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## Exploring Linguistic Aspects in Iranians' Graffiti

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### Abstract

There is a great range of graffiti created with variety of intentions and purposes. Graffiti as a significant linguistic event have been viewed as a source of data including linguistic studies of discourse patterns and grammar which have attracted a number linguistics researchers' attention. The study is based on the hypothesis that graffiti, as a linguistic landscape, use specific features of language and seeks to gain an insight into linguistic peculiarities involved into graffiti writing. The data for this article consisted of two hundred written documentations in the context of Iran. In order to determine how many of gleaned data entail the linguistic peculiarities and specify the number of each peculiarity, the researcher has applied Hall's (1980) fifteen processes in defining linguistic features on graffiti. The results revealed abundant linguistic aspects in the collected graffiti. Findings of the present study showed that linguistic features existed in 78 graffiti and in 3 cases, two linguistic features of graffiti were found. Among all graffiti entailing linguistic features, dialogues were the most frequent linguistic peculiarity involved into graffiti writing and punning on re-division of words and implication of questions with no legitimate answers are the least frequent ones.

**Keywords:** graffiti, linguistic landscape, linguistic peculiarities, dialogue graffiti

### INTRODUCTION

The word "graffiti" exists for centuries but its implication in English language as a specialized term is rather recent. According to Longman Dictionary, word graffiti is defined as being rooted in Italian "Graffiare" that widely known "to make marks on a surface" at any point of history. Rychlicky (2008) also refers to 'graffiti' as plural form of an Italian word 'graffito', picture scratched on a surface. Contemporary graffiti, whether

as an expressive social and public form or an art or a crime, is complex practice (Halsey and Young, 2006) that like many other communicative conventions reflect the complex contemporary social aspects of the society at anywhere that could be marked (Phillips 1999). In the society is a great range of graffiti, created with specific intentions and purposes. The “hidden aspects of graffiti culture”, according to Halsey and Young, are as follow: The complex of motivation for graffiti writing; The sense of cultural belonging graffiti can generate for young people; The shifting threshold between ‘art’ and ‘vandalism’; Writers’ reaction to ‘blank’ surfaces and ‘clean’ spaces; Graffiti’s interconnection with other criminal activities. They also outline the following motivations: -aesthetical appeal of graffiti; -opportunity of social interaction; -powerful emotional and physical sensations in the act of writing (e.g. pride, pleasure, recognition obtained from writing community, etc.); political events (pp. 276-279).

Webster (2009) argues that Halliday’s Systemic Functional Theory prepares the handle we need to realize texts as intentional acts of meaning. This theory views language as a social semiotic, a resource people use to accomplish their aims by expressing meanings in context (Halliday, 1985a). Halliday (2009) writes that it is always difficult to gain and keep a balanced perspective on language because one constantly has to shift one’s depth of focus, advocating a broader understanding of language, seeing it as an autonomous intellectual game, whose goal should be to describe the grammatical resources available in language for making meaning. A language as our primary tool of thought and perception is more than just a means of communication. It is a map, a reality representation and an evolutionary device that has made the people’s cultural identity possible with the best of its artistic and social modes of expressions. (Munoz & Calvo, 2008). Labov (2001) also believes Languages are constantly changing, sometimes into entirely new varieties of speech and this changing leads to subtle differences in how we present ourselves to others. Nowadays languages appear in advertisements and commercials, names of buildings, streets and shops, instructions and warning signs and cyber space, in short, surround us everywhere. Graffiti is situated between visual and verbal expression too. Some researchers tend to investigate graffiti as a mode of linguistic communication within a community setting. Gross et al. (1997) argued that graffiti is a linguistic phenomenon, which involves both “form and content” by commonly making use of discourse – “any segment of signs larger than a sentence,” and signs – something which “stands for something other than itself”. In order to understand graffiti as a mode of communication, it is inadequate to purely find the texts without identifying graffiti as a medium. So modern graffiti integrates stratified levels of linguistic and artistic to express its messages of communication (Hanauer, 2004). Though illegal, graffiti writings and drawings are a fact that should be dealt with as they reflect different reactions; this paper tries to introduce graffiti with linguistic codes.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Graffiti refer to writings or drawings scribbled, scratched or sprayed on every surface and ranges from comments scrawled on bathroom walls to massive mural. Those rapidly moved from the streets into subways, covering entire cars of metro trains. Consequently, increasing

