



## Language Choice and Preferences: Mapping the linguistic landscape of Sentul, Malaysia

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### Abstract

The study attempts to map the linguistic landscape of Sentul, the new urban area of Kuala Lumpur. It aims to examine the preferred language of shop signs in the area. Data were collected primarily from visible shop signs and categorized through a sign coding scheme based on Sunwani's (2005) model. The analysis indicates that the area preferred a mixture of English, BM, and Chinese for the shop signs. The findings show diverse factors govern the choice of language use on the shop signs attributed to identity, nature of business owners, and shop location.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape; Shop sign; Multilingual; Language Learning

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### 1.0 Introduction

Malaysia is a country consists of citizens from various ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. One of the reasons for this is colonization by different countries including Britain, Japan, and Portugal. The immigration of people from China and India in the past contributed to making Malaysia a melting pot nation. With citizens of different races, Malaysia holds a unique language environment. David (2003) explained that Malaysians speak using around a hundred languages. However, they only use the languages from the three main races in the country; Malays (Bahasa Melayu), Chinese, and Indians (Tamil) whether in the public space or for outdoor advertising. As for advertisers, they frequently preferred other languages such as English and this is not surprising as it plays a major role in the corporate world. According to Nair-Venugopal (2001), it is due to "... the legacy of use in colonial British enterprise and traditional links with the English-speaking world" (p.22).

Linguistic landscape (LL) is the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings which combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory or region. Signs

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are used to publicizing messages of general public interest such as topographic information, directions, warnings, etc. Public signs also appear in commercial contexts like marketing and advertising, where their function is to draw attention to a business or product (Backhaus, 2005). As LL is where one could see the display on how languages are being 'played', this study intended to observe the LL of Sentul, which is an area in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

### 1.1 Language policy in Malaysia

Linguistic landscape (LL) has its relation to the language policy of a country. Aini (2017) stated that generally, government agencies set the policies, and in LL, the language policy would involve top-down policies. Malaysia is governed by its language policies; this includes outdoor advertising, which is also a part of LL. In the Malaysian Constitution, Bahasa Melayu is the country's national and official language. Government agencies must use Bahasa Melayu in all official government functions. Similarly, in the LL of Malaysia, there exists a language policy governing the language used in public space.

To monitor the use of Bahasa Melayu in the public sphere, the Institute of Language and Literature Malaysia, or well-known as Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP hereafter) have to ensure the implementation of the language policy in outdoor advertising. This includes signage such as shop signs, billboards, posters, and buntings. DBP has also come up with a clear outline for language policy in outdoor advertising with the Verification Procedures of National Language in Advertising (Tatacara Pengesahan Bahasa Dalam Iklan), and this in line with the national language policy. Kuala Lumpur City Hall also employs the language policy document. The policy states that all outdoor advertising, which includes shop signs must use Bahasa Melayu. It also specifies that if Bahasa Melayu is used with other languages, it must be prioritized and must be more prominent than the other languages in all aspects.

However, despite the existence of the policy documents, its implementation in the public space shows a certain degree of compliance. Due to this, the authorities are very active in promoting the use of Bahasa Melayu in outdoor advertising. In 2013, the then DBP Director-General, Datuk Awang Sariyan stated that he would implement a star-rating system for using Bahasa Melayu in outdoor advertisements in municipalities as a token of appreciation for the local councils for promoting the use of the national language in public space ("Dewan Bahasa Champions Use of BM in Ads", 2013). He also elaborated that this move could also encourage the correct usage of Bahasa Melayu in outdoor advertising. Although the government agencies promote and govern the use of the national language in the public space, Aini (2017) found that advertising companies and the private agencies sometimes give prominence to other languages, especially English. This could be because English is the international language, English is appropriate for outdoor advertising, and also some certain products or services cater to a specific target market who may not be only the Malays.

