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When Meaning Is Not Enough: Cultural, Phonological, and Semiotic Constraints in Arabic-English Trademark Translation

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ABSTRACT: Trademark translation between Arabic and English in Saudi Arabia is not a routine act of lexical transfer but a high-stakes form of cross-cultural brand mediation. Even where denotational meaning is preserved, brand value can be weakened by phonological mismatch (unlicensed consonants, stress patterns, syllable structures), script-direction effects on visual salience, and semiotic interference (unintended indexical meanings, prestige/register shifts, taboo adjacency, or religious sensitivity). This article develops a theory-dense account of Arabic-English trademark translation by modelling it as multi-constraint optimisation rather than equivalence. We propose a constraint framework-the Cultural-Phonological-Semiotic (CPS) model-in which successful brand-name transfer maximises (i) cultural acceptability, (ii) phonological fit and processability, and (iii) semiotic coherence with brand positioning and category cues, under the additional requirements of legal distinctiveness and consumer trust. Using a curated dataset of thirty Saudi-market trademark pairs (Arabic/English forms used on packaging, storefronts, or apps) and an expanded bank of constructed examples to isolate specific mechanisms, we show why literal translation often produces semantic dilution and register drift, while pure transliteration can introduce unintended meanings or weak memorability. We then derive innovative strategies that move from “translation” to brand-oriented transcreation: hybrid semantic-phonetic blends, culturally filtered naming, semiotic mapping of associative fields, consumer-tested validation, and bounded AI-assisted screening for semantic and reputational risk. The contribution to translation theory is threefold: (1) it specifies the translation unit as a brand sign rather than a word, (2) it operationalises semiotic constraints (iconic, indexical, symbolic) as design-relevant criteria, and (3) it formalises trademark translation as constraint satisfaction in which trade-offs can be justified and empirically tested.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Saudi market, trademarks routinely cross scripts. Arabic marks are rendered in Latin characters for export packaging, investment documents, and English-language interfaces, while global English-language marks are localised into Arabic for storefront visibility, app icons, product labels, and consumer reassurance. Yet many such transfers are still treated as “translation” in the narrow sense-an attempt to preserve denotational meaning (Nida, 1964; Baker, 1992). This framing is inadequate. A trademark is not simply a lexical sign; it is a commercial semiotic device that must remain recognisable, pronounceable, culturally acceptable, and legally distinctive, while also indexing a coherent brand personality (Aaker, 1997;

Keller, 1993; Kapferer, 2012). In bilingual markets, a name's value is produced as much by sound symbolism, visual form, and social meaning as by dictionary semantics (Mick, 1986; Klink, 2000; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

The Arabic-English direction is particularly constraint-heavy. The two languages differ sharply in phoneme inventory and phonotactics (Watson, 2002; Ryding, 2005). English /p/ and /v/ are often adapted in Arabic through /b/ and /f/ (e.g., "Panda" → بنده), while Arabic pharyngeals and emphatics (ع, ح, ص, ط, ظ) have no direct English equivalents and can destabilise pronunciation and spelling conventions in Latin script (Holes, 2004). Script directionality and letterform aesthetics create further divergence: Arabic's connected cursive forms can increase perceived ornamentation and authenticity, whereas Latin script can signal global modernity; both effects shape semiotic interpretation (Coulmas, 2003; Kelly-Holmes, 2005).

Beyond linguistic factors, Saudi market norms impose cultural constraints. Names may drift into unintended religious resonance, taboo adjacency, or register mismatch when translated literally (Venuti, 1995; Nord, 1997). Conversely, phonetic transliteration can import problematic associations or simply feel cognitively "hard" in the target language, reducing processing fluency and recall (Reber, Schwarz & Winkielman, 2004; Yorkston & Menon, 2004). Finally, trademark decisions must pass through legal filters: distinctiveness, avoidance of confusion, and compliance with consumer protection rules (Beebe, 2004; WIPO, 2013).

This article asks: Why do meaning-preserving translations fail as trademarks? What systematic constraints govern Arabic-English brand-name transfer in Saudi Arabia? And how can translation studies contribute a theory and workflow that brand owners and translators can apply without reducing naming to intuition? We address these questions by developing a constraint model that integrates translation theory, phonology, and semiotics. We then ground the model using a curated set of real Saudi-market trademark pairs and an expanded bank of constructed examples that isolate specific mechanisms and trade-offs.

Our argument is that trademark translation should be theorised as multi-constraint optimisation. The resulting framework—the Cultural-Phonological-Semiotic (CPS) model—treats successful transfer as the outcome of balancing three interacting constraint families, rather than matching meanings. This approach aligns with functionalist translation theories (Reiss & Vermeer, 1984; Vermeer, 1989) but specifies what "function" means for trademarks: the production of recognisable sign-value under cultural and phonological constraints. The contribution is theoretical (a formal model) and practical (a decision workflow and an example-driven diagnostic).

2. BACKGROUND: TRADEMARK TRANSLATION AT THE INTERSECTION OF TRANSLATION STUDIES, BRANDING, AND SEMIOTICS

Translation studies provides several lenses relevant to brand names, but none alone fully captures trademark constraints. Equivalence-based traditions treat translation as a relation between source and target meanings (Catford, 1965; Koller, 1995). Functionalist approaches shift attention to purpose and audience effect: a translation is "adequate" if it fulfils the intended function in the target context (Reiss & Vermeer, 1984; Nord, 1997). Descriptive approaches emphasise norms and regularities within socio-cultural systems (Toury, 1995). For trademarks, these insights are necessary but under-specified: "function" is not merely communicative but commercial and semiotic, and norms are shaped by market psychology and law as much as by literary or institutional systems.