desire to produce larger, visually unique pieces, as well as upraising competitive character of an activity, caused formation of group work (Deal Cia, 1998). Graffiti as a “human product” considering either criminal or illness of society or artistic activity is a “form of human communication”, which can be interpreted, analyzed and comprehended (Gross & Gross, 1997). Concisely, to quote Halsey and Young (2006), it is widespread myth that process of graffiti writing leads to other. In hands of some youngsters, graffiti was utilized for tagging and sometimes to protest the government. Although graffiti is broadly used by government to present ideological issues and, by advertising agencies as advertising tool, monitoring and examination of academic documentations together with mainstream media representation of graffiti practice, display that view of graffiti writing as an act of vandalism seems to predominates among different segments of society, and thus turning into conventional notion.

For the last decades, the study of graffiti has appealed researchers to many disciplines such as Geography, Psychology, Linguistics, Law enforcement, Cultural studies, History, Art, Communication and Sociology (Pietrosanti, 2010). Research on visual language use has grown to an emerging discipline under the term “Linguistic Landscape (LL)” that is a relatively recent one. Today, this term has a wide definition, including the widest variety of forms and modes of visual language use (e.g. Shohamy & Gorter, 2009) and may serve important informational and symbolic functions (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). These days, sociolinguists do not just walk around the world carrying field notebooks and sound recording equipment, there has been a growing interest amongst researchers in sociolinguistics and other areas of applied linguistics in the ‘linguistic landscape’ (Blommaert, 2012), which involves all the linguistic in the public sphere includes any written sign found outside private homes, from road signs to names of streets shops and schools (Shohamy & Barni, 2010). Studies of LL are concerned with language in its written form; LL refers to language that is visible and salience to all in the public and on commercial signs in a specified region (Gorter, 2006) and according to this, actually graffiti, material manifestations, are so called linguistic landscape. The dynamic field of LL attempts to understand the motives, uses, ideologies, language varieties and contestations of multiple forms of ‘languages’ as they are displayed in public spaces.

As the term implies, the linguistic approach is based on the language used in each graffito and the way the wall writer applies that language and thus linguistic analysis is best when used with contextual information from the community where the graffito was located (Gadsby, 1995). Graffiti is viewed as a source of data that includes linguistic studies of discourse patterns and grammar. It also with lexical codes and appreciating them is a communication process starting by the addresser, i.e., graffiti writer, and received by the addressee, i.e., the public (Jakobson 1960). Between these two extremes, meaning is construed through several steps and interactions. One of the most interesting linguistic studies was done by Grider (1975). The study deals with the cultural and linguistic use of the term *con safos* or the initials C.S. around individuals’ tags and public graffiti as a form of protection for their writings within the community. Hall (1980) believes there are number of processes involved into language

modifications through graffiti. He focuses on a variety of process that in the next sections, collected graffiti will be analyzed based on these processes.

There is a large body of undisputable studies on graffiti which ascertain significance of graffiti in terms of its visual communicative properties by linguistic and graphical signs or combination of both. For instance Kalerante (2006) in paper "*Graffiti as a Form of Social and Cultural Conflict: The Greek Case*", emphasizes on this issue. On the other hand, Hanauer (2004) argues that graffiti has been investigated as a mode of linguistic communication within a community to realize the discourse resources present and their ramifications within a specific community setting. Halliday's SFL theory (1994) also explains language in terms of the functions that language evolved to serve. In short, he states that particular aspects of a given context (such as the topics discussed, the language users and the medium of communication) define the meanings likely to be expressed and the language likely to be used to express those meanings.

Graffiti take several forms in Iran: a) pictorial, b) written, and c) a combination of both of them. According to all above, this study focuses on the second form, lexical graffiti where texts can reflect linguistic features. Texts of such graffiti, however, fall into Persian categories. According to hypothesis that graffiti use specific features of language, this study focused on Linguistic discipline in graffiti and attempted to answer the following research question:

- How would Linguistic aspects be reflected in Iranians graffiti?

