# SPELLING ISSUES IN EFL GRAFFITI: ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

*Hanna AbuJaber*

Al-Balqa Applied University


*Sane M Yagi*

University of Jordan


*Asad Al-Ghalith*

Minnesota State Colleges & Universities

**Abstract**

Anonymous inscription on others' properties has attracted research from multiple perspectives. This paper takes interest in graffiti from linguistic and pedagogical perspectives. It is concerned with spelling phenomena in statements made by Jordanian non-native English speakers. It delineates the phenomena unique to Jordanian foreign learners and those exclusive to English native speakers, as well as the phenomena common to both groups. Graffiti from private English-medium schools have been videotaped, transcribed, and coded. The resulting corpus has been analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Results revealed that Jordanian learners of English did develop a sense of ownership of the language that motivated them to play with its spelling for attention-seeking, innovation, simplification, emotiveness, or politeness. They also followed spelling trends in English-speaking communities under the influence of globalization, SMS texting, and internet communication. In fact, some of these trends and the innovation spirit had a spillover effect on how students spelt their native Arabic using Roman rather than Arabic script. Quite often, they used Romanization for effect, emotion, boasting, or demeaning others. Jordanian English speakers made spelling errors in capitalization, contraction, vowel sequencing, and noun

compounding. Most errors were due to sound assimilation, mispronunciation of English words, mother tongue interference, and rule overgeneralization.  (200 words)

---

**Keywords:** Graffiti, latrinalia, spelling, TEFL, TESL, language education, sociolinguistic

## 1.      Introduction:

The word 'graffiti', 'scribbling' in Italian, means illegal, anonymous, and topical writing or drawing on a surface in a public place. It might be as brief as a single word or as long as doggerel. It is often, not always, whimsical, witty, and interactive. It has been practiced for centuries, the earliest known example that resembles modern style graffiti is claimed to have been found at Efes nearby Selçuk in Turkey. It apparently advertises a brothel1!

Graffiti writing has been practiced for centuries and has been discussed from a variety of perspectives: semiotic, sociolinguistic, discourse analytic, socio-psychological, communicative, semantic, stylistic, gender, and criminological.

The relationship between graffiti writing on a college campus and the authoritarian personality syndrome was examined by Solomon and Yager (1975)2. They found that "much of the content… was seen as evidencing release of repressed sexuality or the sort of aggressive and hostile impulses that are said to be authoritarian concerns" (p.149). They also discovered that toilet graffiti were significantly more hostile towards out groups and more concerned with sexuality than public area graffiti.

Green (2003)3 observed strong gender differences for graffiti topics, finding males more in favor of politics and financial matters, whilst females more interested in the discussion of rape, religion, and philosophy. Males tended to be more insulting, more racist, and more concerned with self presence. Females, on the other hand, tended to seek more personal advice and to be more concerned with romance. Women liked to discuss sex more than men did; however, men were more in favor of sex descriptions and homosexuality, and they made more sex requests. Men were more concerned with their courses, yet more humorous. Women were surprisingly more concerned with drinking and drugs!

Green did not find but subtle differences between the two genders in terms of language style.

Linguists took interest in graffiti writing as well finding its language to be revealing of how human language changes and evolves. Claramonte and Alonso (1993)4, for example,

did not only outline the social significance and categories of wall and desk top graffiti, but they also studied peculiar and idiosyncratic spellings and discussed abbreviations, acronyms, clippings, pun, rhyme, slang, and new word derivation strategies. They demonstrated that graffitists of a university background are linguistically quite creative.

In fact, Obeng (2000a)5 viewed graffiti as discourse and identified such properties of interaction as turn-taking, repair, opening and closing, adjacency pairs, and indirectness. He also observed that graffiti sentences were often short and of the simple sentence type.

The reasons for graffiti writing are varied; David Crystal (2006)6 recognizes that it is not always in the spirit of real communication but rather for demonstrating presence and leaving a mark. He asserts that the internet encouraged a dramatic expansion in linguistic creativity which appears to have influenced the graffiti written by foreign learners of English. In Crystal (2008)7, he considered at length some of the strategies utilized in texting which appear to have been borrowed wholesale by graffiti writers. He studied their impact on literacy, language, and society and explained how to interpret pictograms, logograms, abbreviations, symbols, and wordplay. He also demonstrated how old some of these strategies are, tracing some as far back as Leonardo da Vinci,  William Camden, Ben Johnson, Lewis Carroll, etc.

Language attitude in graffiti has been studied by Obeng (2000b)8. He found out that the discursive strategies used to express language attitudes in the graffiti written by Ghanian university students include intertextuality, and he noticed that graffitists borrow from previous texts or from public knowledge when creating graffiti. The strategies that they used included name calling, insults, and in-group slang. The linguistic resources used were inclusive and exclusive pronouns, verbs denoting strong emotional valence, repetition of specific syntactic frames, and adjectives of quality. Graphological strategies included exclamation marks and upper case letters to signal agreement or disagreement.