Branding research shows why names matter. Brand equity is partly the cumulative value of mental associations held by consumers (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Names provide category cues, personality cues, and affective signals that influence evaluation and recall (Keller, Heckler & Houston, 1998; Schmitt, 1999). Even subtle phonetic features can bias perceptions through sound symbolism and processing fluency: certain vowel and consonant patterns are associated with size, speed, softness, or premium quality (Klink, 2000; Lowrey & Shrum, 2007; Yorkston & Menon, 2004). In bilingual markets, these cues can be disrupted or re-mapped in translation.



Figure 1: Selected bilingual trademarks in the Saudi market (illustrative)

Semiotics clarifies the problem: a trademark is a sign operating simultaneously at symbolic, indexical, and iconic levels. In Peircean terms, the symbolic dimension concerns conventional meaning; the indexical dimension concerns social and contextual associations; and the iconic dimension concerns resemblance or felt qualities, including visual and phonesthetic features (Peirce, 1931-1958; Eco, 1976). Marketing semiotics extends this view to brand value: the brand is a system of signs that organises cultural meaning in the marketplace (Mick, 1986; Oswald, 2012). Translation, then, is not merely substituting words but re-engineering sign relations in another language and script.

Arabic-English transfer intensifies these semiotic concerns because script is itself a cultural sign. Writing systems carry social meanings and shape perception (Coulmas, 2003). In the linguistic landscape-storefronts, billboards, packaging-script choice can index prestige, globality, authenticity, or modernity (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Backhaus, 2007; Blommaert, 2013). In Saudi retail spaces, Latin script can signal international quality or cosmopolitan identity, while Arabic can signal heritage, trust, and local belonging. When a brand is rendered into the other script, these indexical values may shift-sometimes strategically, sometimes accidentally.

The legal dimension is inseparable from the semiotic dimension. Trademark law regulates signs in commerce, and scholars have argued that trademark doctrine can be illuminated through semiotic analysis, especially regarding distinctiveness, confusion, and the communicative function of marks (Beebe, 2004). For practitioners, legal constraints mean that translations cannot become generic descriptors or collide with existing marks, even if culturally and phonetically ideal. Thus, trademark translation is constrained by a fourfold space: linguistic form, cultural meaning, market cognition, and legal distinctiveness.

Existing scholarship on brand name adaptation and multilingual advertising suggests that bilingual presentation can be persuasive, but effects depend on audience proficiency, identity, and the perceived authenticity of language choices (Piller, 2001; Luna & Peracchio, 2005). In the Saudi context, English branding often coexists with Arabic reassurance or explanation. The translational task, therefore, includes managing code choice and script salience, not only translating content.

Against this background, we argue that translation theory can contribute most by offering a principled model that treats trademark translation as constraint satisfaction. The next section introduces the Cultural-Phonological-Semiotic (CPS) model and shows how it can be operationalised for Arabic-English brand naming.

3. THE CULTURAL-PHONOLOGICAL-SEMIOTIC (CPS) CONSTRAINT MODEL

We model Arabic-English trademark translation as the search for a target form that maximises brand sign-value under a set of interacting constraints. This is not a claim that naming is algorithmic; rather, it is a theoretical move that makes trade-offs explicit and thus debate-able. The model draws inspiration from constraint-based thinking in linguistics, especially Optimality Theory, in which surface forms emerge from ranked or weighted constraints rather than from deterministic rules (Prince & Smolensky, 1993/2004; McCarthy & Prince, 1993). We do not import Optimality Theory wholesale; instead, we use constraint logic as an explanatory and design framework for trademarks.

The CPS model contains three primary constraint families. Each family can be unpacked into sub-constraints that practitioners can inspect and empirically test.

Cultural acceptability (C) concerns whether a candidate name is socially safe and locally resonant. Sub-constraints include: (C1) taboo avoidance (e.g., proximity to offensive slang, bodily terms, or culturally dispreferred themes); (C2) religious sensitivity (avoid sanctifying lexemes in trivial categories; avoid forms that mimic sacred names); (C3) register alignment (premium vs everyday tone; modern vs heritage voice); and (C4) identity fit (alignment with target community norms and expectations). These sub-constraints reflect the social meaning of language and the indexical values attached to scripts and lexical choices (Silverstein, 1976; Agha, 2007; Bourdieu, 1991).

Phonological fit (P) concerns pronounceability, phonotactics, and processing fluency in the target language. Sub-constraints include: (P1) segmental compatibility (avoiding absent phonemes or providing stable substitutions); (P2) syllable and stress naturalness (minimising awkward clusters; preserving a memorable rhythm); (P3) distinctiveness in sound (reducing confusability with competitors); and (P4) ease of articulation and recall. Phonological fluency matters because it contributes to processing ease, which can increase liking and trust under many conditions (Reber, Schwarz & Winkielman, 2004; Alter & Oppenheimer, 2006).

Semiotic coherence (S) concerns whether the translated mark preserves the brand's intended associative field and category cues across scripts. Sub-constraints include: (S1) category signaling (does the name hint at food, beauty, logistics, fintech, etc., when desired?); (S2) personality/positioning coherence (e.g., playful vs formal; heritage vs futuristic); (S3) visual-script coherence (letterform aesthetics, length, symmetry, and logo compatibility); and (S4) indexical stability (does the target form unintentionally index a different social identity or geographic origin than intended?). Here the semiotic triad is central: a successful translation maintains a workable balance of symbolic meaning, indexical association, and iconic/phonesthetic feel (Peirce, 1931-1958; Eco, 1976; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Finally, trademark translation is constrained by legal distinctiveness and registrability. Legal constraints are not independent from CPS: a name that is semantically transparent may become legally weak if it is descriptive or generic; a culturally resonant term may be unregistrable if common in the category. Legal screening thus functions as a hard constraint in many naming projects (Beebe, 2004; WIPO, 2013).

The CPS model yields two analytical payoffs. First, it explains common failure modes: meaning-preserving translations often violate P or S (they sound heavy, lose premium aura, or become generic), while phonetic transliterations often violate C or S (they evoke unintended meanings or lack category cues). Second, it supports strategy selection: if symbolic meaning is the priority but phonology is difficult, hybrid semantic-phonetic blends may be optimal; if cultural sensitivity is high, culturally filtered transcreation becomes necessary; if visual identity is dominant, script-aware adaptation is required.