## **METHOD**

### **Materials**

As it mentioned in introduction, there is a great range of graffiti which are created with specific intentions and purposes and for this reason, the study of graffiti has attracted researchers to many disciplines including Linguistics. As discussed earlier, the standards specified for the graffiti to be analyzed are that the graffiti: i) has linguistic codes, ii) is in Persian. Hall, Jr. (1980) states linguistic peculiarities were involved into graffiti writing and defines linguistic features on graffiti. For determining how many of all graffiti contain these linguistic peculiarities and how many frequency of each peculiarity is, 200 graffiti written and scratched on the surface of any public and private property were collected from common context of Iranian society.

### **Procedures**

To illustrate graffiti with linguistic peculiarities, in accordance with Hall's processes in defining linguistic features on graffiti, Following bellow are several examples of linguistic peculiarities involved into graffiti writing (in Hall, 1980, pp. 235-238):

- Phonological processes (e.g., alteration of vowel, alteration of consonant, homonymy, pun on variant senses of the same word, etc.)

- Morphemic processes (e.g., words are altered in accordance with their roots and affixes)
- punning on re-division of words;
- Most productive syntactic pattern in graffiti begins with "Help...", "Due to..." and "In memory of..." (e.g., "Help! I'm slowly being bored to death", "Due to a lack of originality this desk has been canceled", "In memory of those who died while waiting for their TV set to brake")
- Alteration of already existing expressions (e.g., original: "Old soldiers never die, they just fade away", alteration: "Old soldiers never die; young one does")
- Graffiti based on reader's expectation of parallel syntax (e.g., "It's normally warmer in the summer than in the country")
- Implication of questions with no legitimate answers (e.g., "Did Adam and Eve have belly buttons?")
- Conditional patterns (e. g., "Would you be more careful if it was YOU that got pregnant?")
- patterning after political slogans, protests against trials of political activities, or mocking of election slogans (e. g., "Shriver for something", "Free Huey-and Dewey and Louie")
- Graffiti based on types of common expressions (e. g., "In case of emergency-Panic!")
- Negative admonitions and affirmative exhortations (e. g., "DO NOT WRITE ON THIS DESK!!!!!!!!", "Let's put some life into our funerals")
- Dialogues graffiti (planned or spontaneous)
- Common expressions are put at the end (e. g., "Vasectomy means never having to say you're sorry")
- broadening scope of an original expression (e.g., "Breathing is habit forming")
- narrowing scope of original expression (e. g., Hire the morally handicapped")

All 200 graffiti were analyzed according to Hall's processes and then specified these linguistic elements on which graffiti were applied and number of each peculiarity thereto the most and the least frequent one appointed. The following analysis better demonstrates how linguistic codes work with the Iranians graffiti. The results of the analysis would be presented in the next section.

## RESULTS

Graffiti texts appeared to be written using various languages. The examples of these fifteen variables are presented briefly in the next sections. Dialogues graffiti has the

highest frequency among all linguistic peculiarities. The occurrence of this linguistic peculiarity is 35.

### Phonological processes

In this example ن in Persian has been changed to ب and with this alteration of consonant, the meaning of sentence is opposed.

"لطفاً در این مکان سیگار نکشید" (1)

"Don't smoke-you place this in please"

(no smoking here)

"لطفاً در این مکان سیگار بکشید"

"Smoke-you place this in please"

(Smoking is permitted in this place)

This example consists of a deliberate confusion of similar words or phrases for humorous. "ماست" here means "is on our side" but different sense of this word is deliberately confused. ماست is from fermented dairy products and these productions are available in groceries. By considering another meaning in first sentence, ماست instead of "is on our side" is considered as fermented dairy product, furthermore, for humorous in second graffiti is said that god is available.