Graffiti writing has also been compared to doublespeak, language use that is characterized by propaganda, misleading vested-interest, semantic distortion, and dishonesty, despite that the two types of communication being on opposite sides of the establishment fence (Nilsen 1978)9. The two types of communication resort to the same techniques: glittering generalities, name-calling, transfer by comparison, testimonials of famous people, plain folk associations, card-stacking by leaving out facts, and bandwagon jumping.

Social psychologists attempted to identify personality and motivational variables that contributed to men and women's restroom graffiti writing. Towards this end, Loewenstine,

Ponticos, and Paludi (1982)10 surveyed university students and found out that the motivation was to fulfill a need for communication and recognition and to relieve boredom. The majority of respondents indicated that "people who make inscriptions are humorous and immature. Women, more frequently than men, reported using graffiti as a forum for giving and seeking advice for personal problems" (p.308). They found that graffiti might be a manifestation of power differences between men and women.

It is clear that the literature does not sufficiently deal with the cultural influence on the language of graffiti. It does not draw any significant conclusions that might have practical pedagogical implications for language instruction.

The focus in this paper is on various spelling phenomena for the purpose of delineating what is unique to Jordanian non-native speakers of English and to native speakers of English, as well as what is common to both groups. It also seeks to answer the following questions:

•        What functions do English and Anglicization serve in graffiti?

•        What impact does global English have on Jordanians' English language and culture?

•        What are the linguistic and stylistic characteristics of Jordanians' English graffiti?

•        To what extent do graffiti statements reflect the language competence of their writers?

## 2.        Data Collection & Analysis

Motivated by a desire to understand a variety of aspects of the language culture of Jordan, a large corpus of graffiti has been compiled, transcribed, categorized, and coded. The collection has been taken from urban and rural centers; from public and private organizations; from Arabic-medium and English-medium educational institutions; from primary, intermediate, high schools, and universities; from streets, shops, and restaurants; from desks, doors, and walls; from bathrooms, classrooms, and libraries; and even from books.
The corpus used for the purposes of this study is a subset of the bigger corpus and it comes from private English-medium schools of Amman.

To collect the graffiti, a video camera has been used to capture the conversations that took place between graffitists. Each video has been marked for date and location so that the data it contains could be labeled in terms of gender of writer, location, and writing media. All graffiti statements have been transcribed in a manner that would replicate them but in print; i.e., they have been written in the script of their original language together with their original spelling and grammar errors, their innovation, and their playfulness. Video recording

privileges the researcher with the possibility of determining whether a set of graffiti statements was written by one or more than one graffitist; the color of ink and style of handwriting are excellent clues for that. It also facilitates the decision whether a set of statements in close proximity constitutes a conversation or is simply a group of unrelated statements.

Each graffiti statement has then been recorded in one table row and if there was a conversation between graffitists, then the whole conversation would appear in a table row but in the form of a dialog. On the same row labels are used to describe the content and the language of the statement or conversation. In the same row, next to that where a graffiti statement is transcribed, all the independent and dependent variables are specified. For example, the location of where the statement was collected from is indicated in one cell, the medium where the statement appeared, the gender of the graffitist, his or her age, the topic of the statement, whether it had any spelling or grammar errors, the type of error, etc.

Once all the data have been transcribed and labeled, a statistical analysis was performed. Using SPSS, the researchers cross-tabulated the data and analyzed it attempting to find any possible correlation between a range of dependent and independent variables.

The current paper is focused on a qualitative analysis of a subset of the corpus, namely the graffiti that came from private English-medium schools in Amman.

## 3.    Spelling Phenomena

A distinction is made here between what is considered to be erroneous spelling, on the one hand, and playful, popular, and Romanized, on the other. A spelling abnormality is categorized as an error if there is evidence that the graffitist appears to be lacking in their command of English. If, however, there is evidence of native-like competence, then the spelling abnormality is classified as either playful or popular. Romanized spelling does not conclusively point to lack of competence, although writing Arabic words in Roman letters could be construed to be motivated by ignorance of the English equivalent.

The distinction between playful and popular is a matter of currency in usage. If an abnormality is fashionable amongst English native speakers, then one would assume that the foreign learner of English must be imitating native speakers in their spelling. When an erroneous spelling is made in a creative way that is different from what is popular amongst native speakers and there is evidence of English competence, then it is classified as playful spelling.

