Original Paper

The Linguistic Landscape on the Streets of Kuwait: *A Challenge to the Concept of Diglossia*

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Abstract

Linguistic landscape (LL) is a representation of language(s) visibility in public space. This study aims to draw a comprehensive profile of LL as adopted by private firms on billboards alongside the main streets of Kuwait, shedding light on the status of Kuwaiti vernacular, Standard Arabic (SA), and English in the country. The study utilises a quantitative approach through which billboards on the main streets of Kuwait were photographed, categorised based on the language of the script, then quantified to assess the popularity of the language. Billboards representing the main displayed language varieties were presented to a heterogeneous sample of respondents to assess their views across the two dimensions of status and solidarity through a digital questionnaire. The study also utilised a qualitative approach through informal interviews to gain the language specialists' perspective on the issue. The results indicate that Kuwaiti vernacular has a growing positive attitude because of its perceived charisma and promotion of solidarity. When SA is mixed with English, or when English is transliterated into SA orthography, it tends to appeal to the public eye. Kuwaiti sociolinguists reflected a strong rejection of the trendy Kuwaiti vernacular over SA. Yet, English has not been viewed as a threat to SA.

Keywords

sociolinguistics, diglossia, linguistic landscape, Kuwaiti Arabic, Standard Arabic, English

1. Introduction

The language on billboards is constantly changing worldwide. In Kuwait, for example, the language used on billboards is now more dominated by the Kuwaiti dialect than it used to be. Gradually, people have started to take the spread of Kuwaiti on billboards seriously across various social media platforms,

including Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook. Such highly intense controversy over the spread of billboards with Kuwaiti scripts inspired us to investigate the matter systematically.

Gorter and Cenoz (2017) claim that a study of the Linguistic Landscape (LL) can establish a new insight with a different perspective on language awareness within social communities. In this study, the researchers aim to draw a comprehensive profile of the linguistic landscape as adopted by private firms and institutions on billboards alongside the main streets of Kuwait. Such a profile, we hope, would shed light on the rising status of Kuwaiti vernacular as opposed to Standard Arabic (SA) and English in the country through the former's growing utilization in public.

Another objective of this study is to point out how private firms and businesses are challenging the dominating ideology of pushing the population towards utilizing SA and ensuring its high status over Kuwaiti. The study will revisit the concept of diglossia, as presented by Ferguson (1959), a phenomenon presenting the co-existence of two distinct language varieties in one speech community, each of which used for identified linguistic communicative purposes agreed upon by the society. Thus, a standard variety of Arabic (SA) is used across the Arab World for official purposes such as formal speeches, university lectures, and news media; a colloquial variety is used for informal conversational settings by both educated and non-educated Arabs, which is subject to regional variation, not only across the borders of the Arab countries but also among areas within the border in one country (Al-Sobh & Al-Abd, 2012). Each version receives its grading status by the speech communities in the Arab World based on the purpose assigned for that variety. Therefore, a "High" (H) variety is used for government, media, education, and religion, and a "Low" (L) variety is used for everyday purposes. Elaborating on Ferguson's theory, Hudson-Edwards (1984) describes the elevated variety as 1) enjoying higher prestige; 2) associated with literary work; and 3) holding long term stable, functional relationship with the L variety, expected to last for centuries. The current study challenges all three concepts of diglossia.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Understanding Linguistic Landscape

Linguistic Landscape (LL) refers to the linguistic objects that mark the public space (Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara, & Trumper-Hecht, 2006). Gorter (2013) points out two underlying assumptions of LL contributions into the field of sociolinguistics: 1) people process the languages on signage, and as a result, texts on signs are considered a language input, and 2) languages in which signs are written influence and reflect the perceived status of those languages, which would, in turn, influence the linguistic behavior of the people residing in the signs' neighborhood. Accordingly, signs are indices reflecting the degree of visibility of certain language varieties that exist in a specific geographical area. Landry and Bourhis (1997) explain the notion of LL as a referent to the visibility of languages on signs in public spaces in a given territory, including road signs, names of sites, streets, buildings, institutions,

advertising billboards, commercial shop signs, and even personal visiting cards. They, therefore, stress the point that the concept of LL refers to private signs issued by individuals and firms acting within the limits of a territory's official regulations, as well as signs issued by public governmental authorities.

Spolsky and Cooper (1991) state that LL functions not only as an informational marker but also as a symbolic entity reflecting the power and status of the linguistic groups within a specific geographical area. Landry and Bourhis (1997) also stressed the symbolic function of language signs. They found that signs reflected the perception of the community towards the value and status of their languages when compared to other existing languages in the same territory. Where language is a salient marker of identity, LL becomes "the most observable and immediate index of the relative power and status of the linguistic communities inhabiting a given territory" (1997, p. 29). Thus, LL can represent an independent factor within the concept of subjective ethnolinguistic vitality score and language behavior in multilingual communities. This factor would promote the higher likelihood of using one's language, leading to identifiable patterns of language maintenance and language shift.

As a result, a relatively new branch of sociolinguistics called Linguistic Landscape Studies (LLS) has emerged over the past two decades as an attempt to present an accurate inventory of various linguistic language varieties utilized by linguistically identifiable groups of people across specific geographical areas. Blommaert and Maly (2014) rationalize the need for LLS as the only tool that compels sociolinguists to focus on communities' literary representations. Such a blissful tool, they add, turns some of the sociolinguistic field bias towards the spoken languages.

Spolsky and Cooper (1991) establish three rules in the field of signage that would produce the incentive for the preference of certain languages over the others: 1) at a practical level, sign-writers write signs in the language they know to ensure the production of proficient signs; 2) at an economic level, signs are written in the language preferred by the sign readers; and 3) at a symbolic political and socio-cultural level, signs are written in a language with which the readers wish to be identified, reflecting the national loyalty of the addressed community. According to Spolsky and Cooper, rule 1 is essential, rules 2 & 3 might be in conflict, but in some cases, rule 3 could function so rigorously that rule 1 would lose its functionality.

