Transliterated brand names

[...] 97% of the respondents believed that the translations are incomprehensible in Arabic. The other 3% stated that they sometimes understand the translations. (p. 92)

Even if the sample size is rather small, these are astounding results: basically, he’s saying that the entire target population of an advertising message doesn’t get it. Small wonder that Arabic speakers often gripe about the way the Arabic language has become “infested” (Al Agha’s term; p. 82) with English. Al Agha notes that the preferred “translation” strategy in his corpus of Saudi fast-food ads is transliteration rather than translation. Transliteration is also very much in evidence elsewhere in the Arab World. Consider the following four examples. I took the first two pictures in Abu Dhabi, the third one was taken in Cairo and published by Gulf News, and I took the fourth one – surprise, surprise – in Munich.

What these signs have in common is the fact that they look bilingual but are really monolingual in two different scripts. “London Dairy” is “London Dairy” in the Roman and the Arabic script; “Igloo” is “Igloo” in the Roman and Arabic script; “Smart” is “Smart” in the Roman and Arabic script; and “McDonalds” is “McDonalds” in the Roman and Arabic script. The McDonalds sign may look monolingual but that is just because neither the Roman nor the Cyrillic versions that also grace the McDonalds outlet at Munich’s central Marienplatz fit in the picture.
Some of these transliterations fit the patterns of the Arabic language more comfortably than others but all of them can be considered loan-words and insert a foreign or exotic element into the Arabic language. Unsurprisingly, some Arabic speakers find them annoying. Al Agha claims that this type of advertising is outright “rejected by the target culture” (p. vi). I don’t know about that seeing how prevalent the practice is and how well fast-food restaurants in particular seem to be doing in the region.

Of course, the transfer of brand names from one language market to another is inherently a tricky business as the imperative to keep the brand constant in order to achieve brand recognition is in conflict with the imperative to be responsive to the specificity of the target market. Many people have heard of and had a good laugh at some of the more spectacular misnomers such as the one by Mitsubishi, who didn’t bother to check the meaning of Pajero before they introduced the car of this name to Latin America (it’s the equivalent of a four-letter word in some countries in the region) or Ford, who made the same mistake, when they introduced their Nova to Spanish-speaking markets (“no va” = “doesn’t move”). I’ve got a chapter on interlingual brand name bloopers in my PhD thesis, which is available from our Resources Section. However, infelicities such as these are really those of an older, less sophisticated era of advertising – certainly before the advent of diversity marketing. The “multi-scripted” (is that the term for the phenomenon?) rendition of the “McDonald’s” name in Munich is the most obvious example of the strategy I have collected to date: an obvious attempt to signal diversity symbolically by one of the most homogeneous corporations in the world.

Unlike large US brands such as McDonald’s who may seek to symbolically distance themselves from all forms of hegemony, including linguistic hegemony, in order to be able to do “hegemonic business,” small local shops such as the “Smart” tailor in Cairo still bank on the cache of English in order to attract customers.
Frontpage of the IT section of the Jam-e Jam newspaper, Iran

One of the reasons I mostly dislike transliterated brand-names is that they are so obviously fake. Scratch the surface of these “multilingual” signs a tiny bit and all that is beneath it is English monolingualism. However, I also have (one!) example of a very sophisticated multi-scripted brand name in my corpus! This one comes not from the Arab world but from Iran: the name of the IT section of the Iranian newspaper Jam-e Jam is “click.” “Click” is much more than a simple transliteration as the word can be read both ways: read from right-to-left, you get “click” in the Arabic script; read from left-to-right, you get “click” in the Roman script. Multilingual creativity at its best!

Anyone got examples of transliterated brand names and advertising? I’m always on the look-out to increase my collection

Al Agha, Basem Abbas (2006). The translation of fast-food advertising texts from English into Arabic Unpublished MA dissertation, University of South Africa