**3.1 Playful Spelling**

Even though the graffitists discussed here are but foreign language learners of English, they appear to have developed a sense of ownership of the language, so much so that they are turning creative in it and have become comfortable enough with it that they play with its spelling as native speakers have done for hundreds of years. David Crystal (2008) asserts that English speakers played with language long before IT, mobile phones, and the internet. Creativity/playfulness  in spelling often aims at grabbing the attention of the reader, simplifying the spelling of words, expressing strong emotions, showing politeness to others, or displaying originality. Here is an illustrative discussion of the various types of playfulness that have been identified in the collected graffiti.

**3.1.1 Attention Grabbing**

Attention grabbing is intended by the graffitist to motivate the reader to read the message. This is done by multiple ways. At times, the graffitist would use an exclamation mark in lieu of a lower case 'i' as in 'L!NK' for link. At other times, he or she would use the dollar sign instead of the letter 's' as in '$chool $uck$'; or merge two words together as in '6ex' (six and sex); or duplicate consonants twice as in 'sikk'; three times as in the interjection 'OHHH!!!', or four times as in 'opppps'. Attention is also called by graphemic sizes. Graffitists follow the English tradition in this regard which capitalizes proper nouns, titles, headlines, etc.11

Graffitists call for attention by mixing upper case with lower case characters. Let us for ease of reference assume that an English word is made up of  five letters and that these letters are schematically represented as F S T R L for 'First', 'Second', 'Third', 'fouRth', and 'Last' respectively.

Graffitists have used the patterns illustrated below:

(1)     F S T r l        YASiR donkey        "Yasir is a donkey"

(2)     F s t r L        MufeN          "Muffin"

(3)     f s T r l        niNja          "Ninja"

(4)     F s T r l        NaNcy          "Nancy"

(5)     f S T R L        mATCH          "Match"

(6)     f S t r l        oMack          "Your mother"

These different patterns of capitalization appear to carry the fingerprint of the graffitist emphasizing his or her identity. In the absence of capitalization in their native

Arabic, the graffitists found it convenient to use a spelling convention in English indicating their openness to cultural assimilation. Interestingly, the graffitists were willing to compromise cultural identity by borrowing a foreign convention to emphasize their unique individual signatures. The question of individual identity seems to come before cultural identity.

### 3.1.2 Simplification

Graffitists play with the spelling of words for the purpose of simplification, perhaps not in the same spirit as that of Noah Webster12 in the 1800's, but rather for playfulness with the sacred. Methods of simplification include dropping the 'silent letters', reflecting the slang pronunciation of words, writing assimilated sounds as they are pronounced, rebus writing, and dropping the contraction marker.

Inconsistency between English spelling and pronunciation has been recognized as far back as John Hart's The Opening of the Unreasonable Writing of Our Inglish Toung that was published in 155111. It is not strange for the pronunciation of a word to change without the concomitant change in spelling.  Take as an example all the so called 'silent letters'; they are written but not pronounced. Foreign language learning graffitists seem to be keenly aware of this phenomenon in the English language, hence the dropping of silent letters as in 'wen', 'wenever';' I lov sex'; 'Kiss my as all of you'; and 'I lovd'. Sacred as it might be to conservatives, the young learners of English demonstrate courage in challenging it.

They also act like native speakers of English when they feel so free as to spell words the way that they pronounce them. If teenage native speakers drop the velar nasal at the end of a word, so do these young foreign learners in statements such as 'pumpin' and 'FUKN'. Sound assimilation motivates graffitists to render words as they pronounce them as in 'iconz'; 'happenz', 'if  you wanna fewe', 'Datz my Dawg', 'Da Gurl on top','movies dis weekend?' This is a trend also true of English native speakers that seems to have created a chatting subculture. Crystal (2008:127)7 asserts that, "As a texting culture develops in a particular language, it is very likely that different preferences will emerge and novel kinds of abbreviatory conventions appear". In fact, under the influence of this slang phonetic writing trend, Jordanian learners of English have culturally gone so far as to write colloquial Arabic in the same native English style.

Part of the graffitists' simplification drive is the use of rebus writing; they represent words by means of letters, numbers, or other symbols for parsimony purposes as in 'rox'; 'u r

sickk!!', where the letter 'x' stands for the sounds 'ks' and the graphemes 'cks'. They also use the letter 'u' to stand for the graphemes 'you' and 'r' for 'are'. Notice how economical this strategy is!

Crystal (2008:41) maintains that the rebus trend is an old tradition in Europe that dates back to Latin times and that is found in European art and literature. He says, "Leonardo da Vinci drew rebus puzzles. Ben Jonson ridiculed them in one of his plays. They were especially popular in the nineteenth century. Lewis Carroll put them into his letters to children. The earliest use in English seems to be in 1605, when the antiquarian William Camden referred to people who 'lackt wit to expresse their conceit in speech; did vse to depaint it out (as it were) in pictures, which they call Rebus'."

