

# OBSERVATION ON SIGNBOARD PHOTOGRAPHS IN KOTA KINABALU, SABAH AS INDICATOR OF CHANGE TOWARDS GLOBAL BUSINESS<sup>1</sup>

Suhaimi Salleh<sup>2</sup>  
Noraini Abdullah<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

*This paper reports on the study of signboards' designs and words, not often studied in Malaysia, as research variables. Treating these designs and words as valid variables the writers attempted to examine signboards as indicators of change. Data in the form of photographs of shops signage, taken in various locations in Kota Kinabalu were analysed and described to determine what aspects of the signboards would provide the desired indicators. The choice of designs, languages, words, colours, graphics, positions and complimentary signages were coded and entered into SPSS for ease of analysis. These were then discussed in relation to the socio-economic and geographical attributes to ascertain what kind of indicators were identifiable. This study tried to identify what background and words, colours and languages were the top choices in the the making of the signages. Analyses of the signboards facade will identify whether the design and wordings as variables can be described as 'conventional', 'unconventional' or 'recent' with several possibly unchanged over time with designs and wordings traceable to signage designs which were usually up to the period several decades ago. Preliminary findings of this study showed that the signboards of shops within the areas of Kota Kinabalu City and two neighbouring towns (Manggatal and Telipok) in the zone of Kota Kinabalu, were not compliant to the guidelines prescribed by the relevant authorities. This paper thus concluded by listing several indicators of change discernable through the facade of shops' signboards.*

**Keywords:** *signboards, signages designs, indicators of change*

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## Introduction

Searches on studies pertaining to signboards in Malaysia had indicated, to date, not as one of the most prolific in this country. Apart from commenting on aspects of semiotics of signboards, this paper attempted to examine signboards as indicators of change. This examination of the

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<sup>2</sup> Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Jalan UMS, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Tel: +608832000 Ext. 1771. E-mail: ssuhaimi@ums.edu.my

<sup>3</sup> Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Science and Natural Resources, Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Jalan UMS, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Tel: +608832000 Ext. 5790. E-mail: noraini@ums.edu.my

photographs of shops' signboards had proved to be a journey through time and periods which recorded changes and transformation of words, colour scheme, designs and materials utilised in signboards. Ariffin & Husin (2013) examined the use of language on store fronts of four town centres in Malaysia. Their analysis found that English was the preferred language for the store signs in larger cities, while those in the smaller and provincial towns were in favour of 1) Bahasa Malaysia (Malay), 2) a mixture of Malay and English, or 3) a mixture of these two and another native language. The findings showed that the language chosen for the store signs was related to the type of the township, store location, and the targeted customers. Their analysis also revealed that the store signs in the larger cities portrayed sophisticated language use in terms of English or foreign names, foreign loanwords and language play. On the other hand, the store signs in the smaller towns contained simple Malay, English, or a native language.

Outside of Malaysia, such as in Africa, Juffermans (2008) studied local emplacement and global identities in signboard and billboard literacies in urban Gambia. He found that although 'emplaced' in a typical economy of literacy where both English and writing were expensive symbolic capital, the signboards and billboards in urban Gambia are highly creative and often multimodal pieces of writing. Subsequent to that, Akindele (2011) analysed data collected from public domains such as street signs, advertising signs, building names, warning notices and prohibitions, billboards, shop signs, informative signs in Gaborone, Botswana. This study found that English dominated the landscape as it is in the case of other Anglo African countries. However, it also suggested that there was an influx of Chinese language and culture.

Denis & Pontille (2010) examined Parisian subway signs and their scripts against perception by passing travellers/riders. What they "learned from the details of the signage scripts and from the analysis of the embodied practices showed that the accountability performed by subway signs was plural. They identified four different figures of riders: the informed one, who wants to control her trip and has to read messages; the planner, who anticipates the conditions of her ride and has to use calculation devices; the problem solver, who calms down her anxiety by finding clear options exposed on recognizable signboards; the reactive entity, who circulates smoothly by responding automatically to specific graphical features of the surroundings." This study showed that signage viewers were reactive entities.

Botnick & Raja (2012) studied Indian hand-painted signboards in the lead-up to the Commonwealth Games in 2010. Their paper examined "the ingenuity of the hand-painted signboard which employed complex visual strategies such as three-dimensional depth cues, typographic innovation and visual metaphor, while assessing the unique ways in which hand-painted signage shaped the experience of public space in an urban environment." They also proposed the idea of 'aesthetic of accommodation' where "the visual and the social order here become sites for the expression of an 'adjustment' ethic visible in the hybrid art practice of hand-painted signboards and the multiple rather than single usage of public spaces."