2.2 Methodological Framework in LLS

Research in the field of linguistic landscape has faced several obstacles. Gorter (2013) summarizes the obstacles to be theoretical and methodological in nature. Theoretically, studies of linguistic landscapes are covering multidisciplinary aspects, and as a result, the studies are conducted concerning different theories in sociolinguistics, advertising, education, economics, history, media, semiotics, sociology, and many more. Scholars in the field warn that covering such an extensive range of theories might, in many cases, come into conflict in their findings.

From a methodological perspective, one of the obstacles is what to classify as a legitimate LL. Laundry and Bouhris (1990) included a heterogeneous list of objects as part of a territory's LL, including street

signs, commercial signs, billboards, signs on national and municipal institutions, trade names, public notices and many more in urban areas, let alone the more recent technological advancement of electronic displays, LED neon lights, foam boards, electronic message centers, interactive touch screens, inflatable signs and scrolling banners (Gorter, 2013). It is therefore argued that covering such a vast and growing list of objects as part of the researcher's data would be extremely hectic and, in many cases, even impractical.

Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) attempted to resolve the issue of what to be included in the area's LL by drawing a distinction between top-down LL and bottom-up LL. According to Ben-Rafael and his co-authors, top-down signs exhibit the demands of institutions controlled by national policies committed to the dominant socio-cultural status of the residents. In contrast, bottom-up signs represent individual and corporative actors in their attempt to appeal to the public within the society's legal limits. As such, street signs, signs on national and municipal buildings, and public notices should be quantified and investigated in distinction from billboards, trade names, and commercial signs. The distinction, as believed, may have partially resolved the issue by making a list less heterogeneous, yet the various types under each category still stay diversified and problematic.

Another obstacle is identifying the aspect of the sign that would be more indicative of the area's linguistic profile. In that regard, a group of recent researches in the field criticized magnifying the existing texts on the sign, while neglecting other semiotic aspects of the sign such as text size, color, manufacturing material, site of placement, and category of the content (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Moreover, in a global world, multilingualism is the norm, resulting in practices of language combinations and mixing on signs just as we do in our spoken communications (Van-Mensel et al., 2016).

In an attempt to overcome the sign identification obstacle, Gorter and Cenoz (2017) suggested establishing a definite criterion to improve the validity of the study, although a margin of arbitrariness is claimed to be inevitable. Several researchers criticized the quantitative approach as the sole tool for data collection, selecting a more qualitative approach in their studies of linguistic landscapes, shifting their focus from the sign as an object, into people's relationship to the signage. Ben Said (2011, p. 68), for instance, stressed the importance of including the "voices from the people as an essential part of the interpretation of the linguistic landscape" reflecting the essential role of qualitative data collection and analyses. Mitchell (2010) used a triangulation method that combined discourse analysis of a newspaper clipping, the spoken languages on streets alongside a quantitative analysis of the signage in a neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Contrary to that view, Gorter (2013) explained that studies with multidimensional research tools would integrate an inherited research weakness as a result of utilizing non-random selective empirical data, making it more difficult for the studies to be replicated and come up with generalizations in other parts of the globe.

2.3 Linguistic Landscape as a Model of Language Policy

Initially, LL studies have been initiated in the field of language policy and planning. In her general review of the importance of LL studies, Shohamy (2015) described it as a useful tool in language revival, multilingualism documentation, the assessment of local versus state's policies, but more important, the enhancement of language policy awareness and the challenge against wrongly constructed policies. Van Mensel et al. (2016) state:

"In settings of societal conflict between different ethnolinguistic communities, demarcations of space employing language were used as a means of institutionally resolving or mitigating inter-community friction" (2016, p. 434).

According to Van Mensel et al. (2016), language policies across the world fall between two extremes: an official language policy dictating the legal use of a language on official signs, while commercial signage is not regulated. A similar distinction has been proposed by Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) between "top-down" and "bottom-up", where the former mirrors the "overt power", and the latter represents the "covert solidarity". The dichotomy is believed to result in huge discrepancies between the LL profiles produced by public versus private signage.

2.4 Kuwait: A Unique Sociolinguistic Setting

Kuwait is a country with a respectively small geographical area reaching 17,818 square kilometers, comparatively slightly smaller than the state of New Jersey, resided by 4.2 million according to the most recent national census (2017). Despite its small land area, the state's population is centered within six governorates, each containing several areas that do not exceed 5 square kilometers, leaving the outskirt of the country not resided yet. (See Figure 1, showing the populated areas vs. non-populated land).
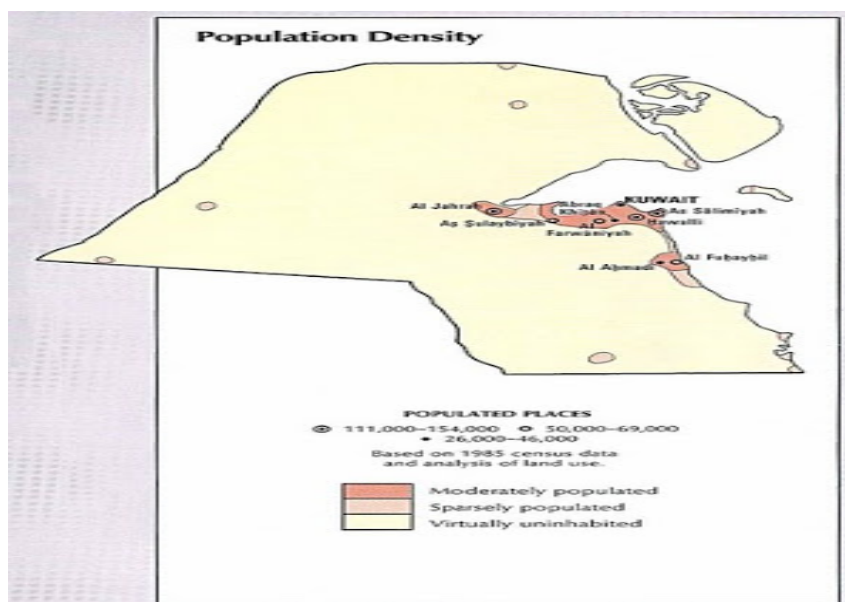

Figure 1. Map of Kuwait (www.mappery.com)

Kuwait's land is divided horizontally into seven ring roads cutting Kuwait into seven semi-circle main roads that run across the populated areas of the country. The country's geographical area also contains three main highways (30, 40, and 50) that divide the land vertically. There is also a coastal road that runs alongside the coast of the country starting from Al-Bidi', Messila, and leading towards The Gulf Road.