"خدا با ماست" (2)

"Is- us with god"

(God is on our side)

"خدا موجود است"

"Is available god"

(God is available)

### Morphemic processes

Morphemic analysis is a strategy used to determine or infer the meanings of words by examining their meaningful parts (prefixes, suffixes, roots, etc.). A root word is the base of a word after all affixes are removed. This example was found in a university's class, graffiti writer just has followed structure of other words like "جا مدادی" "pencil case" or "جا کلیدی" "key ring" and made new word "جا استادی" by putting a base (or morpheme, here is استاد) between two other morphemes. It seems that this new word was made only for humorous.

"جا استادی" (3)

"Professor place"

(Professor's desk)

This example not only shows phonological change (like example (1) ن in Persian has been changed to ب and with this alteration of consonant, the meaning of sentence is opposed) but also contains a morphemic change. By substituting morpheme خوب instead of morpheme بد the meaning of the sentence is opposed.

(4) "خراب بشه از بس شهر بدیه"

"Bad-is city because of become-it destroy"

(I hope this city to torn down because of being so bad)

"خراب نشه از بس شهر خوبیه"

"Good-is city because of don't become-it destroy"

(I hope this city not to torn down because of being so good)

### Alteration of already existing expressions

From the cradle to grave is a proverb. This proverb is as "ز گهواره تا گور دانش بجوی" in Persian. But as example below بیخیال (come on) is replaced instead of دانش بجوی (gain knowledge)

(5) "ز گهواره تا گور بیخیال"

"Come on grave to crib from"

(Come on from the cradle to grave)

In the following example, true expression has been "تو به بزرگی خودت ببخش" (Forgive for the sake of your big character) but کوچیکی (small character) is replaced instead of بزرگی (big character).

(6) "تو به کوچیکی خودت ببخش"

"Forgive yourself smallness to you"

(Forgive for the sake of your small character)

### Graffiti based on reader's expectation of parallel syntax

Syntax is the study of the structure of phrases, sentences and language set of rules that govern how words are combined. "با" (with) and "پا" (foot) have parallel syntax.

(7) "حفر چاه دستی"

"Manual well excavation"

(Manually excavation of well)

"حفر با پا"

"Foot with excavation"

(Excavation with using foot)



### Conditional patterns

"اگر عشق ایستادن سر کوچه است پس تیربرق عاشق ترین است" (8)

"Is the most lover lamppost thus is top alley standing love if"

(If love is standing on the top of alley, the lamppost is the most lover person)

### Patterning after political slogans, protests against trials of political activities, or mocking of election slogans

"مرگ بر شاه" (9)

"Shah to death"

(Death to Shah)

"ایران ایرانستان شد" (10)

"Became full of Iran Iran"

(Iran became full of Iran)

### Graffiti based on types of common expressions

Darband is a village at north of Tehran. Surrounded by the mountains, Darband has a suitable climate all year round. It's a perfect option to escape from the city life and spend some time in nature. For this reason, it is known as a recreational place. In following example writer based on his knowledge about this, used Darband only humorously.

"بی وفا کجا میری؟" (11)

"Going-you where fair-weather?"

(Where are you fair-weather going?)

"در بند"

(Darband)

### Negative admonitions and affirmative exhortations

"توکل به خدا" (trust on to god) and "ناامید نشو" (don't desperate) in the following example are affirmative exhortation:

"توکل به خدا، انشاءالله پیدا میشه، ناامید نشو" (12)

"Don't desperate-you will be found-it better luck, trust on to god"

(Better luck it will be found, don't desperate and trust on to god)

"دعوا نکنید" (don't argue) is a negative admonition in example below:

(13) "دعوا نکنید همه جای ایران سرای من است"

"Is I home Iran all anywhere don't quarrel"

(don't argue, all places in Iran is my home)

### Dialogues graffiti

Example (11) is planned dialogue graffiti. More examples are shown below. Example (15) contains 23 spontaneous dialogue graffiti but 6 graffiti of them are brought in:

(14) "بریم تو؟"

"Inside go-we"

(Do we go inside?)

"نه بابا ول کن تو لاتی"

"Scoundrel- you you forget it-you come on"

(Come on, forget it! You are scoundrel)

(15) "حالم بهم می خوره از این خراب شده کی میشه تموم بشه بریم شهر خودمون"

(I'm getting sick and tired of this cheap garbage. When does it finish and we will come back our city?)