In the remainder of the paper, we operationalise CPS through a Saudi-market dataset and an expanded example bank. The empirical goal is not to rank brands but to show how CPS constraints interact and how translators can justify decisions with explicit reasoning.

4. DATA: THIRTY SAUDI-MARKET TRADEMARK PAIRS AND AN EXPANDED EXAMPLE BANK

To ground the CPS framework in market reality, we curated thirty trademark pairs that are widely visible in Saudi Arabia. Pairs were selected from sectors with high bilingual exposure—food and dairy, retail, telecommunications, banking, logistics, and digital platforms—and represent different transfer strategies (translation, transliteration, and hybrid forms). The dataset is intended as an illustrative core, not a comprehensive registry; the focus is on the Arabic/English forms used in public branding (storefronts, packaging, and apps), which is where consumers encounter trademark translation in practice. Because trademark registration status can vary across jurisdictions and time, the dataset is analysed here as market-facing name pairs rather than as legal determinations.

In addition, we use an expanded bank of constructed examples (clearly labelled as such) to isolate mechanisms that may not be cleanly observable in real brands, such as taboo adjacency or specific phonotactic clashes. Constructed examples allow the theory to specify how a single constraint can dominate and how alternative strategies shift outcomes. This mixed approach—real pair grounding plus controlled constructed illustrations—fits theory-building work in humanities and social sciences that seeks explanatory generalisations while remaining attentive to cultural specificity.

For each real pair, we annotate the observed transfer type (primarily semantic translation, phonetic transliteration, hybrid, or acronymic carry-over) and provide a short CPS-based commentary. In a full empirical extension, these annotations could be

formalised into a coding rubric and tested for inter-rater reliability (Krippendorff, 2018), then linked to consumer outcomes such as perceived quality, trust, and recall (Keller, 1993; Schmitt, 1999).

Figure 2. Illustrative overview of the core dataset: Arabic/English trademark pairs in the Saudi market.



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Figure 3. Distribution of the core dataset by observed transfer type.



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Table 1. Core dataset: widely used Arabic/English trademark pairs in the Saudi market (illustrative).

No.	Sector	Arabic form	English/Latin form	Observed transfer type
1	Dairy/Food	المراعي	Almarai	Hybrid
2	Petrochemicals	سابك	SABIC	Acronymic/Transliteration
3	Energy	أرامكو	Aramco	Transliteration
4	Airlines	السعودية	Saudia	Transcreation
5	Airlines	طيران ناس	flynas	Hybrid
6	Airlines	طيران أديل	flyadeal	Hybrid
7	Telecom	موبايلي	Mobily	Transliteration
8	Telecom	زين	Zain	Transliteration
9	Ridesharing	كريم	Careem	Transliteration
10	E-commerce	نون	noon	Shared lexeme

11	Fintech (BNPL)	تمارا	Tamara	Transliteration
12	Food delivery	جاهز	Jahez	Transliteration
13	Food delivery	هنگر ستيشن	HungerStation	Transliteration
14	Courier/delivery	مرسول	Mrsool	Hybrid (stylised Latin)
15	Retail (electronics)	اكسترا	eXtra	Transliteration
16	Retail (books)	جرير	Jarir	Transliteration
17	Supermarket	بنده	Panda	Transliteration (p->b)
18	Supermarket	الدانوب	Danube	Transliteration/Exonym
19	Supermarket	التميمي	Tamimi Markets	Hybrid
20	Retail (hypermarket)	لولو	Lulu	Transliteration
21	Retail (markets)	العثيم	Othaim	Transliteration
22	DIY/Home	ساكو	SACO	Acronymic/Transliteration
23	Pharmacy	النهدي	Nahdi	Transliteration
24	Pharmacy	الدواء	Al-Dawaa	Hybrid
25	Pharmacy	وايتس	Whites	Transliteration
26	Insurance	التعاونية	Tawuniya	Transcreation/Transliteration
27	Insurance/Healthcare	بوبا العربية	Bupa Arabia	Hybrid
28	Banking	مصرف الراجحي	Al Rajhi Bank	Hybrid
29	Banking	بنك الرياض	Riyad Bank	Translation/Hybrid
30	Banking	البنك السعودي الفرنسي	Banque Saudi Fransi (BSF)	Hybrid

5. FINDINGS: HOW CULTURAL, PHONOLOGICAL, AND SEMIOTIC CONSTRAINTS SHAPE ARABIC-ENGLISH TRADEMARK TRANSFER IN SAUDI ARABIA

5.1 Cultural acceptability (C): sensitivity, register, and the politics of script

Cultural constraints are often the first to be noticed by stakeholders, because violations can trigger immediate rejection or reputational harm. In Saudi Arabia, this includes religious sensitivity, taboo adjacency, and register mismatch, but also the quieter politics of script choice: Arabic and Latin scripts can index different identities, degrees of prestige, and orientations to modernity. A name that is semantically faithful can nonetheless feel culturally misaligned if it pushes the brand into an unintended voice or moral framing.

The core dataset illustrates how many successful pairs manage cultural acceptability by anchoring identity in Arabic while allowing Latin-script forms to function in global interfaces. For example, Al Rajhi Bank / مصرف الراجحي, Almarai / المراعي, and Nahdi / النهدي preserve the Arabic family-name heritage that signals trust and continuity while maintaining an English/Latin form for international readability. In CPS terms, these pairs satisfy C through local resonance and satisfy S through stable identity signaling across scripts.