2.4.1 Kuwait's Demographic Profile

The population in Kuwait is divided into citizens and expatriates. According to the most recent national census (2019), expatriates account for about 70% of the population, including 1.1 million Arabs and more than 2 million non-Arabs, while Kuwaitis comprise a minority of 1.3 million (worldpopulationreview.com/countries/Kuwait-population). Viewing themselves as a minority in their land, Kuwaitis consider the high figures of non-nationals a problem that requires taking immediate measures by the government to be resolved. The national census, however, shows the figures of expatriates continuously increasing since then.

According to Longva (2005), Arab expatriates have the privilege over non-Arabs of spreading their ideas and communicating more efficiently with Kuwaitis using their L spoken varieties due to their shared diglossic sociolinguistic setting in the countries of origin. Two-way intelligibility of the L variety used by Arab expatriates and Kuwaitis gives them a more robust level of access in the Kuwaiti community. Al-Ruwaiyeah (2016) described the context based on her own experience in the Kuwaiti community:

"Arabs speak in their L varieties normally when addressing Kuwaitis. So, it is very normal in Kuwait to find a Kuwaiti using KA (Kuwaiti Arabic) when speaking to an Egyptian, in turn, responds to the Kuwaiti in Egyptian Arabic" (2016, p. 11).

Al-Ruwaiyeah added, "despite the increasing numbers of foreigners in Kuwait, there are efforts by the government to minimize the influence non-Kuwaitis have on the language of students", through what Al-Sabaan (2002) described as the process of "Kuwaitization" of the education sector (2002, p. 11).

Non-Arab expatriates, on the other hand, come to Kuwait with their languages that are, in most cases, unintelligible to Kuwaiti citizens. Nevertheless, since the majority of them work as domestic servants in the homes of Kuwaitis, many gain cultural familiarity with their Kuwaiti hosts, while the Arab expatriates stay "hedged with caution and characterized by social distance" (Longva, 2005, p. 124). Perceiving non-Arab expatriates as a "mortal threat", Longva described the relationship between Kuwaitis and this group of expatriates as being not "any better". As a result, Al-Ruwaiyeah proposed learning Kuwaiti by the domestic workers is the norm in Kuwait but not vice versa.

2.4.2 Kuwait's Sociolinguistic Profile

Such unusual relationship between Kuwaitis and expatriates has resulted in a unique sociolinguistic profile, where three primary language varieties are utilized: Standard Arabic (SA), known as the H variety, the Kuwaiti vernacular functions as the L variety within a country known for its diglossia, and

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English with a status that has been dynamically changing during the recent decades. The status of English in Kuwait has been going under a constant change. In her account of Kuwait getting global, Akbar (2019) explained how the status of English has changed from an EFL into an ESL in the country. Akbar (2019) added, due to "its empowering socio-economical effect within the Kuwaiti society, the community is believed to consistently move towards bilingualism", where code-switching between English and Arabic in both varieties (SA and the Kuwaiti vernacular) has become the norm (2019, p. 305). From an ideological point of view, Akbar (2007) described the community in Kuwait as encountering a double standard national, linguistic ideology; an overt one that pushed Kuwaitis into preserving their national language variety (SA), and a covert one of the sought after native-like proficiency in English to enable them to access the prestigious walks of life. In his study of the role of English in Kuwait using Kachru's (1983) model, Dashti (2015) stated that the use of English has extended from the academic settings into interpersonal and innovative functions including the use in Kuwaiti homes, social gatherings, banks, hospitals, media and more. His study also viewed English as becoming "a sign of social glamour" in Kuwait (2015, p. 33).

Intending to investigate attitudes of Kuwaitis towards the diglossic switching between L and H varieties, Al-Ruwaiyeah (2016) explored attitudes of newspapers' columnists and readers towards the use of Kuwaiti in literary work. Her work revealed a stable status-solidarity relationship between SA and the Kuwaiti vernacular by the newspapers' readers, with a decrease in favorable attitudes towards using Kuwaiti in the literary work of the columnists within the younger Kuwaiti generations. Columnists, on the other hand, seemed to be still constrained by the society's linguistic norms, opposing using L variety extensively in newspaper articles even by the columnists who do so. The study's findings suggested that Kuwaitis still perceive the H (SA) variety holding into its high status when compared to the L (Kuwaiti) variety.

The constitution of Kuwait asserts in one of its articles, "Arabic is the language of the Holy Quran, and the official language of the state (www.e.gov.kw). Accordingly, all public signage is displayed in the state's scape with Arabic script on top, and very frequently followed by an English translation. Road signs, official buildings, and government institutions' signs are, therefore, presented in SA and English.

2.5 The Present Study's Scope

In this study's context, the LL in Kuwait follows what Van Mensel (2016) and his co-authors propose to fall between two extremes: an official language policy dictating the legal use of a specific language on official signs; while commercial signage is not regulated. Thus, the current study investigated the latter (commercial signs) aiming to find out the conflict between the state's political, linguistic ideology, and the voice of the community.

With the present study's two significant objectives being the private institutionalized challenge of the state's national, linguistic ideology, and the attempt to revisit the conventional theory of diglossia in the Arab World, our study aimed to answer the following research questions:

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1) How do private billboards present different language varieties in Kuwait?