Hussien *et al.* (2015) surveyed shops and used sociolinguistic questionnaire in Amman, Jordan, to examine what languages were used in shop signs in different areas and what were the factors behind language choice in shop signs. They found that shop signs regarding languages used were either monolingual or bilingual signs and using foreign names in shop signs profoundly enhanced perception of prestige and positive attitudes towards foreign names, commercial interests, type of goods/services provided and the educational and economic levels of customers. Meanwhile, Yiu (2015) studied two specific neighbourhoods in Kowloon, Hong

Kong where data collected due to their popularity among locals and tourists as shopping and dining places as well as their semiotic abundance of signage. The data analysis found that shopfront signs make use of text and images to achieve the informational and promotional ends. It revealed a range of strategies used by the shopfront signage for signification and advertising. Yiu's findings had also amongst others revealed how the shopfront signage derived meanings from the material aspects of the physical world, including the use of identical letterform in decontextualized shopfront signs.

More recently, Shin Yeon Woo (2016) believed it was necessary to form an integrated landscape that reflected the geography, cultural characteristics and urban context of the street. His study aimed to improve the design of signboards to strengthen the identity of the city and attractiveness of the designated area in Seoul, Korea. The study was however focused on music related businesses area. One of the findings was that continuity and musical motifs were needed through the design of the facade design. The study concluded that the more the cultural and artistic characteristics were emphasized, the more attention was paid to the design and formative beauty and while emphasizing the identity of the landscape, it was necessary to pay close attention to the hierarchy of landscape, buildings, signage, and information transfer power.

## **Methodology**

This study began with the intention to explore the methodology of semiotic analysis for the study of the texts and images depicted on signboards in the sampled locations. It was however morphed into a more basic method proposed below.

For this article, data were collected from direct visual observations of items in the locations particularly the signboards and the environments they were placed, informal interviews and photographs of signboards. Hence, data were extracted from photographed signboards of shop buildings built before the year 2000 because this study had assumed that in newer shop buildings or complexes, more recent design of signboards would be incorporated. This article also had put forward a template described as Figure 2 below which the writers believed was a novel method of describing and extracting analysable information from signboards' depictions.

## ***Data Collection Locations***

Samples of signboards photographs were taken within the geographical area known as Kota Kinabalu. Kota Kinabalu is "defined within the borders of what is the district, formerly the municipality, of Kota Kinabalu. With an area of 351 square kilometres, it is the smallest but the most populous district in Sabah. It encompasses Tanjung Aru and Kepayan in the south, up to Telipok and Sepanggar in the north. The urban expanse of the city, however extends into the district of Penampang on the south of the city border, which includes the towns of Donggongan and Putatan. The combined area of Kota Kinabalu (district) and the contiguous built up areas in Penampang and Putatan is known as Greater Kota Kinabalu" (Wikipedia). Due to the expanse of the area, this study only collected samples from Telipok, Manggatal and the Gaya areas of Kota Kinabalu City as shown in the following Figure 1.



Figure 1: Map of Sampling Locations  
 Source: Google Map

The new spelling Manggatal has replaced Menggatal due to the reversion back to the original indigenous pronunciation of the word. Photographs of signboards on the front of shops along selected roads were taken at the sampling locations marked with yellow star in Figure 1 above.

**Data Input and Analysis**

Photographs taken were examined. While examining the semiotics of the words and designs, the following variables indicated in Figure 2 were also noted and entered into SPSS version 22 for analysis.