However, cultural risks increase when translators rely on literal semantic renderings that introduce elevated or sacred registers. Consider the following constructed examples (not market claims) that show how meaning-preserving choices can shift cultural tone:

- Constructed example C1: 'Holy Glow' (cosmetics) -> 'التوهج المقدس'. Denotatively accurate, but 'مقدس' risks religious overtones; a culturally filtered transcreation such as 'إشراق' or 'وهج' preserves positivity without sacralization.
- Constructed example C2: 'Pure Bliss' (snacks) -> 'النعيم الخالص'. The translation moves into elevated, quasi-religious diction; alternatives such as 'متعة صافية' or keeping a coined Latin name with an Arabic descriptor can better match a casual food register.
- Constructed example C3: 'Confession' (perfume) -> 'اعتراف'. In some categories the moral framing can feel uncomfortable; translators may prefer a metaphor of 'توحي' (sharing) or a coined name that carries allure rather than moral judgement.
- Constructed example C4: 'Skin Idol' -> 'معبود البشرة'. Literalism creates taboo and theological collision; CPS flags a C-violation and requires re-design (e.g., 'أيقونة البشرة' or 'Skin Idol' retained with Arabic descriptor).

Beyond overt sensitivity, taboo adjacency can arise from phonetic near-neighbours in dialectal Arabic or in English slang. Because transliteration often produces sequences not normally used in Arabic morphology, it can inadvertently approximate colloquial expressions. This is why cultural filtering must be systematic rather than intuitive: it requires checking candidate strings against common dialectal forms, youth slang, and socially marked words. In bilingual settings, the risk is doubled because a safe Arabic name can map onto an unfortunate English homophone, and vice versa.

The dataset contains examples where the Arabic form itself provides a culturally safe anchor while the English form is stylised for distinctiveness, as in Mrsool / مرسول. The stylised Latin spelling 'Mrsool' encodes brand modernity and app aesthetics, but the Arabic مرسول grounds the name in a culturally legible lexeme meaning 'messenger'. This pairing is not a literal translation; it is a bilingual semiotic design that balances C (cultural legibility) and S (modern platform identity).

Script choice also functions as cultural positioning. In linguistic landscape research, the presence and ordering of scripts can signal hierarchy: a large Latin logo with a smaller Arabic descriptor may index global prestige, while a primary Arabic logo may index local authenticity (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Backhaus, 2007). In Saudi practice, many brands adopt bilingual lockups where Arabic provides reassurance and compliance while English provides cosmopolitan cachet. Translators should therefore treat 'Arabic vs English' not only as a language decision but as an indexical decision: what social world does the brand want to evoke?

Cultural constraints are not only prohibitive; they can be leveraged. The success of Careem / كريم, for example, benefits from the positive Arabic connotation of karim (generous), while the Latin spelling 'Careem' remains pronounceable for English readers and retains the emotional warmth. CPS describes this as a cultural affordance: the Arabic meaning contributes to brand personality (Aaker, 1997) while phonological adaptation preserves recall.

In sum, cultural acceptability requires (i) sensitivity screening, (ii) register calibration, and (iii) script-aware positioning. Failure to treat these as constraints leads to names that are linguistically correct but culturally brittle.

5.2 Phonological fit (P): segment substitution, syllable structure, and processing fluency

Phonological constraints are a primary reason why meaning is not enough. A trademark must be repeatable in speech: it circulates through word-of-mouth, customer service interactions, and oral recommendation. Names that are difficult to pronounce reduce processing fluency, which can lower liking and trust even when meanings are positive (Reber, Schwarz & Winkielman, 2004). In Arabic-English transfer, pronunciation is shaped by phoneme inventory gaps, syllable structure differences, and orthographic conventions.

English-to-Arabic transfer frequently requires segment substitution. The most familiar case is /p/, which is commonly realised as پ in Arabic branding (e.g., Panda -> بنده). Similarly, /v/ may map to ف, yielding variants such as 'فودافون' for Vodafone in many Arabic-speaking contexts. While such substitutions preserve pronounceability, they can reduce distinctiveness because multiple English segments collapse onto fewer Arabic segments. CPS therefore treats distinctiveness in sound (P3) as a non-trivial issue: two distinct English marks may become confusable once adapted to Arabic phonology.

Arabic-to-English transfer faces the opposite problem: Arabic consonants with no English equivalents (especially ع and ح, as well as emphatic consonants) can produce unstable Latin spellings and inconsistent pronunciation. Othaim / العثيم and Al Rajhi / الرحجي illustrate the challenge: the Arabic 'ayn and the pharyngeal/fricative qualities are often represented by apostrophes, digraphs, or omitted, each with consequences for P. When the apostrophe is used (e.g., Al 'Uthaim), English readers may not know how to interpret it; when omitted, the link to the Arabic source may weaken. The choice therefore involves a P-S trade-off.

Syllable structure also matters. Arabic tends to avoid certain consonant clusters that are common in English, and Arabic brand transliterations often insert vowels to break clusters, which can change perceived rhythm. Conversely, Arabic roots can yield short, consonant-heavy Latin spellings that look and sound abbreviatory. Because rhythm and sonority contribute to memorability (Klink, 2000; Lowrey & Shrum, 2007), translators should consider stress patterns and the 'mouthfeel' of names as part of translation, not as decoration.

Illustrations from the core dataset:

- Dataset illustration P1: Panda -> بنده. The /p/ -> /b/ substitution preserves Arabic pronounceability but weakens phonemic distinctiveness; visual identity and logo iconography help maintain S despite the phonological shift.
- Dataset illustration P2: Mobily -> موبيلي. Vowel insertion supports Arabic syllable patterns and smooth articulation; the Latin form remains short and rhythmic.
- Dataset illustration P3: flynas / طيران ناس. The Arabic descriptive form provides easy pronunciation and category cue; the English coinage 'flynas' has a compact cluster but remains pronounceable because it maps onto familiar English words ('fly') plus a short syllable.
- Dataset illustration P4: Jahez / جاهز. The Arabic source is a common adjective; the Latin spelling 'Jahez' offers a stable approximation of /ja:hiz/ with minimal diacritics, improving P relative to forms that attempt to represent pharyngeal detail.