2) Does the linguistic landscape, as presented through private billboards, contest the official overt linguistic ideology?

3) Do the Kuwaiti vernacular and Standard Arabic (SA) represent the conventional diglossic criteria established by the pioneering scholars Hudson-Edward (1984) and Furgeson (1959)?

3. Methodological Framework

3.1 Data Collection & Tools

Our study adopted an exploratory design that combined quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. The study mainly utilized a quantitative approach for which the billboards on the main streets of Kuwait were photographed using smartphones by an assigned team. For that purpose, a team of assistants was assigned to drive alongside the main roads of Kuwait, and take pictures of every billboard they view. A pdf file was compiled for each road and sent to the main researcher via email.

As we mentioned earlier, the limited inhabited region in Kuwait made the collection of almost all billboards on the streets of Kuwait a feasible task. A file of a total of 557 billboards was prepared and analyzed in terms of the script displayed on the billboards, quantifying, and tabulating the billboards per the script on them as:

1) Billboards with Standard Arabic (SA).

2) Billboards with Kuwaiti vernacular.

3) Billboards with English.

4) Billboards with English transliterated in Arabic orthography.

5) Billboards with Standard Arabic and English.

At a later stage, two linguists were interviewed to gain their perception on the use of Kuwaiti vernacular as opposed to SA and English on selected billboard samples. Linguists' accounts were analyzed qualitatively to reach the language specialists' points of view.

Five billboards representing the main investigated language varieties (Kuwaiti vernacular, English, Standard Arabic & English, Kuwaiti vernacular & English, Arabic transliterated of English) were selected by the researchers, ensuring that they all represent neutral content, type of sign, and sign features. The selected billboards were presented to respondents of different age groups and genders to find out their views on the billboards across the two dimensions of status and solidarity.

During a preliminary stage, the billboards were piloted on a group of 32 participants (18 females, 14 males, ranging between 19-53 years old) to write down the first list of 5 description words that came into their mind when they saw each billboard. The following 5 descriptive words were most frequently presented in the pilot data, starting with the highest to the lowest frequency as follows:

Funny (26 times), *strong* (24 times), *professional* (24 times), *attractive* (22 times), *satisfying* (19 times). Other words included "*unique*", "*beautiful*", "*nice*", "*amazing*", *and* "*loved it*", none of which appeared

more than 4 times in the data provided. We, therefore, decided to use the five most frequent attributes in the questionnaire designed to obtain the respondents' attitudes towards each of the sample billboards. A digital questionnaire was designed via Crowdsignal application, distributed through the primary researcher's Twitter account. The questionnaire included two sections. The first section overviews the respondents' demographic details, including gender, age group, nationality, and education level. The second section included the level of attributes of satisfaction, professionalism, strength, attractiveness, and fun of each of the selected billboards as viewed by the respondent.

4. Result

4.1 Quantifying Billboards on Kuwaiti Main Streets

The data received from the various teams who photographed the billboards on the assigned streets in the country are presented in Figure 2.
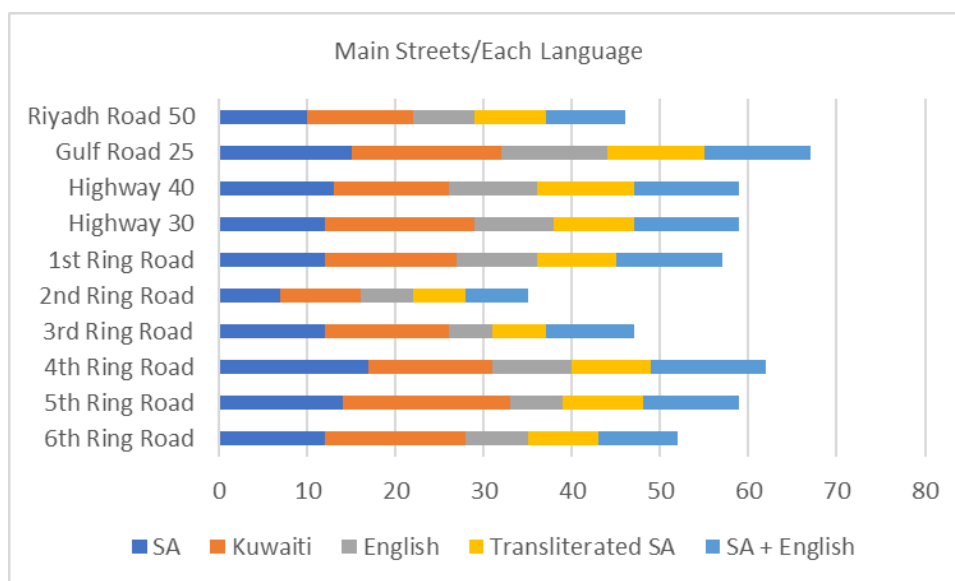

Figure 2. Billboard Distribution across 10 Major Streets of Kuwait

As the graph shows, the billboards with Kuwaiti script seem to outnumber all other scripts on the 6th ring road, 5th ring road, and the Gulf road. SA, on the other hand, tends to outnumber the rest of the billboard scripts on the 4th ring road and Highway 30. English tends to stay at the bottom of the chart alongside the transliterated English with a bit of enhancement on the 5th ring road. However, when SA is combined with English, the frequency of the billboards jumps to a mid-point in the chart. The results indicate the highest frequency to Kuwaiti vernacular, followed by SA, and the lowest frequency to English. When English is infused with SA, its value reaches a middle ground.

4.2 Questionnaire Results

A sample of 230 respondents completed the questionnaire that was posted on the primary researcher's

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Twitter account. The sample comprised 71 male respondents and 159 female respondents, 68% of which claimed to be in their twenties, 14% in their thirties, 11% in their forties, 8% in their fifties, and 9% above sixty. A majority of 97% of the respondents are Kuwaitis. Academic-wise, the sample comprised 20% of high schoolers, 15% diploma holders, 60% bachelor holders, while only 6% were masters and Ph.D. holders.