Animosity to the apostrophe appears to be universal. Crystal (2006:170) observes in chat language on the internet that "the apostrophe is commonly absent from contracted forms, in a manner reminiscent of George Bernard Shaw". Perhaps this animosity is due to the recent advent of the apostrophe in the English language, as its use became standardized only in the 19th century (Punctuation, 2010)13. Like native speakers, foreign learners of English drop the apostrophe in contracted forms as in 'cant'; 'shes my bitch'.

Finally, double vowels in words such as 'books' are deemed unnecessary, as far as young foreign graffitists are concerned, so they rendered this word as 'boks'. Perhaps this kind of spelling can be attributed more to lack of awareness of some English rules of pronunciation or to the graffitist's desire for giving precedence to simplification over proper pronunciation rules.

### 3.1.3   Emotiveness

True to a typical function of language, graffiti are not only written in a playful manner, but they are also written in a style that would express part of the emotion that motivated the graffitist to inscribe the statement in the first place. There is frequent use of vowel elongation similar to that observed by Crystal 2006 in internet English. Some of this vowel elongation is by doubling, tripling, quadrupling, and some by duplicating the vowel excessively more times. There are, for example, such elongation as 'WHOOO'; 'LIEEE'; 'oooops'; 'Baaaaad', etc. At times, vowel elongation is intended for emphasis as in, 'I love you is a LIEEE', at others it is for intensification as in, 'sexsyyyyyyyyy', and yet at others for endearment as in, 'I love you mhmooood' and 'Ayoooosh!!'. Notice that the proper spelling of the first noun is 'Mahmood' which is a masculine name, whilst the second is a feminine

name and is usually written as 'Aysha'. The graffitist practices syncope in the first syllable in 'Mahmood' but elongates the vowel in the second. In the second example, the graffitist uses the diminutive form of 'Aysha' and elongates the vowel in the second syllable.

Foreign learners of English have demonstrated yet again their openness to influence by trends started by English native speaking communities. Most likely, Jordanian graffitists caught on this trend through online chatting with native speakers, a precursor to other more significant cultural influences. The internet seems to have broken linguistic as well as cultural boundaries. Crystal (2006:215) corroborates this fact saying, "The Internet, as has often been pointed out, is no respecter of national boundaries."

### 3.1.4  Politeness

Foreign teenagers are not all rude. Some of them are polite enough to write the F-word as 'F****  iT'   but not polite enough to refrain from practicing graffiti in the first place. Similarly, they use the short form 'MOFO' to avoid sounding too obscene. Perhaps the reason can also be partially traced to the conservative background of the graffitist where using such words is not only taboo but also shameful. Graffitists find it easier to express such obscenity in an abbreviated foreign language form than spelling it out in Arabic.

It appears that Jordanian graffitists find it much easier to break away from the sanctuary of their culture by using English with members in their online communities to express profanities, a verbal behavior that is unthinkable to emulate in their native Arabic since their conservative Islamic culture does not condone that.

### 3.1.5  Innovation

There is ample evidence in these examples that school graffitists feel so comfortable using the foreign language that they innovate and play with words. For instance, one graffitist in a creatively humorous way played around with English pronouns trying to create a new paradigm. As the accusative and genitive case of the masculine 3rd person singular pronoun (he) is 'him', the accusative and genitive form of the feminine 3rd person singular pronoun (she) ought to be, in their point of view, 'shim'. Although  the apostrophe (s') is never used in English as a plural marker except when making numbers plural as in 1960's, 9's, etc, one graffitist used this rule creatively by inscribing 'six's' instead of '6's'.

As young native speakers use English to create words such as 're-tarded' to mean "under the influence of ecstasy to the extent of incapacitation", one foreign graffitist created

'gaytarded' demonstrating knowledge of the blending word formation process as well as semantic creativity. One would presume that 'gaytarded' is used to mean someone is disabled by being gay.

### 3.2       Popular Spelling

Popular spelling is a colloquial style of writing made appealing by information technology and adopted for purposes of brevity, efficiency, and economy.

In keeping with a universal trend, foreign graffitists of English have adopted a shorthand writing style to express longer common expressions in written communication. Shorthanded symbols are often used in text-messaging and web-chatting to make efficient use of time, effort, and space, and to keep up with colloquial pace and rhythm of speech (Crystal, 2006). While it takes less time to write, it takes more time from novices to interpret these symbols than from proficient advanced graffitists.

Although rebus is an early stage in the development of writing (Yule, 2010)14, it has gained currency these days of fast communication technology. To use pictures and single letters or numbers to represent whole words is quite widespread amongst the young who have revived and modified this ancient pictographic writing style. Arab graffitists of English as a foreign language are not an exception to this new trend. The collected graffiti feature numerous examples where numbers are used instead of words (eg, 1 for 'one', 2 for 'to', 'two' and 'too', 4 for 'for', 'four', and 'fore'), and letters stand for words (eg, u for 'you', r for 'are', and ur for 'you are' and 'your'. The following is a sample:

• 'When u lov some1 u do anything just 2 keep this lov ...'

