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Linguistic Landscape in Malaysia: The Case of Language Choice Used in Signboards

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the languages used in shop signs in three different areas in Semenyih, Selangor, Malaysia. Using a mixed-method approach, this paper identified the preferred language for shop signs in the town of Semenyih, Pelangi Semenyih, and Setia Ecohill, as well as examined the relationship between the language choice in signages and linguistic landscape in Malaysia. A total of 180 signboards was photographed to ensure the impartiality of data collection, and they were coded based on four aspects: full names of the shops in various languages, the business scope of the shops, the number of languages used in shop signs, size of the scripts, and layout of languages highlighted, adopted from the study of Shang and Guo (2017). Questionnaires and interviews with the shop owners were also employed to elicit information about their preferences regarding the language choice for their shop signages, which shed light on the impact of the development in Semenyih towards the choice of shop signages. The findings revealed that, despite the regulations imposed by the local city council (Majlis Perbandaran Kajang (MPKJ) or Kajang Municipal Town Council) on the permissible shop signages, the shop owners still used languages other than the Malay language in their signboards, such as English, Mandarin, and Tamil, with English being the most dominant one. This indicates that, as the towns develop, the linguistic landscape here changes with importance being given to signboards in English compared to Malay.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Studies on the linguistic landscape (LL) have been carried out around the globe for decades. According to Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 25), linguistic landscape (LL) can be conceptualised “as the language of public road signs, promotional billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings”. However, Backhaus (2007) argued that previous research of the linguistic landscape domain found that recognising the difference between official and non-official signage is a crucial variable. One of the important aspects to consider when studying linguistic landscape is the demography of races as the historical and geographical factors cause proportions of different ethnic groups to vary across regions (Albury, 2021). Malaysia is known as a multilingual country and in Semenyih (a district in Selangor) with a population of 91.808 as of 2020, 45.5% are Chinese, 39.8% are Bumiputeras, 14.5% are Indians, and the remaining is composed of other races (City Population, 2020).

Cultural or social practices represented in linguistic signage can be linked to a community’s identity; however, language usage in signage does not necessarily rely on its need to be recognised by the government. Syed et al. (2015) revealed that size symbolises the importance of language in signage. They found that language or languages on the signs with a larger font size are allocated in a greater space. Similarly, according to Lai (2013), signs which are written in capital letters and have larger font sizes, command more attention from the audience. Meanwhile, in a study conducted by Scollon and Scollon (2003), the preferred code is usually put on top, on the left, or in the centre position, and the marginalised code is on the bottom, on the right, or the margins. Hence, the linguistic objects become a medium where information is transmitted to the public, and the language used indicates who the expected viewers are. Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 26) stated that language choice in LL represents the “power and status relationship that exists between the various language groups present within a given administrative or geographical region”.

Even though Malaysia is one of the countries well known for its multilingualism, the studies on the linguistic landscape in the Malaysian context are still limited. The research on shop signs from a sociolinguistic perspective is often carried out in big cities, such as Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya, and Ipoh. There are very few studies concerning the linguistic landscape of small towns which are going through development. To reveal how the development of a place influences the LL, Semenyih district, one of the fastest-growing areas located in the Southeast of Selangor, was selected as the focus of the study. Semenyih, which was once known for its recreational offerings and rubber plant estate, has become the fastest-growing area in the South of Selangor. In 2005, Nottingham University opened its branch in Semenyih, attracting local and international students to enrol in the university actively. This development brought significant changes in the landscape and increased the number of migrants in Semenyih. Over the years, connectivity to other locations has been enhanced through the existence of highways. Semenyih, which was once a quiet village, is going through

a development phase in terms of infrastructure and economic boost in tourism and agriculture.

In Semenyih, the names on the business signages are in Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and English. According to [Hussein et al. \(2015\)](#), English is linked to the development of cities and represents the idea of prestige and modernisation. The town council, *Majlis Perbandaran Kajang* (MPKJ) or Kajang Municipal Town Council, sets the standard format for what can be written on the signboard before it is displayed. The shop's name can be in any language, but its business description must be in the Malay language. It would be interesting to find out the reason behind the use of other languages, particularly English, despite the rules and regulations imposed by the MPKJ. As such, this study aims to identify the language choice on shop signs in three locations in Semenyih, Selangor, and examines the relationship between the development of Semenyih and the usage of English in shop signs. Based on the objectives identified, this study formulated two main research questions:

1. Which language(s) or code(s) are preferred in the shop signages?
2. How does the language choice on shop signs relate to the development of the area?