The main part of the questionnaire was statistically analyzed using SPSS to compare the mean scores representing the respondents' attitudes towards the five selected billboards based on the language used in each. The scoring results indicate several trends across the five attributes.

4.2.1 Fun of the Languages on Billboards

As Figure 3 below shows, the overall sample scores of the different billboards indicate that the billboard with the Kuwaiti language scores the highest mean of 3.86 out of a scale of 5.00 for being fun, while the rest of the billboards scores range close to one another between 2.18-2.34, significantly lower than the billboards with Kuwaiti language. Mean scores of how the sample of the study views the billboard with the Kuwaiti script as being funnier than the rest indicates the high solidarity of the Kuwaiti dialect over the official language of the country (SA), English (despite its progressive status), the combination of both SA and English, and English transliterated into Arabic alphabet.
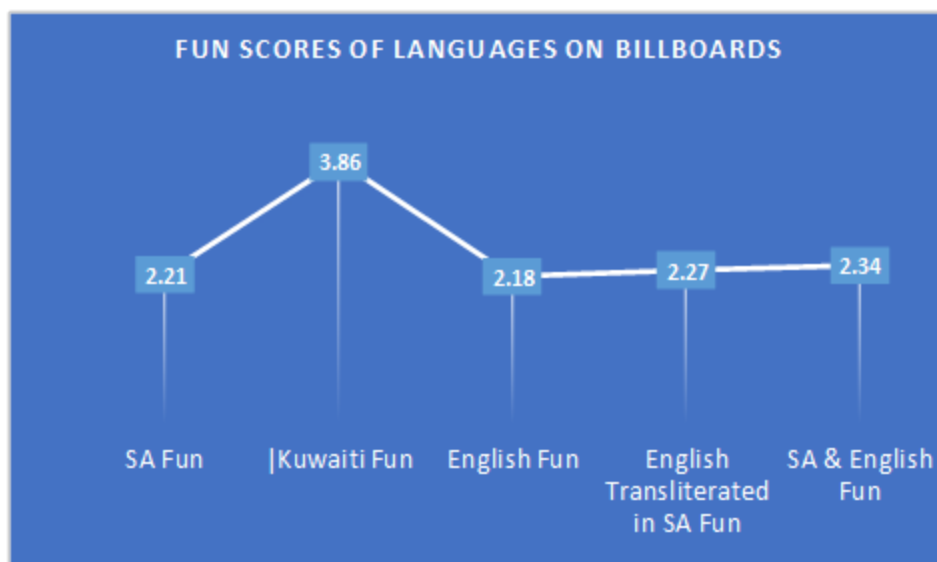

Figure 3. Respondents' Evaluation on the Feature of "*Fun*" across the Five Billboards

4.2.2 Strength of the Languages on Billboards

As for the views expressed by the sample in response to how strong they thought the language was on each billboard, the mean scores indicate an extremely high level of strength attributed to the billboard with Kuwaiti script 4.23 when compared to SA scored at its lowest level 2.71. The billboard with

English, on the other hand, seems to also be at a low level (2.93). Nevertheless, when the script on the billboard is a transliteration of English using SA orthography, the mean score rises to reach a higher level of 3.48. The mean scores reveal a high status of the Kuwaiti dialect when compared to the supposedly H variety in the country (SA). The results also suggest that English might be promoting SA to a higher status level (see Figure 4).
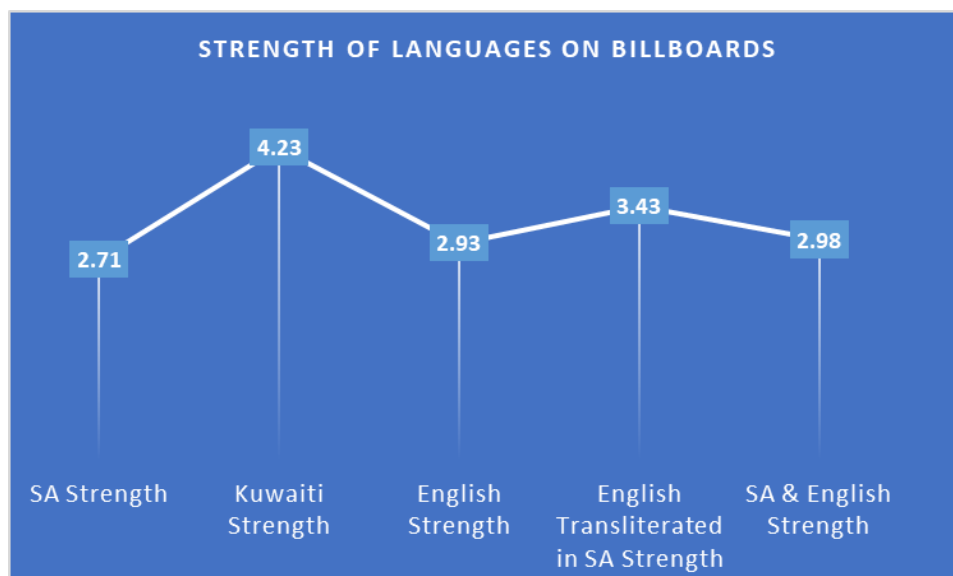

STRENGTH OF LANGUAGES ON BILLBOARDS

| SA Strength | Kuwaiti Strength | English Strength | English Transliterated in SA Strength | SA & English Strength |
| 2.71 | 4.23 | 2.93 | 3.43 | 2.98 |

Figure 4. Respondents' Evaluation on the Feature of "Strong" across the Five Billboards