• 'there is no distance..2 great//2 lov'

• 'Best friends 4ever'

• 'hurt me once shame on u, hurt me twice shame on me'

• 'thisz freedom in ur ARMS'

An example of the old concept of rebus writing is clearly seen in 'I'm in <3 with u 11th graders', where the pictogram consists of the combination of the 'less than' sign and cardinal number 3, meaning 'love' because the resulting combination is similar to the drawing of a heart.

Phonetic spelling is another popular style of writing. Arab graffitists of English seem to have picked up on phonetic spelling under the influence of globalization and internet communication. In the following graffiti statements, foreign learners of English have

replaced the vowels in 'love' and in 'was' with 'u' due to misconceived similarity in pronunciation: 'Lyric mania wuz here' and 'Luv me'.

To achieve economy and to keep pace with the rhythm of chatting, foreign graffitists often resort to standard slang abbreviation to transmit their messages as seen in these common examples:

- 'I love my BF' (boyfriend)

- 'omg did you do the hw?' (oh my God, homework)

- 'I am looking for sth' (something)

- 'Plz God help me' (please)

- 'btw we r girls' (by the way)

- 'illusions the best rock n roll band in Jordan' (and)

## 3.3    Romanization

Romanization is when graffitists inscribe an Arabic message using the Roman alphabets. One would resort to writing their own language in foreign alphabets either for effect or because of sheer ignorance and lack of ability to express themselves in the foreign tongue. It is also possible that mobile phone texting tradition is carried over to graffiti. Crystal (2008:125) observed that "in Arabic texts, numerals can be used to replace letters that don't exist in the Roman alphabet; for example, a 2 is used to show an Arabic glottal stop, so that insha'llah 'God willing' appears as 'insha2llah' though usually abbreviated to 'isa').

### 3.3.1   Effect

Graffitists use Romanization of Arabic for affective reasons, chief amongst which is the desire to express their own emotions that would otherwise remain inexpressible in English. Boasting is easier in the native language than in the foreign language. Equally important is the effect on the reader that is captured when an insult is leveled against someone or when an idiomatic expression in common currency is used. Below is a discussion of these facets of communication together with some illustrative examples.

### 3.3.2   Emotiveness

When the paramount concern of the graffitist is the expression of their own feelings and attitudes, there is nothing better than one's own native language.  Take as an example, 'habibiii'. It could have been written in English as, "MY darling", but the writer wanted to

emphasize the possessive pronoun, so she stressed that he was part of her by tripling the vowel corresponding to the English possessive adjective 'my'!

In another example, the graffitist uses 'Jo3ane Jo3ane Jo3ane' "hungry, hungry, hungry", as she screams for the satisfaction of spiritual vacuum using the secular language of everyday life. Often Sufi and metaphysical poets use the word hunger to express metaphorically the need for love. The profane language and secular language are often used to express a higher need, since language is limited and cannot contain the unlimited spiritual. Emotiveness is best illustrated in 'GARAF' "crab, shit, dirt". Here the graffitist shows disgust and repulsion as he or she is extremely fed up, frustrated, and annoyed with some aspects of daily life. As far as the Arab graffitist is concerned, the sounds of 'GARAF' are emotively stronger than the English equivalent. Metaphorically, it reveals the very unpleasant state of mind of the writer. The English synonym does not necessarily express the psychological intensity of 'GARAF'.

### 3.3.3   Insulting

To insult is to demean and cause emotional injury to others by using a humiliating word or phrase. Insulting is a common practice in graffiti and in internet chats. Crystal (2006) attributed the use of explicit language in Netspeak to the combination of intimacy induced by the shared background of participants and privacy of internet chats; he said, "Operating behind a false persona seems to make people less inhibited: they may feel emboldened to talk more and in different ways from their real-world linguistic repertoire. They must also expect to receive messages from others who are likewise less inhibited, and be prepared for negative outcomes", p.54. He also related, "Having been given access at one point to an IM exchange between some teenagers, I have to say that I have never seen such an unconstrained and inventive use of taboo words in written form. It is difficult to shock a linguist, but they did it!", p.255. It appears that this young generation of language users, whether native speakers or foreign speakers of English, share a common cyber-culture that does not frown as much on foul language as an older generation would have. The internet culture appears to have had a spillover effect on the language of foreign Jordanian speakers of English.

Arabic is endowed with a number of velarized, uvular, pharyngeal, and glottal sounds that appear to be associated in the minds of graffitists with what is ugly and rough. As such sounds are absent in English, graffiti writers have used numerals to replace softer English

sounds. These numerals are similar in appearance to the Arabic graphemes. The intention is to cause maximum emotional damage.