Constructed example bank for phonological constraints (for theory-building):

- Constructed example P5: 'Viva' -> 'فيفا'. /v/ becomes ف, which may be acceptable; but if a competitor also contains /f/ in English, Arabic forms can converge.
- Constructed example P6: 'Spark' -> 'سبارك' vs 'سبارك'. Arabic inserts an initial vowel/consonant support; the cluster /sp/ is approximated via 'س' + 'ب'.
- Constructed example P7: 'Crunch' -> 'كرنش' (phonetic) vs 'مقرمش' (semantic). The phonetic version retains brand sound but may feel harsh; the semantic version is pronounceable but loses distinctive rhythm. CPS predicts a hybrid solution: 'كرنش' plus an Arabic descriptor to keep category meaning.
- Constructed example P8: Arabic 'عطر' -> English 'Itr'. The Latin form looks like an abbreviation and lacks vowels; an alternative 'Ittar' provides a pronounceable shape and aligns with existing market conventions in fragrance naming.
- Constructed example P9: Arabic 'صفاء' -> English 'Safaa' vs 'SafaaH'. Adding an -h can cue final vowel length but complicates reading; 'Safaa' may be more fluent.

- Constructed example P10: Arabic 'قمة' -> English 'Qimma' vs 'Kima'. 'Q' preserves Arabic identity but may slow reading; 'K' increases fluency but shifts indexicality.
- Constructed example P11: English 'Premium' -> Arabic 'ممتاز' vs 'بريميوم'. The Arabic word is fluent but shifts semiotic aura; transliteration keeps global premium indexicality at the cost of importing foreign phonotactics.
- Constructed example P12: English 'Clinic' -> Arabic 'كلينك' vs 'عيادة'. Transliteration preserves brand sound; translation provides clear category cue; a hybrid lockup can satisfy both.
- Constructed example P13: English 'Byte' -> Arabic 'بايت'. The mapping is easy; but if the brand depends on a pun (byte/bite), translation cannot preserve it and requires semiotic redesign.
- Constructed example P14: Arabic 'طيبة' -> English 'Taybah' vs 'Taiba'. Orthographic choices change stress expectations; testing with target users can identify the most fluent option.
- Constructed example P15: English 'Glow' -> Arabic 'غلو' (bad) vs 'غلوو' (awkward) vs 'غُلُو' (diacritics). This shows why meaning-first translation ('إشراق') may outperform transliteration for some phonological shapes.
- Constructed example P16: Arabic emphatics (ظ, ط, ض, ص) in Latin script often require digraph conventions that are unfamiliar to general audiences; simplified spellings can increase P but may reduce perceived authenticity (S trade-off).

Phonological fit is therefore not a secondary aesthetic matter. It is a core translational constraint that affects memorability, shareability, and even credibility. For translation theory, this reinforces the claim that the relevant unit is the brand sign, whose success depends on cognitive processing and sound-shape relations, not solely on semantic correspondence.

5.3 Semiotic coherence (S): category cues, indexical meaning, and script-based visual semiosis

Semiotic coherence concerns whether the translated form continues to function as the same brand sign. This cannot be reduced to dictionary meaning. In practice, brands depend on associative fields: premium vs budget, heritage vs innovation, local vs global. A translation that preserves the literal meaning can still reconfigure these associations by changing script, rhythm, or cultural framing.

The pair noon / نون offers a clear illustration of semiotic design. The mark exploits a bilingual symmetry: 'noon' is a recognisable English word-form while also resonating with the Arabic letter name نون. This creates a semiotic bridge between scripts, strengthening S through cross-script play and enhancing memorability by linking to a culturally embedded sign (the Arabic letter). The success is not semantic equivalence but semiotic coherence across languages.

Other pairs show how English descriptors are used to provide category cues that Arabic family names do not carry. Tamimi Markets / التميمي and Bupa Arabia / بوبا العربية illustrate a common hybrid pattern: a name anchor (often culturally grounded) plus an English descriptor that clarifies category or geography. This pattern is not translation in the narrow sense; it is bilingual sign engineering to maintain recognisability and relevance in both scripts.

Semiotic coherence also depends on visual constraints. Arabic script is cursive and can compress or expand depending on letter connections; Latin forms often have different length-to-height ratios. This affects logo design, app icons, and signage. A brand name that fits elegantly in Arabic may become too long in English, or vice versa, forcing abbreviations that change semiotic value. Acronymic strategies such as SABIC / سابك illustrate one solution: short, block-like forms that remain stable in both scripts and support strong corporate semiotics.

Indexical meaning is particularly important in Saudi Arabia because language choice can index cosmopolitanism, professionalism, or authenticity. For example, 'premium' indexicality is often associated with English or French forms in certain categories. A literal Arabic translation of 'premium' (ممتاز) may be semantically correct but can shift indexical meaning toward everyday evaluation rather than branded premium identity. Conversely, transliteration بريميوم may preserve indexical premium cues while introducing foreignness. CPS treats this as an S issue, not merely a stylistic one.

A further semiotic constraint is legal distinctiveness. Descriptive translations can become semiotically weak and legally vulnerable. For instance, a logistics brand named 'Fast' translated as سريع provides clear meaning but risks genericity; a hybrid or coined form (e.g., Saree Logistics) can preserve the Arabic meaning while maintaining distinctiveness. Semiotics and law intersect here because the semiotic power of a mark is partly its capacity to function as a unique sign in a crowded field (Beebe, 2004).