4.2.3 Professionalism of the Languages on Billboards

The views of the sample on professionalism reflect unexpected low mean scores for SA (2.83) and English (2.84). The situation does not seem to get any better, neither when English is transliterated into the Arabic alphabet, nor when it is combined with English. Despite the line graph showing a downfall in professionalism for the Kuwaiti dialect, the mean score level of 2.82 tends to be within the approximation of the rest of the languages on billboards (Figure 5).
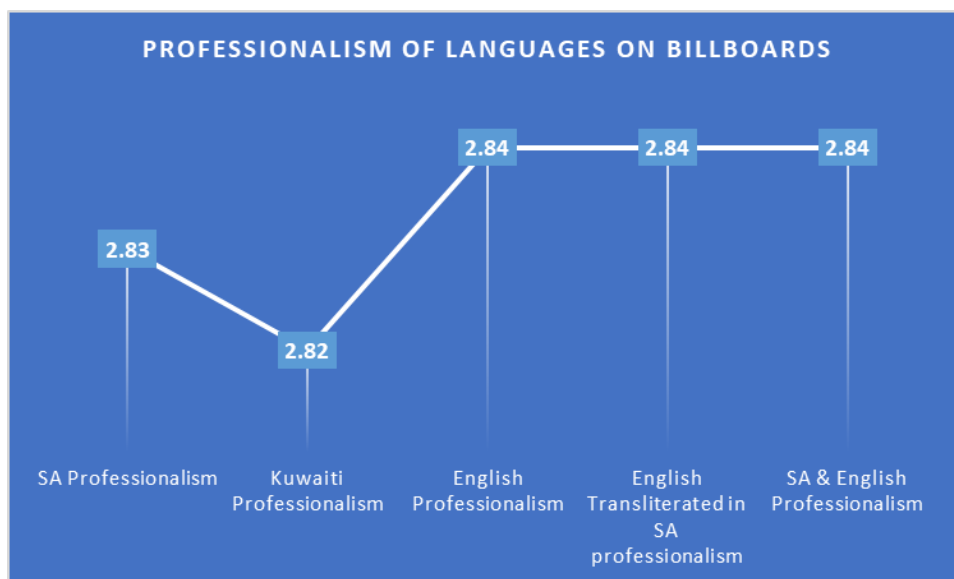
Figure 5. Respondents' Evaluation on the Feature of "*Professional*" across the Five Billboards

4.2.4 Attractiveness of Languages on Billboards

The mean scores of the attractiveness of the languages on billboards reflect the highest level reaching 4.05 for the Kuwaiti script. Both SA and English scripts score 3.07. However, when English is transliterated into the Arabic alphabet, the mean score of its attractiveness rises to reach 3.39. A slight rise is also reflected in 3.20 when SA is combined with English. The profile indicates the high status of Kuwaiti as well as an upgrade of the status of English when transliterated into SA alphabet, or when combined with English (Figure 6).
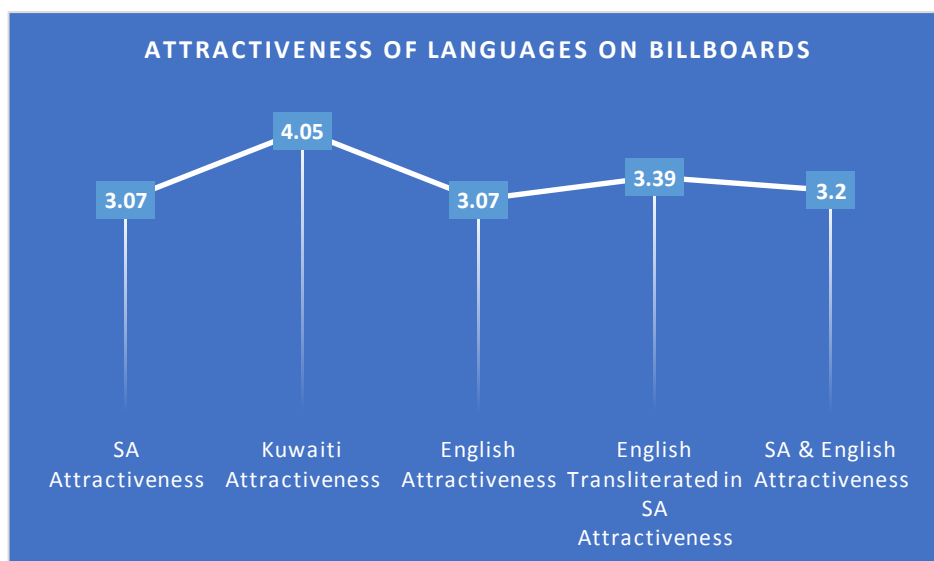

Figure 6. Respondents' Evaluation on the Feature of "*Attractive*" across the Five Billboards

4.2.5 Satisfaction of the Languages on Billboards

Results of the mean scores in relation to the sample's satisfaction with the scripts on billboards show, once again, the highest level attributed to the Kuwaiti script at an outstanding mean score of 4.86. Both SA and English score at lower levels of 3.07 and 2.97 in succession. However, when English is transliterated into Arabic, or when combined with an English script, the mean score of satisfaction tends to get upgraded to 3.4 and 3.29 successively. Once again, the results indicate more positive attitudes towards Kuwaiti than SA. Also, English seems to enhance the views of the sample towards SA when an English billboard is infused with SA (see Figure 7).
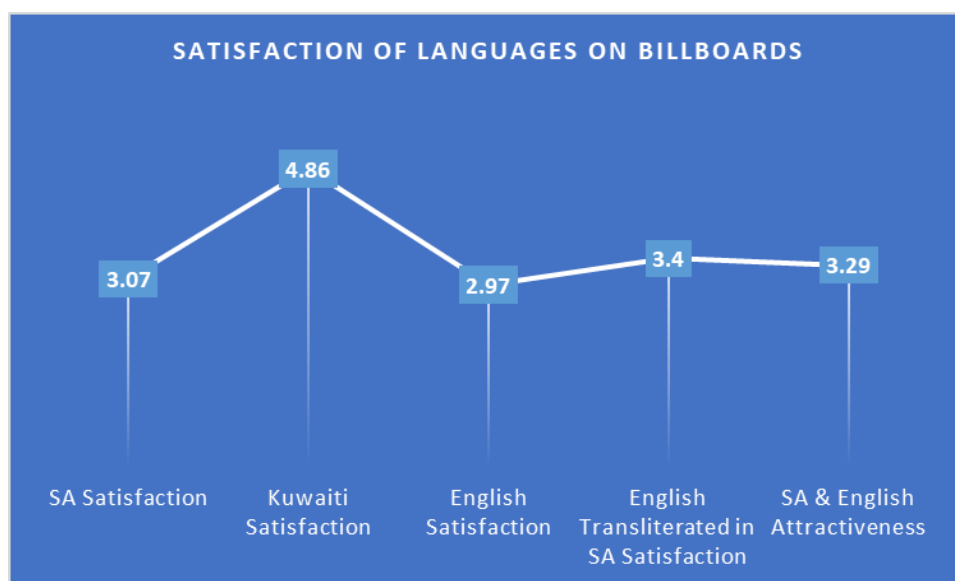

