

Semiotic of Billboards

Ahmad Khair Mohd Nor
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris

INTRODUCTION

The role of billboards in business' premises is vital as a form of publicity to attract customers, whether to inform about the business itself, or to tell about the services offered by the business premise. The language used on the billboards can be found in varieties of shapes and formats based on linguistic or nonlinguistic factors. The nonlinguistic factors are based on the statements that explained that the name on billboards is one of the sign which could attract consumers to come to the premise, or to get the bargain or services offered by the premise. In linguistics terms, the usage of billboards is part of sign system (semiotic). The language on the billboards will help the public to know of the patterns of the language usage. It will explain why certain forms of language are being used and some do not.

Language is a communication tool (Lyons 1977: 32). There are many of ways on how we could convey information, and one of them is using billboards. Billboards, in particular language on billboards, contain varieties of information. It is designed to persuade the audience to buy the products or services advertised on the billboards. Therefore, the language on the billboard is meant to positively influence consumers.

Semiotic refers to the science of symbols and signs. According to a semiotic scholar, Charles Sanders Pierce in Sudjiman et al. (1992), "sign is what represents something for someone", and language contains a system of signs and symbols which represents ideas and concepts. Therefore, from the semiotic perspective, the name of a company or business is in actual fact a sign. It refers to an object either in physical or abstract forms. One's experiences about the surrounding play a vital role in interpreting the sign. A sign is a combination of a concept and an utterance that represents the concept, and between concept and utterance, a suitable sign (or icon) is created.

Names of businesses, trademarks and brands of all types of products and services do represent such experiences within the audience. Therefore, they all could be used in advertisements to persuade the audience to buy products and services. For example, the company names such as Astro, Celcom and Maxis are being used as icons to highlight the services from the respective telecommunication companies. The name or business icons are used by the business communities to indicate the existence of the particular businesses.

Besides that, it is designed to attract the public to buy products or services advertised by the company. Apart from that, the name on the business billboards can be a sign to indicate educational level and culture of the people involved. It is clear that the name stated on the billboard described the skill and creativity of the advertisers in using the language used. The language used are words, names, lines, or sentences used by the owner of the business to display the billboards.

Generally, it can be said that premises have billboards that consist of the business' name, which are professionally made and with a variety of contents. The use of names on billboards depends on various factors such as reliability, environment, events, etc. which have become a sign system for the growth of the business itself.

Names and the world view of the language

It is important for names to be seen in every aspects of human life. Each daily activity is always related with people's names, events or places. Sometimes these names are being mentioned or act as references. The definition or meaning is an amount of words which become the substantives for the noun phrase. Basically, nouns consist of names of people, places, objects or concepts. Nik Safiah Karim et al. (2008). For instance, the word Maryam, *Si Belang*, *rumah*, *cahaya*, Melayu etc. are nouns that refer to something concrete or abstract. When a name is used, it is related with the world view (weltanschauung) of the community.

There is a difference in the categorization of nouns into sets. For the purpose of this paper, categorization made by Zabeeh (1968) and Le Bihan (1974) in Gottdiener (1999) is used. Classifications of nouns are as follows:

1. Nouns: Aminah, Muaz, Suzana, etc.
2. Names of Animals: *Sang Kancil* (deer), *Si Belang* (tiger), *Sang Lamri* (fox), etc.
3. Terms of address: *Ayah* (father), *Emak* (mother), *Pak Ngah*, etc.
4. Place names: Ipoh, Malaysia, Taman Wangsa, etc.
5. Time and Date: Monday, May, Century, etc.
6. Institutional Names: Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, UiTM, Ministry of Education, etc.
7. Products: Panadol, Sembilu, Concorde, etc.
8. Symbols: H²O (Science), % (Maths)
9. Specific name for publicity: Lucy (Storm), *kembar siam* (siamese twins), *minah kilang* (factory girls).

Such a classification not absolute, as the categorization given above can be merged into a fewer sets:

Name: 1, 2, and 3

Place: 4

Time: 5

Names of man-made products: 6, 7, and 8

Metaphor's: 9

Object and observation materials

In this paper, the nouns (names) on the billboards are the object of the observation. They refer to businesses, industrial products and services. The billboards observed are located around the town of Tanjung Malim, Perak.

The premises observed are restaurants, photo shops, fashion houses, tailor shops, mini markets, blacksmiths and motor vehicle workshops, hardware shops, hawkers, etc. Banks and schools are not included. For the purpose of this research, the premises have been picked randomly. All the data taken and analyzed are based on the categories and the appeal the billboards made. The billboards selected in this research have been categorized into six groups:

1. Billboards without names (but the activities is indicated)
2. Billboards with names
3. Billboards with nature elements
4. Billboards based on the name of places
5. Billboards based on prominent people
6. Billboards based on numbers

These six categories of billboards will be discussed below.

