

Banal cosmopolitanism

By Ingrid Pillar | October 31, 2017 | Globalization

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Have you recently seen a “welcome” sign? They constitute a strange genre: ever more ubiquitous on the one hand, yet utterly false and insincere – how can you be “greeted” by a piece of stuff? – on the other.

Whenever I see one of these “welcome” signs, I am reminded of an anecdote told by a colleague who had travelled in Japan in the 1970s: he had visited Japan for an academic conference and added a few days of sightseeing. For the latter, he had rented a car to drive around the countryside. It was the days before GPS and mobile phones and satellite tracking; all he had was an old-fashioned paper map. The map had all the place names in the Latin script while the signs he saw next to the road were all in Japanese. Illiterate in Japanese, he had no way of matching a name on the map with a name on a sign.



Multilingual “Welcome” sign in a shopping mall in Munich, Germany

Sure enough, he got lost. Because some signs had the place name in both Japanese and Latin scripts, he just kept on driving in the hope of finding such a bilingual sign to regain his bearings. To his mounting frustration, the only non-Japanese signs he encountered for a long time said: “Welcome!” He knew he was “welcome” but he didn’t know where – or even what – it was he was welcomed to ...

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A similar story is unlikely to happen today. Not only because of the advent of GPS and Google maps but also because directional signage outside the Anglophone world and particularly in countries that do not use the Latin script has become bilingual and largely follows the Vienna Convention on Road Signs and Signals. Article 14 stipulates that “The inscription of words on informative signs [...] in countries not using the Latin alphabet shall be both in the national language and in the form of a transliteration into the Latin alphabet reproducing as closely as possible the pronunciation in the national language.” As more and more countries have become



Multilingual “Welcome” sign in a heritage village in Abu Dhabi, UAE

signatories mono-script directional signage outside the mono-script world have largely become a thing of the past.



Multilingual “Welcome” sign in a shopping mall in Los Angeles, California

In fact, it is not only directional signage that has become bi- or multilingual but the same is true of “welcome” signs, which must be one of the most multilingual genres on the planet.

Any self-respecting institution today says “welcome” multilingually in a show of banal cosmopolitanism.

“Banal cosmopolitanism” is based off the much better-known concept of “[banal nationalism](#)”, a frequent topic here on *Language on the Move*. Banal nationalism refers to the mundane discourses – flags, maps, national references, etc. – that enact national belonging in everyday life. Similarly, banal cosmopolitanism refers to mundane discourses that enact globalization in everyday life. Banal cosmopolitanism is apparent in the “mediatization and consumption of spatially distant places, signifiers of cultural diversity, and opening up of lifestyles to new experiential spaces and horizons” (Jaworski, 2015, p. 220).

One linguistic form that banal cosmopolitanism may take is the excessive use of new letterforms, punctuation marks, diacritics, and tittles, as Adam Jaworski shows in a 2015 paper entitled “Globalese.” Their use, particularly in brand and shop names, serves to create “novel, foreignized, visual-linguistic forms increasingly detached from their ‘original’ ethno-national languages” (p. 217). Detached from their national and local linguistic context, they point to somewhere else, somewhere in the realm of the global.



English “Welcome” graffiti in Ramsar, Iran

Multilingual “welcome” signs are another such mundane index of globalization and banal cosmopolitanism. Multilingual “welcome” signs feature prominently in consumption spaces – as the examples from shopping malls show and tourist destinations show. However, they are not exclusive to those and are increasingly popular also in universities and similar institutional spaces that want to mark themselves as internationalized, diverse and inclusive.

That all this indexing of cosmopolitanism is indeed “banal” and only runs skin deep is best exemplified by those multilingual “welcome” signs that get one or more of their versions wrong. And I don’t mean home-made signs in developing countries that get their English spelling wrong. What I mean are huge signs professionally produced on durable materials that scream “welcome” in dozens of languages – certainly more languages than the designers of the sign could master or could be bothered to verify the translation for.

The versions that go wrong most frequently are those that use right-to-left scripts.

If a designer gets the Arabic and Persian translation of “Welcome” from Google Translate and then copies and pastes it into a selection of other translations, their word processor is likely to re-order the letters from left to right; as happened in this sign at the University of Limerick.

As a result of this linguistically-uninformed process, the Persian version, for instance, which should be “خوش آمدید” is scrambled to read something like the equivalent of “emoclew”; a line later (2nd before last), half of the word, “آمدید” has been repeated, leaving a truncated version similar to “come”; again scrambled to actually spell something like “emoc”.

Examples such as these are not at all rare: [in a previous post, we featured an apron that combines both banal nationalism and banal cosmopolitanism in one item and where the Arabic version of “Australia” is spelled backwards.](#)



Multilingual “Welcome” sign, University of Limerick, Ireland

So who are the recipients of these multilingual “welcome” signs? The signs are intended to send a message of cosmopolitanism, internationalization, diversity and inclusion – but it’s a message that is intended for the

dominant population so that they can feel good about themselves. If a reader were not to speak English ^ ʔ multilingual “welcome” featured here are just as useful as they were to the driver lost in the Japan. And if you are a reader of one of the languages that come in the garbled version, it’s adding insult to injury.

Correction: An earlier version of this post stated that the University of Limerick’s “Welcome” sign was intended to welcome members of an international conference devoted to multilingualism. That was incorrect. Attendees of that conference posed beneath the banner and shared it on social media – that’s how I came across the image – but the banner was not associated with the conference.



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Reference

Jaworski, A. (2015). Globalese: A New Visual-Linguistic Register. *Social Semiotics*, 25(2), 217-235. doi: 10.1080/10350330.2015.1010317

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