From an interview with the local authorities, Aini (2017) discovered that they are worried about the sustainability of Bahasa Melayu. They are afraid that it would be difficult to maintain Bahasa Melayu if our government does not take aggressive actions to those who did not comply with the language policy. This is because advertisements may have strong effects on a person's mind, including his or her language choice and preference. Aiestaran, Cenoz, and Gorter (2010) also explained this situation when they stated: "... people process the visual and linguistic information that comes to them, and the language in which signs are written can influence their perception of the status of the different languages, their attitudes toward them and it can even influence their language use in either a positive or a negative way." (p.223). Due to this, this study looked into the linguistic landscape of Sentul and to observe the language choice and preference in the area's outdoor advertising, specifically focusing on shop signs.

### 2.0 Literature Review

According to Landry and Bourhis (1997), the linguistic landscape is "... the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings..." (p.25). Many scholars have come up with other definitions that go beyond Landry and Bourhis's definition of LL. Ben-Rafael et al. (2008) extended the definition by including signs inside buildings and they posited that LL "... constitutes the very scene – made of streets, corners, circuses... - where society's public life takes place" (p. 8).

When looking at LL, Dailey et al. (2005) included signs inside and outside of shops, texts, and interactions in classrooms and neighborhoods, as well as on television and other advertising media. On the other hand, Shohamy and Waksman (2009) further widen the LL scope by incorporating all possible 'discourses' that materialize in public space to give meaning. As indicated by them, LL is not only assembled by language, it is also developed by other modalities such as things people see, hear, speak, and think.

Although many studies in LL focused on more than one type of signs, there were studies done which only focused on one type of sign. Aini, Chan, and Ain Nadzimah (2013) conducted a study that specifically looked into the relationship between multilingual practices in billboard advertising and language policy in Malaysia. The finding indicates that multilingual signs dominate the selected LL for government-sponsored signs (GSS) as well as privately-sponsored signs (PSS). In the same study, English was the dominant language used, followed by Bahasa Melayu (BM) and other languages; Chinese, French, and Japanese. This study indicates that the billboard advertisements cater to both foreigners or tourists who visit the country and local road users since the selected survey area is the entrance and exit route to Malaysia.

Wang (2013) conducted a case study to investigate the multilingual environment of China. He focused on the shop signs in Beijing, China particularly in Wangfujing Street (one of the Chinese capital's most famous shopping streets). The findings of the study reveal that there are monolingual signs of Chinese, English, Japanese and French; bilingual signs of Chinese and English, and the use of images in the shop signs. The analysis reveals that the shop owners used Chinese-only signs in an almost exclusive local business where customers can find a diversity of shops using Chinese. As for bilingual signs of Chinese and English, the shops offer

service-providing businesses such as banks, hotels, restaurants, and travel agencies. Meanwhile, boutique shops used English-only signs which show that Wangfujing Street is a globalized place associated with prestige and wealth.

### 3.0 Sociolinguistics profile of Malaysia and research area

Malaysia, a multiracial and multicultural country is made up of two regions; West Malaysia (comprising 11 states); and East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). It is separated by some 640 miles of the South China Sea. As a multilingual country, Malaysia has 134 languages with 112 indigenous and 22 non-indigenous. The principal languages of Malaysia are Malay (official), English, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam (Ethnologue, 2018). The census of 2016 shows that Malaysia has an estimated total population of 31.7 million. This comprises multi-ethnic citizens who are Malays/indigenous groups (68.6%), Chinese (23.4%), Indians (7.0%), and Others (1.0%) (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2016). The national and official language of the country is Bahasa Malaysia or the Malay Language.

Sentul is a town located in the city of Kuala Lumpur, which lies about 3km north of the heart of the city. The town was one of the major industrial hubs during colonial eras. In the past, Sentul was referred to as Railway Town because the Malayan Railway employed most of its residents to work in a depot and a huge engineering workshop there. During World War 2, the British attacked and bombed Sentul which was one of the last towns left. Sentul has a historical significance as it still maintains its historic buildings such as The Sentul Market, Sentul Cinema, and some of the schools. Today, Sentul is one of the fast-developing towns in Kuala Lumpur. According to the 2010 Population and House Census of Malaysia, its locality consists of about 53.45% Malay, 20.55% Chinese, 16.07% Indians and the rest is a combination of other bumiputras and non-Malaysians. Due to its diversity and historical values, Sentul's linguistic landscape is indeed worth to be observed by researchers.