1. Billboards without names

The owners do not use their names or other people's names on the premise due to the reason where they are more inclined to show indicators of services offered by them. By doing so, the public will easily know of the services or business offered by that particular premise. Beside that, by doing it this way, it can help the consumers choose the services or products they want. For example:

Kedai Sukan dan Alat Tulis (Stationery and Sports Equipment Shop),
Kedai Pajak Gadai (Pawn Shop),
Restoran Tom Yam (Tom Yam Restaurant),
Klinik Gigi (Dental Clinic),
Gedung Perabot (Furniture Mall),
Kedai Jahit (Tailor Shop),
Tukang Kunci (Locksmith),
Tukang Kasut (Cobbler),
Kedai Gunting (Barber Shop),
Kedai Photostat (Photocopy Shop),
Butik Kecantikan (Beauty Parlor),
Sekolah Memandu (Driving School),
Salon Kecantikan (Beauty Salon),
Kedai Barang-Barang Perhiasan (Accessories Shop), etc.

Sometimes this category of shops will add additional information after offering their services or (italicized words are used to spell the additional information). For instance:

Kedai Gunting Rambut Wanita (Women's Barber Shop), *Restoran Nasi Kandar Pulau Pinang* (Penang's Nasi Kandar Restaurant), *Kedai Jahit(an) Wanita* (Women's Tailor Shop), *Kedai Pakaian Pengantin* (Bridal Shop), *Kedai Servis Komputer dan Jualan* (Computer Shop, Sales and Services), *Rawatan Kecantikan Tradisional* (Traditional Beauty Treatment), etc.

There are some billboards that do not write down information, instead symbols or marks are used, such as logos of the company are displayed, logos of spectacles, or symbols of keys. For instance, when Panasonic logo is used for electrical products is enough to tell the shoppers about the products. Therefore, it could attract the consumers.

Other examples, the sign crescent helps to advertise a klinik (clinic), the sign of a key will help describe the *Tukang Kunci* (locksmith). In this matter, crescent and key are considered as icons.

Owners of premises which do not provide any information using words, believe that this is a more effective method to get the public to know of the products and services offered. Therefore, what the consumers need is just an indicator of the services or products offered. In this context, a billboard provide the icons that signify messages intended.

There are billboards that have added extra information in them. For example:

Kedai Elektrik (Electrical Appliances Shop)
Servis dan Membaiki Penyaman Udara dan Alat Elektrik
 (Air conditioner and electrical appliances repairs and services)
 Telefon: 05-4506567

Writing only electrical appliances on the billboard can cause the customers to assume that only electrical appliances are sold in the shop. To avoid that extra information is needed in the billboards. In this case, the owner adds 'Air conditioner and electrical appliances, repairs and services' on the board to tell customers that his shop also provides repairs and services. Besides, he also adds a phone number for the customers to call. These types of billboards give customers information so that they can easily go to the shop that provide services wanted. Other examples are:

Kedai Alat Telekomunikasi
 (Menjual serta Membaiki Telefon Bimbit, Alat-alat Perhubungan dan Alat-alat Ganti)
 Telefon: 6214663/6234453

Telecommunication Device Shop
 (Cell phone and spare parts sales and services)
 Telephone: 6214663/6234453

2. Billboard with names

There are a few ways of displaying billboards with names:

(i) Billboards with owner's full name

- (ii) Billboards with owner's nickname
- (iii) Billboards with family member's name

- (a) Billboards with owner's full name

These category of billboards contain the owner's full name and the services that they provide, for example:

Maulana's Grocery Shop, Rosmah's Bakery Shop, Rahmah's Beauty Salon, Jalal's Restaurant, and Lim's Electrical Appliances Shop.

- (b) Billboards with owner's nickname

Billboards with owner's nickname are dominant on the Malay business premises. They usually use names that signify the elders in the family such as, *Restoran Opah* (Grandma's Restaurant), *Kedai Kakak Yang* (Kak Yang's Stall), and *Restoran Mak Teh* (Mak Teh's Restaurant). In semiotic, these names represent the name of the owner that have very close or affective connotation to the customers. As in the *Restoran Opah* (Grandma's Restaurant) for example, customers will feel like eating at home with good cuisine and warm hospitality.

- (c) Billboards with family member's name

Billboards with family member's name show that the businesses are family businesses. It also represents the respect that they have with each other in the businesses. The examples are: *Kedai Perabot Lim dan Anak-Anak* (Lim and Sons' Furniture Shop), *Kedai Runcit Alaku dan Anak-Anak* (Alaku and Daughters' Grocery Shop).