Insults take different forms, the most obvious of which is to dehumanize. For example, '7maaaraaaa' "she-ass", clearly is intended to dehumanize a female and to relieve the graffitist of a strong emotional discharge, especially when he or she intentionally prolongs the vowel sounds in both syllables of the word. The vowel elongation serves an exorcist purpose.

Some instances of insults gain strength from being reiterated, the result being a double insult. '5ara 3ala dana N toz 3leha' "shit on Dana and fart on her', means metaphorically "to hell with Dana; I don't care". Not only does the graffitist want to degrade but he or she aims at augmenting the insult by reiterating it in the same statement. A similar example that illustrates the 'I careless attitude' can be seen in 'toz 3ala al madrasa' "fart on school".

A milder form of insult sometimes used for teasing amongst friends is 'jack ya wese5' "Jack, you dirty". The graffitist hopes to grab attention by gentle provocation.

### 3.3.4   Boasting

Boasting is when the graffitist brags about himself or herself. They often label themselves with self congratulatory pompous statements to egotistically exaggerate the self. It might be used to veil some character deficiencies.

Like a Greek tragic hero, the graffitist shows a great deal of hubris when he says, 'rihani oo bas!!' "Rihani, the one and only". He hopes to gain respect of others by intimidating them based on empty statements of self-aggrandizement. Another graffitist builds up his character when he assumes a condescending attitude towards his peers in such a statement as, 'Qaisi za3eem' "Qaisi rules".

The graffitist assumes a God-like power in such a statement as, 'Diala 5awa' "Diala in spite of you" reminding Diala that he can bend social and legal rules/norms to coerce her into yielding to his desires or demands. The statement implies that Diala has no choice in the matter, for might makes right.

These statements must not be understood as symptoms of megalomania, but rather as common rhetoric prevalent in Middle Eastern cultures.

### 3.3.5   Relations

Romanization is used when the graffitist tries to find an easy common expression to convey various degrees/levels of personal relationship ranging from intimate to hostile. For example, the statement, 'on my Head walla ya 7ob!' "Done, on my word, my love! "demonstrates a very close and respectful relationship indicating a willingness of the graffitist to do anything in his power to gratify the request of his love. On the other hand, the statement, 'ana bkrah' "I hate…", demonstrates an extremely hostile relationship with the other. Because these expressions are so common, graffitists do not have to spend time and effort trying to find the unique right forms of expressions to describe these relationships. Notice in the first statement above, the graffitist started out with an English literal translation of the common Arabic expression '3ala rasi' and finished it with a straightforward transliteration of the Arabic expression 'walla ya 7ob'.

Sometimes, graffitists even resort to well-known quotations from well-known artistic sources to express different levels of relationships, such as '7ata enta ya R ?' "Even thou Brutus!" to avoid creative expressions that would take time and effort to coin.

### 3.4   Spelling Errors

Non-native learners of English produce errors that might be of a common nature or characteristic of their native language group.

### 3.4.1   Capitalization

Capitalization, for instance, is non-existent in the native language of the graffitists, yet the use of capital letters is emphasized in their EFL classes. It is not clear, though, whether the graffitists wrote the following statements without capitalization as a result of Arabic influence, ignorance of English rules, or as a fad that is common in e-communication amongst native speakers of English: 'spanish, turkce; sofi george lebanon'.

### 3.4.2   Contraction

The following contraction problem is quite common among some native speakers of English and EFL learners alike: 'if your not part of the solution your part of the problem'. Here the spelling error is primarily due to the homophonic relationship between the

possessive form 'your' and the contracted form 'you're', hence, the source of confusion to both native and learners of English. Context, however, makes the intended form clear.

### 3.4.3   Vowel Sequencing

Another problematic issue for native speakers and learners of English is vowel sequencing. The jingle 'i before e except after c', that Charlie Brown and Linus sang and which first appeared in Laurie (1866)15 testifies to the prevalence of this problem amongst English native speakers. Perhaps native speakers would neither misspell the word 'because' as 'becueas', nor the words 'liars' and 'jail' as 'Liers', 'jile'  respectively. They would, most likely however, misspell the word 'museum' but perhaps not as the foreign graffitists misspelled it: 'meusium' or 'museum'.

### 3.4.4   Compounding

Compounding can be confusing to some foreign learners of English as it is not clear whether the compounded nouns should be written as one word, hyphenated, or separated by space. As seen in 'fore ever'; 'god father', the graffitist has erroneously separated the compounds with spaces. It is evident that the error in 'fore' can be traced to the homophonic relationship between 'fore' and 'for'. In 'please respect your self', the graffitist treated the reflexive pronoun as a possessive phrase by splitting the compound, which is typical of many non-native speakers.