"خودت تموم بشی آشغال"

Crap die-you yourself" (You yourself die, crap!)

"مجبورت نکردن اینجا بمونی برو گمشو"

"Get out the way stay-you here don't have to- you- they"

(Get out the way; nobody forces you stay here!)

"خراب بشه از بس شهر بدیه"

"Bad-is city because of become-it destroy"

(I hope this city to torn down because of being so bad)

"خراب نشه از بس شهر خوبیه"

"Good-is city because of don't become-it destroy"

"دعوا نکنید همه جای ایران سرای من است"

"Is I home Iran all anywhere don't quarrel"

( don't argue, all places in Iran is my home)

### Common expressions are put at the end

In the following example, there is definition of charge card:

"کارت بلیط کارت شارژی است که موقع سوار شدن جلوی چشم الکترونیکی گرفته به جای دادن بلیط" (16)

"Ticket giving instead of caught electric eye in front of getting in while that is charge card ticket card"

(Charge card is a card has been put in front of electric eye while getting on the bus instead of giving ticket to driver)

### Broadening scope of an original expression

"محکوم به زندگی" (17)

"Life to condemned"

(Condemned to living)

"شاید فردایی نباشد"

"Not be tomorrow perhaps"

(Perhaps there would not be a tomorrow)

### Narrowing scope of original expression

"لعنت بر پدر و مادر کسی که در این محل آشغال بریزد" (18)

"Litter- he place this at who mother and father on god damn"

(God damn parents of everybody litters here)

"حتی پوست تخمه؟"

"Seed pod even"

(Even seed pod?)

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

According to Halliday (1985), Language is a systematic resource for expressing meaning in context and linguistics. His theory is the study of how people exchange meanings through the use of language. This view of language as a system for meaning potential implies that language must be studied in different contexts such as professional settings, classrooms, and language tests. Graffiti are a linguistic phenomenon that exists in public sphere and thus a kind of systematic resource for expressing meaning. Iran is undoubtedly a country full of written graffiti with different purposes and as noted, the present study sought to examine the linguistic peculiarities involved into Iranians' graffiti writing according to Hall's processes (1980). The collected data were analyzed to specifying 15 linguistic peculiarities in graffiti. Findings revealed that planed or

spontaneous dialogues graffiti had the highest frequency and punning on re-division of words, productive syntactic pattern in graffiti that begins with "Help...", "Due to "and "In memory of...", Implication of questions with no legitimate answers had the least occurrences with 0 frequency. The linguistic impression on data gathered leads to following results in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Quantitative Analysis Linguistic graffiti peculiarities involved into graffiti writing

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Phonological processes	12
Morphemic processes	2
Punning on re-division of words	0
Productive syntactic pattern in graffiti begins with "Help...", "Due to "and "In memory of..."	0
Alteration of already existing expressions	6
Graffiti based on reader's expectation of parallel syntax	5
Implication of questions with no legitimate answers	0
Conditional patterns	1
patterning after political slogans, protests against trials of political activities, or mocking of election slogans	3
Graffiti based on types of common expressions	5
Negative admonitions and affirmative exhortations	6
Dialogues graffiti	35
Common expressions are put at the end	2
Broadening scope of an original expression	2
Narrowing scope of original expression	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>81</b>

Researcher can conclude from this study that among groups of graffiti covering surface of a wall, there were dialogues between two individuals or more. These graffiti mostly converted to conversation without aforethought intentions. Data revealed that most graffiti with the least changes, for instance due to pun on variant senses of the same word and alteration of a consonant or morpheme had been aroused just for humor. In some cases, graffiti provoked other people. They tried to oppose the statement with use of alteration and thus bragging was continuing. Briefly, language used in each graffiti and contextual information from the Iran's community showed the way the wall writer applies his language.

The findings of this research study can help discourse analysts and sociolinguists in discourse studies by analyzing language use in society. Also, it can contribute to translators, interpreters, and political analysts by familiarizing them with cultural aspects of language. However, further research can be done in a larger corpora from different contexts in order to compare the findings.

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