3. Billboards with nature elements

Nature enthusiasts use elements of nature on their billboards. For examples: *Rimbun Selasih Pharmacy*, *Anggerik Desa Hotel*, *Bunga Raya Hotel*, *Mangga Stall*, and *Cahaya Resort*. They use these kinds of names to incorporate the beauty of nature into their business. It usually brings the feelings of peace and calm to the businesses. The selection of these names is parallel with Barthes' opinion, where these elements represent the symbol of richness of the world.

4. Billboards based on the name of places

This type of billboards is mainly used in food-based businesses. They used names of places to show where the food originated. It somehow enhances the customers' enjoyment in consuming the food. Customers are said to experience the taste of the original foods from such places such as: *Selera Minang* (Minang's Cuisines), *Nasi Kandar Pulau Pinang*, *Masakan Kampung*, *Pau Tanjung Malim*. It is also being used in other types of business, for examples, *Perabot Taman Bernam*, *Kedai Runcit Taman Segar*.

5. Billboards with based on prominent people

Sometimes, the contribution of a person is chosen as the business name and written on billboards. As an example, a bookshop has the name of *Pustaka Za'ba*, after a well-known scholar. The billboards is a way of showing an appreciation toward him.

6. Billboards based on numbers

Using numbers in billboards is a way of informing the customers of the price rates in chargeable. For example, *Kedai Dua Ringgit*, where all goods sold are priced at RM2.00 each. Besides that, the Chinese believe that certain numbers could bring good luck to the business, such as a double eight *Lapan-Lapan* (double eight). This number means happiness and prosperity according to the Chinese customs. So having a name like *Restoran Lapan-lapan* on the signboard could bring happiness and prosperity to the owner and also the customers.

Language Structure

These are what I have found from the analysis of language aspect on signboards:

1. Writing in short form

Sometimes shop owners use short forms (initials) on billboards as there is not enough space, such as, *Kedai Jam K.S.Lim*. But there are billboards written in short form without providing clear information. For example, *Kedai Buku C.C.Y* and *Perniagaan R&S*. Perhaps they were merely taking a simple name for their business, or a combination of alphabets that represents their affection for someone.

2. Names in foreign language

Choices of words on billboards also have been influenced by foreign languages. The Malay borrows many English words in order to keep up with the latest terms or new words. Therefore, many business people choose to use the latest terms in the language to match the services that they provide. For example, they use words that represent technology for information, for technology-based business. They came up with *Cyber Café*, *Pusat Internet*, *Kedai Komputer* and *Mobile Phone* as their business names.

This type of business usually sells modern products such as communication devices, clothing, and fast food. Examples: John Master (clothing brand), KFC restaurant (fast food) and Rhythm (bookshop).

Arabic words are used by the Muslims who have religion-based business, for example, *Rufaqa Restaurant* and *Kedai Buku Agama Ihya*.

3. Sentences without subject

Usually due to limitation of space, subjects of sentences are left out. For instance, *Rawatan Homeopati* (Homeopathy Treatment) instead of homeopathy treatment shop or *Masakan Minang* (Minang Cuisine) instead of Restoran Masakan Minang.



Conclusion

In general, business people do make the billboards with professional help to promote the business name to attract customers. Those business names are usually taken from family names, nature or respected person. After all, these names are the mechanism in choosing the right name for the right business for effective promotion of products.

Bibliografi

- Abdul Jalil Hj Ishak, (2002). "Pemilihan Nama Tempat Dalam Weltanschauung Melayu: Kerelevanannya Dari Sudut Geografi Sejarah." dalam Prosiding Persidangan Antarabangsa Pengajian Melayu Beijing Ke-2. Penyusun Abdullah Hassan. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Ahmad Khair Mohd Nor, (2003). *Pengantar Sintaksis Bahasa Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications and Distributors.
- Barthes, Roland, (1957). *Mythologies*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Gottdiener, L., (1995). *Postmodern Semiotics: Material Culture and the Forms of Postmodern Life*. Cambridge: Massachusset: Blackwell Puslisher.
- John Haiman, (1980). The Iconicity of Grammar. *Language* 56.3:515-40.
- John Lyons, (1977). *Pengenalan Linguistik Teoretis*. (Pent. Abdullah Hassan). Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Sudjiman, Panuti dan Aart van Zoest, (1992). *Serba-Serbi Semiotika*. Jakarta: PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama.
- Arbak Othman, (2003). *Semiotik dalam Penelitian Puisi*. Seri Kembangan: Citra Kunia Enterprise.
- Nik Safiah Karim, Farid M.Onn, Hashim Haji Musa dan Abdul Hamid Mahmood, (2008). *Tatabahasa Dewan Edisi Ketiga*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.