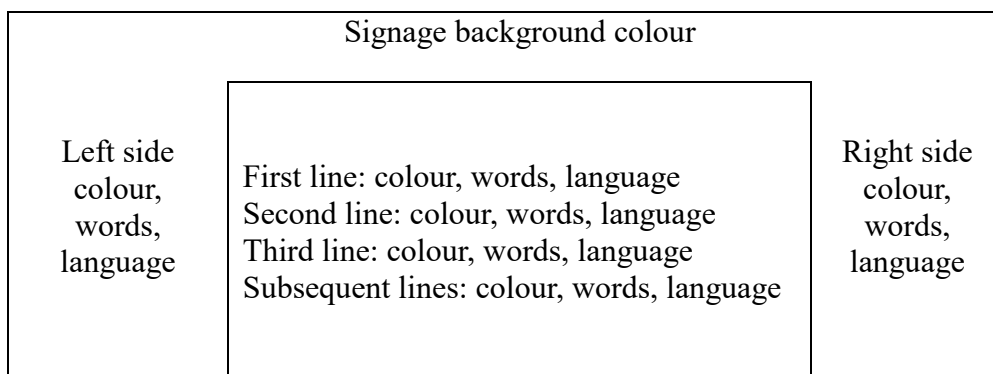


Fig. 2: Template of Shop Fronts' Signboards and Variables

## Results and Discussion

The followings were the quantitative analyses based on the signage template described as in Figure 2 above. Extrapolations were made when the signage did not conform to the given template. Table 1 showed the distribution of signboards sampled in this study. The samples were almost evenly divided into the Gaya area (64) which is nearest to the City Centre, and Manggatal and Telipok areas (66) which are outside the City Centre.

Table 1: No. of Signboards Photographed According to Areas

Areas	Frequency	%
Gaya	64	49.2
Manggatal	36	27.7
Telipok	30	23.1
Total	130	100

Table 2: Lines on Signboards

No. of Lines	Frequency	%
1	29	22.3
2	62	47.7
3	25	19.2
4	10	7.7
5	4	3.1
Total	130	100.0

Table 3: Columns on Signboards

No. of Columns	Frequency	%
1	74	56.9
2	40	30.8
3	15	11.5
4	1	.8
Total	130	100.0

Based on the above Figure 2 template, the number of lines and columns discernable on each signboards were input into SPSS. Most of the signboards used as samples in this study had 2 lines of words (47.7%) and 1 column (56.9%) type of design layout as shown by Table 2 and Table 3 respectively.

### *Design of Signboards: Background and Wordings Colours*

Scholars have a consensus that colours can be categorised into primary, secondary and tertiary colours. Primary colours are red, yellow, and blue while secondary colours are green, orange, and purple. Tertiary colours are derivatives of mixtures of the primary and secondary colours.

The Natural Colour System however, had proposed that elementary colours were white, black, red, yellow, green and blue (Hård *et al.*, 1996). It was generally agreed that colours would come in different shades or hues of the basic or elementary colours. For details, see <http://color-wheel-artist.com/hue.html>). In this study, shades or hues of the observed colours were re-coded into SPSS to the nearest elementary colour. Background with many colours with pictures were coded as 'graphics'. Table 4 below indicated the frequency of the colours used in this study.

Table 4: Signboards Background Elementary Colour

Background	Frequency N=130
White	45 (36%)
Yellow	22 (17%)
Red	21 (16%)
Black	12 (9%)
Blue	12 (9%)
graphics	8 (6%)
Green	4 (3%)
Brown	3 (2%)

### *Languages and Words According to Line on Signboards*

Regulations had been passed by the various Malaysian governmental bodies that the Malay Language must be given preference in advertisement since Malay is the national language. The authors, however, up to this date, are still unable to obtain a copy of the 1982 Regulations for the Advertisements (Federal Territory) or *Undang-undang Kecil Iklan (Wilayah Persekutuan) 1982*. However, according to a page available through the Kuala Lumpur City Hall's (Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur) website at [www.dbkl.gov.my](http://www.dbkl.gov.my), for an advertising sign to be approved by the City Hall, the signages must prioritise the use of the Malay Language in terms of size, colour and position.

Table 5: Language on Signboards vs. Distance from Kota Kinabalu City Centre

	Closest to City Centre	Away from the City Centre		All Locations
<b>First Line Language</b>	<b>Gaya</b>	<b>Manggatal</b>	<b>Telipok</b>	<b>Total</b>
Malay	20 (32%)	17 (52%)	16 (57%)	53 (43%)
English	31 (50%)	14 (42%)	9 (32%)	54 (44%)
Chinese	11 (18%)	2 (6%)	3 (11%)	16 (13%)
<b>Second Line Language</b>	<b>Gaya</b>	<b>Manggatal</b>	<b>Telipok</b>	<b>Total</b>
Malay	6 (15%)	7 (28%)	15 (56%)	28 (30%)
English	26 (63%)	12 (48%)	8 (30%)	46 (49%)
Chinese	9 (22%)	6 (24%)	4 (15%)	19 (20%)
<b>Third Line Language</b>	<b>Gaya</b>	<b>Manggatal</b>	<b>Telipok</b>	<b>Total</b>
Malay	3 (27%)	2 (22%)	0 (0%)	5 (18%)
English	3 (27%)	5 (56%)	3 (38%)	11 (39%)
Chinese	5 (45%)	2 (22%)	5 (63%)	12 (43%)

Contrary to the said and similar regulations, this study had found that English was the top first line language for all the signboards (44%) sampled with those in the Gaya areas at 50%. Gaya which was closest to the City Centre. This finding was similar to one described in an earlier paper by Suhaimi Salleh *et al.* (2015) for signboards in the towns of Tamparuli and Tuaran where English was also preferred.