Constructed example bank for semiotic constraints:

- Constructed example S1: 'Herbal Lab' -> 'مختبر الأعشاب'. Literal translation shifts the brand toward medical institutional imagery; depending on category, a safer semiotic mapping may be 'هيربال لاب' with an Arabic descriptor or 'معمل الأعشاب' if 'مختبر' feels too clinical.
- Constructed example S2: 'Mist' (body spray) -> 'ضباب'. Symbolic meaning matches, but indexical meaning evokes weather/accident imagery; 'رذاذ' or 'ميسْت' may better preserve category cues and affect.
- Constructed example S3: Arabic 'تمرية' -> English 'Date bar'. The translation loses cultural specificity and heritage aura; 'Tamriya Date Bites' preserves local sign-value while adding an English category cue.
- Constructed example S4: English 'Royal' -> Arabic 'ملكي'. Literal translation can sound political or formal; some brands may prefer 'روبال' to retain the global luxury index.
- Constructed example S5: English 'Glow' -> Arabic 'إشراق'. Here semantic translation outperforms transliteration because it preserves the iconic/affective image of light without phonological awkwardness.
- Constructed example S6: Arabic 'عافية' -> English 'Wellness'. The translation is semantically close but loses local warmth and identity; 'Aafiya Wellness' is a hybrid that maintains authenticity and clarifies category.
- Constructed example S7: English 'Station' -> Arabic 'محطة'. In 'HungerStation' the Arabic market prefers a phonetic spelling هُنْغْرِسْتِيشُن rather than a literal 'محطة الجوع', because the literal form creates an odd, even humorous semiotic frame.
- Constructed example S8: Arabic 'البيك' -> English 'AlBaik'. Meaning is opaque to non-Arabic readers; yet opacity can be semiotically strategic if the brand is identity-based and the logo system carries recognition. CPS therefore does not treat transparency as always optimal.
- Constructed example S9: English wordplay or puns rarely survive direct translation. When a mark depends on punning (byte/bite; sole/soul), semiotic coherence requires re-invention rather than translation, often through a new metaphor in the target language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).
- Constructed example S10: Arabic calligraphic styles in logos can index heritage and spiritual gravitas; when rendered in Latin script, the brand may need compensatory visual elements (patterns, colours, typography) to preserve the same indexical world.

Semiotic coherence therefore links translation studies to visual culture, marketing, and law. It is also the main reason why 'meaning' fails as a sufficient criterion. The brand sign has to work as a sign, not as a sentence: it must be recognisable, trustable, and culturally situated in both scripts.

5.4 Interactions and trade-offs: why 'best' solutions are often hybrids

C, P, and S rarely align perfectly. Trademark translation is therefore characterised by structured trade-offs. A culturally resonant Arabic word can be difficult to render in Latin script without diacritics; a phonologically fluent transliteration can be semiotically thin; a semantically transparent translation can become legally generic. The CPS model predicts that many robust solutions will be hybridised: they distribute semiotic labour across bilingual elements and across the broader brand system (logo, tagline, packaging).

The dataset shows three recurring archetypes. First, 'identity anchors' (family names or heritage terms) that are maintained across scripts with minimal change: Jarir / جرير, Almarai / المراعي, and Nahdi / النهدي. These maximise S through continuity and C through local trust. Second, 'category plus coinage' hybrids that combine an Arabic descriptor with an English coined form: flynas / طيران ناس and flyadeal / طيران أديل. Here Arabic provides immediate category cue and cultural anchoring, while the English coinage secures distinctiveness and app-friendly brevity. Third, 'global brand plus local qualifier' hybrids: Bupa Arabia / بوبا العربية and Tamimi Markets / التميمي. These distribute semiotic meaning: the global component carries international credibility and the local qualifier carries geographic or cultural localisation.

A fourth archetype is acronymic stability: SABIC / سابك and BSF (Banque Saudi Fransi) / البنك السعودي الفرنسي. Acronyms reduce phonological and visual variability and can perform well for corporate brands, though they can weaken warmth and mnemonic richness unless supported by brand narratives (Keller, 1993).

These patterns indicate that trademark translation should be analysed as part of a multimodal system rather than an isolated word pair. The translator's task is closer to designing a bilingual sign than to producing a textual equivalence. This is where

translation theory can expand: it can provide models for how meaning, sound, and cultural indexicality are negotiated under constraints, and it can justify why hybridisation is not 'compromise' but often the optimal solution.

6. INNOVATIVE TRANSLATING STRATEGIES FOR ARABIC-ENGLISH TRADEMARKS: A CPS-GUIDED WORKFLOW

6.1 From translation to transcreation: a reproducible decision workflow

Brand-oriented transcreation is often discussed as a creative alternative to literal translation, but it can also be systematised. The CPS framework supports a workflow that is both creative and accountable: it makes explicit what is being optimised and why. We propose a six-stage workflow for Arabic-English trademark transfer in Saudi Arabia. The workflow is designed for translators working with brand managers and, where relevant, legal counsel.

Stage 1: Define the intended semiotic profile. Identify category (food, finance, cosmetics), target segment (mass, premium), desired brand personality (Aaker, 1997), and key associations to preserve (e.g., heritage, speed, care). This stage prevents translation from defaulting to literal meaning when the real objective is an affective or identity cue.

Stage 2: Generate candidate sets across strategy families. At minimum, produce (i) a semantic translation candidate, (ii) a phonetic transliteration candidate, (iii) a hybrid semantic-phonetic blend, and (iv) a coined or metaphorical candidate. Generation should be guided by the semiotic profile rather than by dictionaries alone.

Stage 3: Cultural filtering (C-screen). Screen for taboo adjacency, religious sensitivity, register mismatch, and dialectal drift. This can be implemented as a checklist plus a rapid consultation with culturally diverse reviewers (e.g., younger and older consumers) to catch slang resonance (Piller, 2001).

Stage 4: Phonological and orthographic screening (P-screen). Evaluate pronounceability, stress naturalness, and likely spelling variants. Where Arabic-to-English transfer is involved, choose a Latin spelling that is stable and easy to read without diacritics; where English-to-Arabic transfer is involved, check whether phoneme substitutions reduce distinctiveness or create confusable near-neighbours.