### 3.4.5   Mother Tongue Interference

Native language interference is responsible for some spelling errors characteristic of Arabs. The voicing contrast between the bilabial stops in English does not exist in Arabic; therefore, the voiceless bilabial stop /p/ is often written the way it is pronounced by Arabs as /b/. This typical error is made abundantly clear in 'boplic' "public".

One problem with English consonants is the distinction between the voiceless postalveolar fricative and the voiceless postalveolar affricate, namely 'sh' and 'ch' respectively. Since Standard Arabic does not treat the distinction as phonemic, this Arab English learner graffitist confuses 'catsh' for "catch".

Equally confusing to Arab speakers of English is the distinction between vowels. Since Arabic has only long and short versions of three vowel phonemes, the distinction between e, i,ee, y, and ai as in 'Turkee', 'madred', 'italya', 'palestain' is extremely

challenging to Arabs who tend to mispronounce and consequently misspell words with these vowels. When a word has a sequence of vowels as in 'liars', 'jail', 'heart', it poses double difficulty; on the one hand, the vowel sounds are not phonemic in Arabic; on the other, their pronunciation is not transparent, hence the wrong spelling in these graffiti statements: 'there all fucking Liers'; 'mr dabbas' 'take me to jile'; 'lion hart'.

A similar but somewhat different is 'italya', 'Roma', where the source of error is due to a third language interference, since the words 'Italya' and 'Roma' are spelt as such in the original Italian. Even though the classroom language of Arab graffitists is English, it appears that the writers opted for the Italian rather than the English version because the Arabic version has adopted the Italian sounds.

### 3.4.6   Overgeneralization

Some foreign language graffitists appear to have learned certain spelling rules but over-generalized them, the silent 'e' in word final position is a case in point. The word 'shit' is spelt on several occasions as 'shite' and the word 'lord' is spelt 'lorde'. Another case is that of doubling some consonants as in 'writing' and 'litlle'. The graffitist, here, seems to have generalized the unmotivated gemination phenomenon in English to contexts where it is not applicable. In fact, in the second example, the graffitist displayed confusion when he or she did not double the't', but doubled the 'l' instead. A similar case is 'soory', where the graffitist recognized that there was gemination but could not remember where; hence, he or she doubled the vowel 'oo' instead of the consonant 'r'.

### 3.4.7   Peculiarities of English

Silent sounds are challenging because of the incongruence between pronunciation and spelling. The presence of 'h' in 'whisper', 'w' in 'wrong', and 'c' in 'sucks' but absence in pronunciation caused some foreign graffitists to produce statements where these letters do not feature: 'Soos wisper'; 'the rong way'; 'school suks'.

Equally challenging is the discovery of whether 'c' is pronounced as /s/ or as /k/ and whether the /k/ sound is alphabetically realized as 'k', 'ck', 'c', or 'ch'. Foreign language graffitists appear to fall prey to this English spelling peculiarity. The graffiti collection offers multiple instances, examples of which are: 'SAK her'; 'KOOL KIDS OF DEATH'; 'SPLinter sell' for "Splinter cell", the fictional character's cell in the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles' universe.

A similar peculiarity of each is the spelling of the /f/ sound. Is it spelt as 'f', 'ph', or 'gh'? Arab foreign graffitist had to battle not only with the spelling of this sound but also with the phonemic voicing contrast between /f/ and /v/ since the voiced version is not a phoneme in Arabic; hence, these spelling errors: 'selfestor stalon' for "Silvester Stallone"; "pictures against the profet"; "louf my … out".

More problematic to Arab learners of English is the spelling of English vowels because Arabic recognizes only long and short versions of three vowel phonemes, namely /i/, /u/, and /a/. Consider these examples: 'Bist wishes Youself', 'EVIL HETLAR', 'Go to the hill' for "go to hell". The reduction of English vowels when unstressed to the schwa sound is most perplexing for Arab learners of English. This problem stems from the fact that Arabic does not recognize the schwa as a phoneme; hence, EFL learners are left on their own to figure out the spelling representation of the schwa sound. 'Keep silant' and 'keep yourslf' are examples that best illustrate this type of error.

## 3.4.8   Sound Assimilation

More perplexing still is sound assimilation and elision, where articulation parsimony causes more divergence between spelling and pronunciation. In the case of assimilation, as in 'you doshonest and cheap', the high front vowel in the first syllable seems to have assimilated to the mid back vowel in the second syllable. Confused as to the proper pronunciation of the word, the foreign graffitist appears to have written the word 'dishonest' the same way that they pronounced it. Elision is another cause for confusion for foreign graffitists. In 'the begning of death', the word 'beginning' has been reduced to two syllables with the deletion of the lower-high front vowel in the second syllable. This is a typical pronunciation error of Arab learners of English reflected in spelling.