### 4.0 Methodology

This study aimed to investigate the linguistic landscape of Sentul, Kuala Lumpur. This study is descriptive and employs a textual analysis of the language choice and preferences in the shop signs. This study examines the language(s) present in the shop signs in the selected area. It also seeks to find out the underlying factors contributing to the language choice and preferences for the commercial shop signs.

To explore the actual use or preference of language on shop signs, the researcher analyzed photographs from two sections of the said locality namely Sentul East and Sentul West. This involved photographs from private locations included shops, offices, clinics, and restaurants. As for this study, the researcher collected a total of 422 digital photographs of commercial shop signs in the selected area and categorized the data through a sign coding scheme based on Sunwani's (2005) model. This includes elements such as the number of languages on the shop signs, the order of languages on multilingual signs, and the size of the font used. However, the researcher did not analyze any semiotic signs like an icon, index, and symbol found in the shop signs as they were not within the scope of the study. Table 1 below shows the framework for analysis.

Table 1. Framework for analysis

Patterns of Language Use	Language	Examples
<b>Unilingual</b> - only a single language is used	BM (romanized)	Kedai Menjual Alat Pendidikan & Permainan
	BM (Jawi transliteration)	Kedai Pakaian فكايان كدي
	English	World of Babies
	Vernacular	新寶島小食館
<b>Bilingual</b> -combining two languages in the same sentence -writing the main sign in one language, followed by its translation in another language	BM & English	Butik Terminal Jeans
	Bahasa Malaysia & Vernacular	Kedai Perabot Soon Lee 順利傢俬
	English & Vernacular	San Shu Gong Restaurant 三叔公餐館

**Trilingual / Multilingual**  
-three or more languages are used

BM, Vernacular & English

Era Kedai Kerinting Rambut dan  
Persolekan  
美世紀專業美容美髮  
Unisex Beauty Centre  
and Cosmetic Trading

Dev's Pet Shop  
Kedai Haiwan Kesayangan  
தேவ பெற ஷாப்

寵物店

## 5.0 Findings and Discussions

From the analysis, the commercial shop signs in the selected area use the language quite vigorously. The language distribution on the shop signs reveals the three main languages used including Bahasa Melayu, English, Chinese, and Tamil.

Table 2. Patterns of Language use in shop signs in Sentul

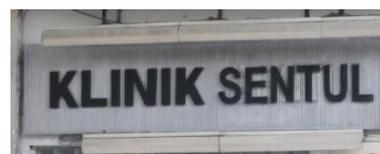
Language Pattern	Language	Number of Shops
Monolingual	BM	44 (10%)
	English	44 (10%)
	Hindustani	3 (1%)
	Italian	2 (0%)
Bilingual	English & BM	77 (18%)
	English & Chinese	60 (14%)
	BM & Chinese	55 (13%)
	BM & English	31 (7%)
	BM & Tamil	4 (1%)
	Chinese & BM	4 (1%)
	Chinese & English	3 (1%)
	English & Arabic	2 (0%)
	BM & Arabic	2 (0%)
	Multilingual	BM & English & Chinese
BM & English & Tamil		9 (2%)
BM & Chinese & Tamil		8 (2%)
English & BM & Chinese		8 (2%)
BM & Chinese & English		7 (2%)
English & BM & Chinese & Tamil		7 (2%)
English & Tamil & BM		7 (2%)
English & BM & Tamil		5 (1%)

### 5.1 Monolingual signs

The analysis of the data indicates that shop signs in Sentul use the language quite vigorously. Table 2 shows the patterns of language used in the shop signs of the area. Shop signs in monolingual recorded in BM (10%) or English (10%) which constitute the highest number of LL in Sentul. This could be because all Malaysians understand either one or both languages. They made such a choice because of the status of the former as the national language of the country and the latter as the most second important language. This aligned to Spolsky and Cooper's (1991) assumption that shop sign-writers 'prefer to write signs in (their) own language or in a language with which [they] wish to be identified'. Writing in BM is a means to assert identity, to claim existence by physically marking and asserting a claim of ownership over the landscape (Spolsky & Cooper, 1991), while it also clearly presupposes and selects a readership proficient in BM. However, Hindustani (3) and Italian (2) languages also existed in the shop signs in the area but the number is not significant as the shops may be targeted for a specific group of people using the languages.