Figure 7. Respondents' Evaluation on the Feature of "*Satisfying*" across the Five Billboards

4.3 Interview Data and Results

In order to gain specialists' views and feedback on the languages utilized in the billboards, the researchers arranged for interviews with two sociolinguists in Kuwait; a 67-year-old male professor, the director of the language center at PAAET, and a 43 female assistant professor from the English Department at The College of Basic Education. Our main objective was to understand the other side of the coin involving those whose job is to preserve the languages and keep them in harmonious relationships. With the study's primary objective being the investigation of the new trend of finding Kuwaiti signs all over the streets of Kuwait, the researchers decided to expose the participants to two billboards with Kuwaiti scripts in order to ensure that the outcome would be reflecting the language variety rather than the content. The participants were also exposed to a sign with English script, and another with Standard Arabic, to explore their views on the three language varieties that tend to compete with one another within the sociolinguistic context in Kuwait.

Three key questions were used to lead the interviews:

1) What do you think of the language on each billboard?

2) Do you sense a trend of using Kuwaiti or English over the Standard Arabic in today's street billboards?

3) What could be the future consequences of billboard trends (if any) on the Kuwaiti community?

Generally speaking, the views of the participants reflected a moderate stance towards billboards with an English script, so long as a billboard of the same content is displayed in SA. The choice of proper English has also been expressed as a condition for accepting a billboard with an English script. Another point signaled the older generation's fear of the likelihood of the younger Kuwaiti generation "*losing their national identity*" as a result of the intense display of billboards with English script.

The views of the participants also reflect a strong passion for SA despite their bilingual English/Arabic status. In this regard, SA has been described as their "*glorious*", "*chic*", "*rich*", and "*genuine*" variety that should be protected by all means. The variety is not perceived to compete with English but with the local language variety, namely Kuwaiti. Being replaced by Kuwaiti even in print will result in the language losing its vitality for the future generation. After all, SA has never been a spoken variety due to the diglossic nature of Kuwait, mentioned earlier. The responses reflect the participants' strong beliefs in the importance of restoring the glory of SA while expressing their concerns about inevitable future language attrition.

The respondents seem to hold, by contrast, extremely unfavorable views of Kuwaiti vernacular when used as a script on street billboards. The language variety makes the billboard "*sound cheap*", "*tacky*" and "*vulgar*", a respondent stated. Their views reflect a strong rejection of Kuwaiti in print, not only on street billboards but also in the media.

The objection towards the use of Kuwaiti on street billboards has also been based on the variety being a minority's language. The billboards using Kuwaiti, a respondent adds, "*must be targeting only a certain type of consumer, who is trendy, wealthy, and local*". This belief indicates social discrimination against non-Kuwaitis from other Arab countries, which will eventually result in a more intense social division between Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis in the country. Another reason behind the rejection of Kuwaiti vernacular on billboards is the expressed concerns over the extensive use of the variety in print, which would likely result in gradual SA attrition, "*making Kuwaitis feel uncomfortable with reading and writing proper Standard Arabic*".

4.3.1 Moving Forward

The views expressed by the respondents have moved a step further toward resolving the linguistic dilemma in the country. The views suggest top-down measures including pressuring authorities into forming a unified language front, where the Kuwaiti dialect is not used in the media. Moreover, the interviewed participants suggested the issuing of a new protective law that enforces SA as the language of print "*to bring back the integrity of Standard Arabic*".

Alternatively, from the interviewees' point of view, bottom-up strategies should also be implemented,

in the hope that the majority of Kuwaitis "*stand united and encourage a movement away from using the Kuwaiti dialect in print*". They also believe that the Kuwaiti people should advocate completely stopping the use of other languages or language variants other than SA, not only in media but also in everyday life. This strong stance, they added, would therefore allow SA to regain its well-deserved respect.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper explored the current controversial sociolinguistic shift in the diglossic varieties used in billboards in Kuwait, thus challenging conventional norms and reinventing the community's linguistic landscape. This shift in the diglossic situation comes amidst growing concerns among governing institutions in Kuwait that advocate the preservation of Standard Arabic (SA). Furthermore, although there is a continuous agreement by the general public acknowledging the prestige and respect of SA as the H variety, the general popularity, and dominance of the Kuwaiti vernacular, which is used in print form in public spaces, seems to paint a different picture.

Descriptive statistics presented in the results of the present study demonstrate not only that Kuwaiti vernacular in scripts upstages SA and English by far, but also that the growing positive attitudes toward the spoken variety are granted high status due to its perceived charisma and promotion of solidarity. Also evident from the results, the aspects of light-heartedness and fun distinguish the billboards with Kuwaiti scripts, and to some extent SA, "only" when mixed with another language (in this case, English). In other words, similar to Van Mensen et al.'s (2016) observations, an ad in which English words are transliterated into SA orthography is much more likely to appeal to the public eye due to the creative mixing of two languages in the same ad, than an ad that simply uses SA.