## 3.4.9   Mispronunciation

Foreign speakers' mispronunciation of English is a recognized cause of spelling errors (cf. Bebout, 1985)16. The elision example above is not unique. The transposition of letters is another type of such a spelling error. In these statements, 'NO BODY IS PREFECT…IM NO BODY' and 'RK covertte', the graffitist practiced metathesis in pronunciation and reflected that in their writing demonstrating inadequate knowledge of the difference between 'prefect' and "perfect", and 'covertte' and "Corvette".

## 4.    Conclusion:

What percolates through the foregoing discussion is the effect of globalization and Internet communication on language learning.

In cognizance of that, teachers of English as a foreign language must adopt a liberal approach to spelling. They need to recognize the fact that their foreign language learners are exposed to native English spelling trends. Following in the footsteps of native speakers, learners would play with spelling, simplify the spelling of some words, use spelling to express intensity of emotions, innovate in spelling, and imitate spellings that are popular amongst young native English speakers.

It might be dangerous to encourage EFL teachers to deemphasize Standard English spelling, for learners need to be taught what is proper and universally acceptable. However, learners need to also be current and must be able to gain acceptability in e-communities that they associate with. If they were to always use standard spelling in chat rooms or in texting, for example, they might risk being ostracized. It is very much like someone using archaic English in today's supermarkets.

In fact, teachers ought to utilize learners' awareness of such trends and train them to discriminate between colloquial forms that they encounter on the net and standard forms that they must adopt in formal communication. The concepts of formality and familiarity extend to spelling. If EFL learners were to understand these concepts well, they would know when to use colloquial and creative forms of spelling and when to refrain from that. While emphasizing proper spelling, teachers should not stifle creativity that is embedded in playfulness and popular spelling. Furthermore, they must encourage learners' spirit of ownership of the English language and the joy of practicing playful spelling, for that spirit could motivate them to master English.

Not all spelling issues are indicative of playfulness and fashionable trends. Some are genuine EFL errors due either to inadequate competence or to mother tongue interference. Perhaps teachers can be guided by English-Arabic contrastive linguistic research but they should also benefit from the common error categories identified above including those due to vowel spelling and sequencing, rule overgeneralization, mispronunciation, sound assimilation and elision, etc.

Mother tongue interference may cause spelling issues and so might mother culture. As the internet has broken many cultural boundaries, Arab speakers of English have found it easier to express vulgarities in English due to restrictions imposed by their conservative Arab

language culture. Moreover, it is more natural for them not only to think but also to feel in their native Arabic, thus finding it more convenient to express emotions in Romanized Arabic when they boast about themselves and demean others. It might be noteworthy to point that boasting is not indicative of megalomania but a common rhetorical practice of Middle Eastern cultures.

Arab graffitists have shown willingness to borrow from other language cultures, namely English, to express themselves, for the question of personal identity seems to supersede cultural identity.

**References:**

Bebout, L. (1985). An Error Analysis of Misspellings Made by Learners of English as a First and as a Second Language. Journal of Psycholinguistic Research 14(6). 569-593.

Claramonte, M. B. & Alonso, J. I. G. (1993). Categories, Morphological Features, and Slang in the Graffiti of a United States Western University. Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses 6. 19-31.

Crystal, D. (2006). Language and the Internet(2nd edn.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Crystal, D. (2008). Txtng: The Gr8 Db8. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Daielsson, B. (1955). John Hart's Works on English Orthography and Pronunciation. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell

Graffiti (2009, September 14). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.

Green, J. A. (2003). The Writing on the Stall: Gender and Graffiti. Journal of Language and Social Psychology 22(3). 282-296.

Laurie, J. S. (1866). Manual of English Spelling. London: Marshall & Co.

Loewenstine, H. V., Ponticos, G. D. & Paludi, M. A. (1982). Sex Differences in Graffiti as a Communication Style. The Journal of Social Psychology 117. 307-308.

Nilsen, D. L. F. (1978). Graffiti vs Doublespeak: The Anti-Establishment Strikes Back. The English Journal 67(2). 20-25.

Obeng, S. G. (2000). Doing Politics on Walls and Doors: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Graffiti in Legon (Ghana). Multilingua 19(4). 337-365.

Obeng, S. G. (2000). Speaking the Unspeakable: Discursive Strategies to Express Language Attitudes in Legon (Ghana) Graffiti. Research on Language and Social Interaction 33(3). 291-319.

Punctuation (2010). Encyclopedia Britannica.  Encyclopedia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica.

Solomon, H. & Yager, H. (1975). Authoritarianism and Graffiti. The Journal of Social Psychology 97. 149-150.

Webster, N. (2010). Encyclopedia Britannica.  Encyclopedia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica.

Yule, G. (2010). The Study of Language (4 edn.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(7152 words)