(a) Computer shop



(b) Clinic in Sentul

Fig. 2. Monolingual signs

### 5.2 Bilingual signs

In terms of occurrence of bilingual signs, English & BM are the highest (18%) while English & Chinese (14%) and BM & Chinese (13%) followed. Shop owners made this choice because the shops targeted a wider audience who understand both English and BM. This also reveals that the shops do not only cater to certain ethnic groups.



Fig. 3. Bilingual signs

### 5.3 Multilingual signs

As for multilingual shop signs, the shop owners preferred to use BM and English and Chinese (9%) in the shop signs followed by BM and English and Tamil as the locals residing in Sentul are mainly from the three ethnics (Malays, Chinese, and Indians).



Fig. 3. Multilingual signs

### 5.4 Language used based on the role of the national language

From the analysis, the LL of Sentul is constructed under the language policy of Malaysia in which according to the National Language in Advertisement Confirmation Procedure (Tatacara Pengesahan Bahasa Dalam Iklan).

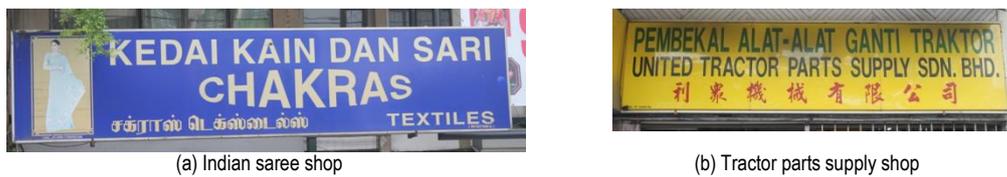


Fig. 4. Signs constructed under the language policy of Malaysia

This can be seen in terms of the placement of the languages and the size of the texts in the signs in which BM comes first followed by other languages in the order or placement and the size of the BM words is bigger and bolder than the other languages.

### 5.5 Language Used based on Globalisation

The analysis also indicates that the majority of the shop signs used English. As English is the second language of Malaysia, the majority of the population used and understood the language. Therefore, BM is used to attract particularly the potential Malay customers while English is used to attract all the groups in the community.



Fig. 5. Signs based on globalization

Overall, the analysis shows a combination of the three main languages in Malaysia (BM, English, and Chinese) that dominates the language used in the shop signs in Sentul. The presence of Tamil language also exists in the shop signs as Indians were the first ethnic being brought to Sentul working at the railway station. The occurrence of BM used in the shop signs reveals that the shop owners do consider the major group community or customers, i.e. the Malays in the area. The usage of English, however, is because of it being the second language of the country, and all other ethnicities in the area use and understand the language.

## 6.0 Conclusion

This study is an attempt to look at the shop signs in the linguistic landscape of Sentul, Kuala Lumpur. It shows that the city is moving towards multilingualism in English, BM, and Chinese as a result of economic activities and globalization of the area. This study also shows that BM dominates the landscape as it is the official language and widely understood language to convey information. This study may be utilized in the education field, as Shohamy and Waksman (2009) indicated that the study of LL could be a tool in language learning. According to Kramsch (2006) using the English texts on signs would expose learners or readers to language, critical thinking, interpretation of symbolic systems, and also literacy. The results of this study could be of interest to the policy-makers as it may provide information on the actual practice in public space concerning the language policies for outdoor advertising. As mentioned by Spolsky (2004) "... the real language policy of a community is more likely to be found in its practices than in management" (p. 65).

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