Our findings reveal much more than merely the public's preferences of a particular language variety or code in public spaces. Our quantitative and qualitative data indicate an apparent and increasing discrepancy between public officials responsible for governing linguistic policy preferences, and private commercial institutions dominating the linguistic demarcation of public spaces actions, i.e., street billboards. The consequence of such a growing paradox is the constant struggle to maintain the status of SA at a national level against the rising sociolinguistic trend of valorizing the spoken Kuwaiti dialect to an extent where it became the popular choice for the language of advertising. While, clearly, companies have noticed the public's preference of the Kuwaiti dialect in ads, according to feedback from interviewees in this study (and as pointed out by Fairclough, 2001), this massive dose of exposure to daily advertising input, is bound to have high impact influencing authority not only on its intended target, the consumer, but more importantly, on the general public routinely reading the ads.

Through what advertising rhetoric calls "tickle ads" (Cook, 2001, p. 34)—ads which usually appeal to people's emotions and moods—advertisers exploit whatever linguistic strategies within their grasp to make an ad more attractive and memorable. Linguistic strategies such as utilizing common traditional

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expressions characteristically suited for casual, verbal conversation, or the use of linguistic play through the mixing of different languages on billboard ads, eventually become famous slogans automatically repeated by the public in daily conversation (Cook, 2001). Consequently, according to our findings and feedback from interviewees, advertisers deliberately play on the degree of explicit persuasion that the use of the Kuwaiti vernacular as a symbol of cultural identity achieves in establishing informality and rapport with the consumer as well as a sense of solidarity among the consumer community.

However, because of the publicness and visibility of billboard ads, it is not too difficult to observe how the language choices reflect the society's linguistic landscape (as defined by Rafael et al., 2001), which mostly displays the current status of the vernacular and the Kuwaiti public's positive attitudes and increasing values towards it. Therefore, the interesting point, in this case, is that people's linguistic values and attitudes are coerced by the conversationalization of textual public ads, a point raised earlier by Landry and Bourhis (1997). This trending sociolinguistic innovation also confirms Spolsky and Cooper's (1991) theory concerning a linguistic landscape being a symbolic entity that reveals the status and power of various groups influencing the linguistic situation in a speech community.

Typically, conflict arises when a smaller non-governing group makes language choices (usually to fulfill certain benefits, as is the case in the present context) without first negotiating them with the community's linguistic governing bodies. According to feedback from the interviewees in this study, given enough time, these linguistic choices then become dominant through explicit and routine public advertising manifestations and especially, when they are "consented' by the public masses (Simpson & Mayre, 2018, p. 3). These indirect and unofficial language choices, as a result, eventually lead to social friction primarily caused by the Kuwaiti vernacular reaching superiority over SA through the legitimization of its popularity, and hence dangerously giving rise to illiteracy in the latter language variety (Ayari, 1996). It also creates "covert ideological resistance" toward the standard variety where its linguistic functions and purposes begin to diminish while the spoken variety appears so commonsensical, that one could predict the emergence of a new written variety that uses a matrix based on the vernacular coupled with the standard variety's orthography (Walters, 1996; Van Dijk, 1998; Ervin-Tripp, 2000; Fillmore, 1996). This idea undoubtedly challenges Ferguson's (1959) views on the H variety's elevated status and its relationship with the L variety and questions whether both varieties do, in fact, always coexist in a stable and harmonious diglossic situation, as proposed.

On a different note, according to points of view proposed by informants in our interviews, the growing prestige of the Kuwaiti vernacular appears to intensify the already deep ethnic division between two groups in the community, namely: the Kuwaitis (a minority in their own country) and the non-Kuwaitis (a majority). The more the valorized Kuwaiti vernacular's presence in public spaces becomes dominant, the more marginalized the large non-Kuwaiti Arab group tends to feel, and the more prominent the division between the "us" (Kuwaitis) and the "them" (non-Kuwaitis) becomes.

It is clear that what private commercial institutions display as creative exploitation of available linguistic tools as a commercial ploy to attract the public's attention, could very well be the reason behind a linguistic disaster to the diglossic landscape in Kuwait. This is primarily because it compromises the status of SA, the official language of the Kuwaiti constitution, and the Holy Qur'an (as mentioned earlier). The seriousness of such an eminent shift in the linguistic landscape of Kuwait was the main impetus behind the present exploratory study, and it merits significant consideration and hence further research in this area.

To conclude, the present study relied on quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis of the language of billboards in Kuwait. Our findings have brought to the surface key insights reflecting the current LL of Kuwait and the widespread popularization of the vernacular (to increase solidarity) over the high status of SA (the country's official language variety). It is also important to point out that the sociolinguistic context in Kuwait is transitioning rapidly, as we have clearly shown in the present paper. Therefore, finding alternative approaches to investigate linguistic choices, especially in media (whether mass media or social media), could certainly reveal other factors at play in Kuwait's continuously shifting LL.

However, from the viewpoint of billboard advertising, it has to be borne in mind that the public ads peppered on highways and streets in Kuwait vary in theme and content. Although researchers of the present study did their best to utilize ads with neutral topics and contents, it would be somewhat unrealistic to claim the billboards' uniformity. This issue is worth keeping in mind for future research in this area. The current study could be regarded as a spark into the study of LL in Kuwait; from billboards, one could move into other contexts or platforms where advertising is very instrumental and strategic such as the case of digital ads found on the Internet, as new lines of signage would add dynamism to the field—introducing a new challenge to the researchers in the field as well as new theoretical and methodological opportunities (Gorter, 2013). Such ads are also part and parcel of the LL in a community that should be included as an important component worth exploring in future studies. Finally, including a qualitative language specialists' perspective in this context was complimenting and objective; indeed, however, it also reflected the gap between what the public wants and what the language specialists aspire; an everlasting language dilemma.

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