Stage 5: Semiotic mapping (S-screen). Elicit associative fields through short tasks: ask participants what the name 'sounds like' (premium vs cheap), what category it suggests, and whether it evokes any unintended meanings. Where possible, run quick recall tests and preference rankings (Keller, 1993; Schmitt, 1999).

Stage 6: Legal distinctiveness screening and final selection. Ensure the preferred candidates are not generic or descriptive in ways that threaten registrability; confirm that they do not create obvious confusion with existing marks. The output should include a short CPS rationale explaining why the chosen form is optimal given constraints.

6.2 Hybrid semantic-phonetic patterns that work well in the Saudi market

Hybrid strategies are effective because they split the semiotic burden: one component carries identity or sound continuity, while another supplies meaning or category cues. The Saudi market provides many examples of hybridisation, especially in sectors where Arabic cultural anchoring and English digital usability must coexist.

Pattern H1: Arabic identity anchor plus English category descriptor. This pattern is common for family-name brands expanding into bilingual spaces. For instance, Tamimi Markets / التميمي uses an Arabic anchor that signals local trust, with an English category label that clarifies function for non-Arabic readers. Al Rajhi Bank / مصرف الراجحي similarly uses a heritage anchor plus an internationally legible category cue. CPS view: C and S are anchored by Arabic identity, while clarity and global accessibility are supported by English descriptors.

Pattern H2: English coinage plus Arabic category descriptor. Aviation and platform brands frequently use Arabic to carry immediate category meaning and English to provide compactness for apps and booking systems. flynas / طيران ناس and flyadeal / طيران أديل illustrate how Arabic can deliver the high-clarity cue (طيران) while the coined English form remains short and distinctive. CPS view: Arabic supports C and S; English supports distinctiveness and digital constraints.

Pattern H3: Retaining a global mark plus adding a local qualifier. Bupa Arabia / بوبا العربية illustrates how a global mark's sign-value is preserved, while a qualifier localises the brand in both legal and cultural terms. CPS view: S is maintained through recognition; C is increased through local belonging.

Pattern H4: Semantic strength in Arabic, sound continuity in English. Some Arabic marks carry meanings that would become generic if translated into an English adjective. Jahez / جاهز is a strong example: rendering it as 'Ready' would be semantically close but commercially weak; keeping 'Jahez' preserves sound and distinctiveness while the Arabic form retains symbolic meaning for Arabic speakers. CPS view: the bilingual system preserves both symbolic and indexical value.

Pattern H5: Acronymic stability for corporate entities. SABIC / سابك reduces variability and supports consistent corporate semiosis across scripts. However, acronyms often require supporting narratives and visual identity to build warmth and mnemonic richness (Keller, 1993).

Additional constructed hybrids (illustrating reusable patterns):

- Constructed H6: Arabic 'صفاء' (purity) -> 'Safaa Skincare' / 'صفاء سكينكير'. The Arabic name carries cultural warmth; the English descriptor clarifies category.
- Constructed H7: English 'Nova' -> 'نوبا كير' (Nova Care). Transliteration retains sound; the descriptor stabilises category meaning.
- Constructed H8: English 'Bloom' -> 'بلوم للعناية' (Bloom for Care) rather than literal 'ازدهار' if the brand wants modern global aura.
- Constructed H9: Arabic 'مزن' (rain cloud) -> 'Mzn Coffee'. The Arabic poetic anchor remains; the English descriptor signals category.
- Constructed H10: English 'Pulse' -> 'پلس فیت' (Pulse Fit). Transliteration keeps rhythm; the descriptor avoids medical misreadings.

6.3 Cultural filtering as a translation protocol (not an afterthought)

Many naming failures occur because cultural checks are informal: a team 'feels' a name is acceptable, but does not systematically test for taboo adjacency, religious sensitivity, or register mismatch. Translation studies can contribute here by treating cultural filtering as a protocol comparable to terminology management or quality assurance.

A practical cultural filtering protocol can include: (i) taboo lists and sensitive lexeme lists for the target market; (ii) dialectal checks across major Saudi regional varieties; (iii) cross-script homophone checks (e.g., does the English form resemble an undesirable Arabic word when pronounced locally?); and (iv) register checks against the brand personality profile (Aaker, 1997). Cultural filtering should be iterative: if a candidate fails, the team should return to Stage 2 and generate new candidates rather than forcing a problematic translation.

For example, if a luxury fragrance brand proposes a literal translation that introduces sacralising vocabulary, CPS flags a C-violation; the protocol demands a redesign that preserves the intended affective imagery without invoking religious domains. Similarly, if an English form transliterates into an Arabic string that resembles slang, the protocol requires phonological or orthographic adjustment.

6.4 Consumer-tested validation: making semiotic claims measurable

A key advantage of a constraint model is that it turns vague claims into testable questions. If a name is said to be 'premium', 'friendly', or 'trustworthy', those are semiotic claims about how audiences will interpret the sign. They can be tested through short, low-cost studies. Branding and consumer research provides ready methods: association elicitation, preference ranking, recall tasks, and processing-fluency measures (Keller, 1993; Reber, Schwarz & Winkielman, 2004; Yorkston & Menon, 2004).

A minimal validation design suitable for trademark translation projects in Saudi Arabia can include: (i) a category-identification task (participants guess the product category from the name); (ii) an association task (participants list words or feelings evoked by the name); (iii) a pronunciation task (participants read aloud, enabling measurement of hesitations); and (iv) a short delayed recall task. These measures can be compared across candidate sets (semantic translation vs transliteration vs hybrid) to identify which strategy best satisfies P and S constraints.

Such validation is especially important for Arabic-English pairs where script-based indexical meaning can surprise designers. For example, an English word that signals premium in one context may appear generic in Arabic, while an Arabic heritage term may appear exotic and therefore premium in English. Only empirical testing can establish whether these effects occur for the target segment.

