combining Visual Code

Some signs use English and Arabic together in the same word or sentence in a creative way:

"No الظلم" means "No to injustice."

"Yes الحرية" means "Yes to freedom."

These kinds of signs can be useful in speech, but they can also confuse people who don't speak both languages.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) <sup>[9]</sup>.say that the choices we make about how things look are like language. They can be wrong, broken, or read wrong, just like how we speak or write (pp. 45–46).

### 4.4 Sociolinguistic Observations

- Signs from protests in cities like Cairo, Beirut, and New York had fewer spelling mistakes and more English words.
- Signs from rural or grassroots areas often had more code-switching, dialectal Arabic, and mistakes in handwriting that were easy to see.
- Women's protests, like the Women's March, had better signs and banners, while men's protests were more about making their point.

These results show that education, urgency, audience, and digital literacy all affect how protest messages are made and where mistakes are most likely to happen.

## 5. Discussion

This part puts together the answers to the research questions and the bigger effects that language and translation mistakes can have on protest signs. The ideas come from linguistic representation, political semiotics, and digital globalization.

### 5.1 The Semiotics of Mistakes as Features

People often think that mistakes in language and translation are bad, but this study shows that these mistakes can make the message more real and powerful when people are protesting. The signs that protesters hold up aren't perfect, just like their struggle is real and urgent.

People who make mistakes often do so because they are on the outside looking in, based on their class, education, or access to language resources. This makes their complaint more believable. For example, a sign that says "We want the freedom quickly please!" that is badly translated. May sound strange to a native speaker, but it gets across a sense of urgency and desperation better than polished speech.

According to Halliday (1993) <sup>[7]</sup>, language differences are not just mistakes; they are also a part of who you are and where you are (p. 35).

### 5.2 Mistakes as Disturbance or Distortion

People sometimes think mistakes are good, but a lot of them—especially in translation—make it harder for protest messages to get through language barriers. People might make fun of or misunderstand a sign that says "No judgment, no sleep" instead of "No justice, no peace," especially if it is shared through the media.

This distortion is especially important for transnational activism, where signs can be taken and shared all over the world without any context. In these kinds of situations, mistakes could change the political demands of the protest or make international allies who don't speak the original language or culture feel left out.

Tymoczko (2007) <sup>[13]</sup>, says that activists have a "ethical responsibility" to translate, and that it might be worse to say nothing than to be wrong (pp. 108–109).

### 5.3 Visual Design and Multimodal Tension

The results show that layout, color, font, and alignment are not just neutral backgrounds; they are semiotic forces that work with language. It's not helpful to have a sign with the right words but a font that is hard to read. A sign with a spelling mistake but strong images, like a bleeding heart or a broken flag, might still make people feel something.

It's interesting that signs that switch between Arabic and English can have a hybrid rhetorical power, even though they often have strange structures. For example, the phrase "Yes *الحرية*" combines the directness of English with the cultural specificity of Arabic. This points to a protest identity that is both global and local.

According to Shohat and Stam (1994) <sup>[12]</sup>, multilingual cultural expressions often work "in-between" standard language systems, which gives them strong hybrid meanings (p. 154).

### 5.4 Technology and the Rise of Machine Mistakes

A new kind of language failure has happened because more and more people are using Google Translate or AI-powered tools to make protest signs. There are a lot of signs that show clear signs of machine literalism, like phrases that don't make sense or tense structures that don't match. These mistakes

show a "digital gap," which means that activists don't have the right tools for translating or checking their language.

These mistakes also make us think about a bigger question: can machines ever make language that is as strong or believable as language that people make? Google Translate made things unclear or watered down the political message in a lot of the signs that were looked at.

Pym (2011) <sup>[11]</sup>, talks about the problem of balancing speed and accuracy in digital translation. She says that "instant global reach often sacrifices local meaning" (p. 76).

### 5.5 Effects on culture and education

It is very easy to see these kinds of mistakes, which makes us think about language education, public literacy, and training for protests. Should groups that work for social change get help with their basic language skills? Are there universities or non-profits that can quickly translate protests? How can we stop making fun of these mistakes and start seeing them as signs of bigger problems in the system?

Also, the fact that signs often use dialectal Arabic, non-standard forms, and creative visuals shows that standardized language rules may not be the best way to judge protest language. We need to look at the language of resistance in its full social and semiotic context instead.

Canagarajah (2005) <sup>[4]</sup>, calls this way of thinking "linguistic pluralism in the periphery," which means that using non-standard language is a sign of strength, not weakness (pp. 212–214).

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 6.1 Conclusion

The point of this study was to find out what language and translation mistakes are often missed on protest signs all over the world. We have shown that these kinds of mistakes are more than just strange or distracting; they are ways of communicating that show higher levels of urgency, identity, marginalization, and resistance. We did this by looking at a collection of protest signs from the Arab world, Europe, and North America that had many languages and modes.

When you make mistakes in Arabic or English, they can show up as misspellings, wrong gender, syntax problems, or using the wrong dialect or formal register. When translations are wrong, especially when they are literal or done by a computer, they can make the message unclear or even change it, especially in situations that cross borders. Also, layout, legibility, and cultural cues can make mistakes in writing worse or better.

These signs are real representations of grassroots voices, even though they don't communicate well. We shouldn't just judge them by how well they use academic language. Instead, we should see them as imperfect but strong symbols of protest through a semiotic and sociolinguistic lens.

Even if their language isn't perfect, Paulo Freire says that "the oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for liberation" (Freire, 1970, p. 76) <sup>[6]</sup>.

### 6.2 Recommendations

Here are some Recommendations based on the analysis and what it means:

#### 1. For Protesters and Groups of Activists

- Workshops on how to translate protest language: Teach people how to translate protest language in a way that makes sense, especially for messages sent around the

world.

- Help with proofreading: groups of volunteers can look over slogans before they are printed.
- Translation apps that take culture into account: Encourage people to use translation apps that do more than just find word equivalents.

## 2. For Scientists and Language Experts

- Make open-access protest corpora: Make multilingual datasets of protest language, with both correct and incorrect forms, to help with both applied and comparative research.
- Normalize the study of "Mistake": Change the way academics talk about "Mistake" so that they don't see it as a failure but as linguistic agency under pressure.

## 3. For Teachers and People Who Set Rules

- Use protest signs and other real-world texts in lessons to teach syntax, translation, pragmatics, and discourse analysis.
- Close the digital language gap: Give protest groups that don't get enough money to buy better translation tools and educational materials.

## 6.3 Issues and Future Research

This study is limited by the small sample size (125 signs) and the fact that it only uses publicly available visual data. Future studies may include talking to protesters, doing ethnographic fieldwork, or looking at different areas and languages. AI could also be used to find mistakes in protests using NLP tools. This is a good area for computational sociolinguistics to look into.

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