However, Malay was top as first line language in Manggatal (52%) and Telipok (57%) which are towns away from the City Centre. This finding agreed with those of Arifin & Husin (2013) that Malay was the preferred language in smaller towns. Overall, Malay came second at 43%. English was also the top second line language for all the signboards (49%) with those in Gaya areas at 63%. Malay came second at 30% overall but top in Manggatal (48%) and



Telipok (56%). For the third line language used on signboards, Chinese was top overall at 43%, only 45% in Gaya but at 63% of the shops in Telipok, a small township furthest from the heart of the Kota Kinabalu City.

### Old and New Imagery



Photo 1: Mobile phone shop in Manggatal



Photo 2: Light travellers accommodation in Gaya



Photo 3: Frontage of an eatery in Gaya



Photo 4: Frontal and side signage (Telipok)



Photo 5: Signboard and roll-down canvas blind (Manggatal)



Photo 6: Frontal and side signage (Gaya)



Photo 7: Old and conventional design and material (Telipok)



Photo 8: Old and conventional (Manggatal)



Photo 9: Old and conventional (Gaya closest to the City)

Photo 1 showed the facade of a mobile phone shop in Manggatal. It had images of old phone models indicating that the signage had not been updated. Given its location as away

from the City Centre, it would suggest that this shop and other similar shops were oblivious to the possibilities of the attraction of new phones models, and would remain detached from the wider global businesses or market. Photo 2 and Photo 3 were taken in the Gaya area which was closest to the heart of the City. Although erected on the facade of relatively old buildings, they depicted modern design and new businesses. In several shops with modern design, website and email addresses were displayed. Photo 3 also showed the creative use of non-conventional materials as signage. Photos 4, 5, and 6 showed the use of main and complimentary signages. Photo 4 of a signboard in Telipok and Photo 6 of a shop front in Gaya depicted how frontal and complimentary side signages were utilised. Photo 6 of a money-lending premise in Manggatal illustrated how roll-down blind was used to compliment the front facade.

A closer examination and comparison of photographs 4 to 7 above and the followings photographs 10-12 exhibited discernable differences. Certain designs, layouts and wordings/texts appeared to be outdated and conventional. Some types of tourists would probably favour the dated looks. This did not reflect the readiness of the shop-owners to venture into more globalised business. This seemed to cater only to local needs and consumers. Perhaps in-depth interviews of selected shop-owners would reveal their thinking about their signboards and level of readiness to go into an enlarged customers base. Changes and transformations were most probably constrained by the owners' mindsets, types of current business and their economic capacity to invest in better designed signboards.

Photos 7 to 12 demonstrated shop signages probably better described as old, new or recent 'conventional' or 'unconventional' designs. There were also signboards possibly unchanged over time with designs and wordings traceable to types which were common several decades ago. The word 'sharikat' was the old pre-1970's spelling for 'syarikat' (meaning 'company' in English). This indicated that the signages were unchanged or upgraded for the past thirty or more years.



Photo 10: New and fresh words and design (Telipok)



Photo 11: Signage for the mini post office (Manggatal)



Photo 12: Modern signboard design and novel business type (Gaya)



## Conclusion

This research combined qualitative semiotics and quantitative enumeration methods for the study of shop signboards. It was found that Malaysia also shared Africa's Gambia and Botswana, Jordan and Hong Kong historical past as former British colonies or protectorates. Shop signboards which incorporated foreign language, in this case English, were perceived as prestigious. In this study of signboards in the Kota Kinabalu City and her neighbouring towns of Manggatal and Telipok, the shops' facade and signboards indicated either discernable changes or stagnance over the years. In the context of Malaysia, the choice of English as the preferred language for the first line of signboards was, however, a positive indicator and base for preparation to engage in further moves towards participation in globalised businesses.

Changing or updated choice of designs and words and complimentary advertising signages were also discovered by this research. While entry to a wider market space would be hampered by poor investment in more up-to-date and visually attractive signages, geographical and infrastructural constraints should be factored in before allocating resources for better signages. Except for the more cosmopolitan zones in the heart of Kota Kinabalu City, those shops in sub-urban areas like the small township of Manggatal and Telipok had specific and limited market segments. This probably accounted for the signages stagnating as old and conventional shops' frontage.

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