6.5 Bounded AI-assisted screening for semantic and reputational risk

AI tools can assist trademark translation in two bounded ways: rapid candidate generation and risk screening. Because brand naming is sensitive, AI should be used as a support tool under human governance, not as a final authority. Within a CPS workflow, AI is most valuable for surfacing overlooked associations and near-neighbour strings.

For semantic risk, distributional models can flag words that cluster near negative domains (e.g., illness, taboo, or low-quality stereotypes) in large corpora. For phonological risk, simple string-based similarity measures can flag candidates that are confusable once adapted to Arabic phonology (e.g., /p/ and /b/ collapse). For legal risk, AI can support preliminary checks by identifying similar names in public databases, but final legal clearance must be conducted through qualified channels (WIPO, 2013).

The theoretical point is that AI does not replace CPS; it operationalises parts of CPS. It provides additional evidence about cultural associations, phonological confusability, and semiotic neighbourhoods. When integrated responsibly, it can reduce blind spots while keeping the translator's semiotic judgement central.

7. CONTRIBUTIONS TO TRANSLATION THEORY

The central theoretical claim of this article is that trademark translation is not a special-case application of ordinary equivalence; it is a distinct translational phenomenon in which the unit of translation is a brand sign embedded in a market semiotic system. From this claim follow several contributions to translation theory.

First, CPS formalises functionalist intuitions by specifying the constraints that constitute 'function' for trademarks. Skopos theory foregrounds purpose, but trademark purposes are not only communicative; they are also cognitive (memorability), social (indexical identity), and legal (distinctiveness). CPS translates these purposes into explicit constraint families that can be audited and tested (Reiss & Vermeer, 1984; Nord, 1997).

Second, CPS provides a principled place for phonology in translation theory. Traditional discussions of transcreation recognise creativity, but they often leave sound-shape effects implicit. By treating phonological fit as a core constraint, CPS connects translation to research on sound symbolism and processing fluency (Klink, 2000; Yorkston & Menon, 2004; Lowrey & Shrum, 2007). This matters for Arabic-English translation where phonological asymmetries are large and where pronunciation shapes consumer confidence.

Third, CPS operationalises semiotics for translational decision-making. Semiotic frameworks are frequently invoked metaphorically in translation studies, but CPS converts the symbolic-indexical-iconic triad into design criteria: symbolic meaning (denotation), indexical meaning (social association), and iconic meaning (phonesthetic and visual fit) are treated as constraints that can be satisfied or violated (Peirce, 1931-1958; Eco, 1976). This allows translators to justify why a semantically accurate choice may be rejected due to indexical risk or iconic failure.

Fourth, CPS reframes 'loss' and 'gain' in translation. In trademarks, loss is not primarily semantic; it is loss of sign-value, which may occur even when meaning is preserved. Conversely, gain can occur when the target name adds category cues or improves memorability without damaging identity. This extends descriptive translation concerns with norms and effects into the commercial domain (Toury, 1995).

Finally, CPS provides a bridge between translation studies and interdisciplinary research on markets, law, and linguistic landscapes. Because trademarks circulate as visible signs in public spaces, translation is part of the semiotic ecology of cities and digital platforms (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Blommaert, 2013). Translation theory can therefore contribute not only to linguistic analysis but to broader accounts of how globalisation and localisation are negotiated through scripts and brand signs.

8. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR SAUDI-MARKET STAKEHOLDERS

For translation practitioners, the CPS model implies that trademark projects require multidisciplinary briefing. Translators should request a brand profile (segment, personality, category, and desired associations) and should treat naming as iterative design rather than as a single 'correct' solution. Deliverables should include a short CPS rationale explaining trade-offs.

For brand managers, CPS clarifies why 'literal' is not safer. Literal translation can create register drift, genericity, or semiotic mismatch. Investing in hybrid or transcreated solutions is often a risk-reduction strategy, not a luxury.

For legal and compliance teams, CPS highlights the need to coordinate language and law early. Names that are semantically transparent may be legally weak; names that are distinctive may require cultural and phonological adjustment. Early joint screening reduces rework and helps ensure that the final bilingual system is coherent.

For educators and researchers, Arabic-English trademark translation offers a fertile site for studying how language, script, and market ideology interact. It also provides a practical context in which to teach translation as social action and semiotic design rather than word substitution (Venuti, 1995; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

9. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is theory-dense and example-driven; it does not claim to provide a complete empirical account of all trademarks in Saudi Arabia. The dataset of thirty pairs is limited to widely visible brands. Future work should build larger corpora from trademark registries and linguistic landscape photography, and should develop CPS coding protocols with multiple raters to quantify constraint violations (Krippendorff, 2018).

Empirical extensions can test CPS predictions through consumer experiments: comparing semantic translations, transliterations, and hybrids on measures of category identification, affect, trust, pronunciation fluency, and recall. Bilingual segmentation (Arabic-dominant vs English-dominant consumers) is likely to moderate effects (Luna & Peracchio, 2005).

Further research should also examine how CPS constraints vary by sector. For example, religious sensitivity may be higher for food and personal care than for electronics; phonological fluency may be more critical for services that rely on oral recommendation; and legal distinctiveness may be especially salient in crowded fintech spaces. Finally, computational approaches to semantic and phonological risk screening can be refined and evaluated ethically, especially where AI is used to propose new names.

10. CONCLUSION

Arabic-English trademark translation in Saudi Arabia demonstrates a general point for translation theory: meaning alone does not determine translational success when the translated unit is a brand sign embedded in market semiotics. By modelling trademark translation as constraint satisfaction across cultural acceptability, phonological fit, and semiotic coherence, the CPS framework explains why literal translation and pure transliteration frequently underperform, and it provides a principled basis for innovative strategies such as hybrid semantic-phonetic design, cultural filtering, and consumer-validated transcreation. The result is both a theoretical contribution and a practical workflow: translation becomes an accountable act of cross-cultural brand mediation that protects brand equity, consumer trust, and market competitiveness.

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