This study contributes to identifying how the development of Semenyih changes the linguistic landscape of a small town.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Languages used in public signs serve two main functions: symbolic and informative ([Backhaus, 2007](#); [Landry & Bourhis, 1997](#)). According to [Kasanga \(2012\)](#), the languages displayed on public signs serve as an indication of the languages that hold local relevance or provide evidence of the languages that are becoming locally relevant. In other words, the significance, power, and pertinence of a language can be measured by the degree of its presence in the linguistic landscape. LL, which is associated with multilingualism and multiculturalism, has become a natural phenomenon in a world experiencing rapid changes and the blurring of borders due to globalisation. Regardless of being at the international or local levels, the changes reflect the linguistic landscape of a place. Therefore, LL is crucial because it helps society understand the world they live in. Numerous case studies have been conducted all around the globe, and relationships between the linguistic landscape and various aspects of society have been investigated. [Alomoush \(2019\)](#), who studied the landscape in Jordan, noted that as the town grows, foreign languages, particularly English, start to appear in shops and other public media. English as a lingua franca is also labelled as a language of modernisation because it is essential to boosting the economy and becoming the measure of the status quo in society.

The effect of globalisation can be seen through LL. A study by [Lanza and Woldemariam \(2009\)](#) revealed that most of the shop signs displayed in the downtown and main shopping areas of Mekhela, Ethiopia, are mostly bilingual rather than monolingual. Some shop signs here combined English with their first language while some others totally used English for the names and descriptions of the shops. The authors concluded that the effect of globalisation had influenced the use of English as a global language.

[Shang and Guo \(2017\)](#) discovered that the Singapore neighbourhood market's linguistic landscape and geographic distribution represent the relative power and status

of language groups inhabiting the multilingual region. Despite having four official languages (English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil), English is still prevalent and appears on most of the shop signs here. Mandarin is frequently seen coexisting with English, whereas Malay and Tamil are uncommon. Due to the importance of English and its status as a global language, English coding appears on most shop signs in neighbourhood marketplaces (ibid.). [Shang and Guo \(2017\)](#) concluded that English shop signs are due to language ideology, in which English is considered an essential language to boost the country's economic development. The appearance of other official languages and English shows the ethnic language status in the community and reflects the owners' identity and their view of the languages. As a result, both English and Mandarin have a significant presence in the Singaporean community, while the other two ethnic languages are marginal.

LL research in other multilingual cities in Hong Kong showed similarities to Singapore. A study conducted by [Finzel \(2013\)](#) indicates that the English language used in shop signage does not reflect the language competency of the majority of the public; instead, it represents the ideas of prestige and modernisation. [Danielewicz-Betz & Graddol \(2014\)](#) revealed in their research that the regular use of English in public signages in Hong Kong, together with traditional written Chinese characters and spoken Cantonese in public announcements, serves an important role in demarcating Hong Kongers' identity from that of mainlanders. Besides, Hong Kong has become a well-known shopping paradise for millions of domestic and foreign tourists, which drives the widespread use of English in its linguistic landscape.

This is verified by [Thongtong \(2016\)](#), whose study focuses on Chiang Mai. It was discovered that tourists from different parts of the world influence the environment in Chiang Mai. Tourism has been one of the factors that influence the presentation of language varieties in public signage. The majority of public signs, particularly shop signage with business descriptions, are written in Thai but coexist with English. According to [Thongtong \(2016\)](#), English is used to bridge communication between locals and tourists. Similar studies in Ipoh and Georgetown in Malaysia revealed that multilingualism helps boost the tourism industry by easing communication for tourists from different regions ([Tang & Tan, 2015](#)).

However, a study conducted by [Ross \(1997\)](#) on LL in Milan concluded that the use of English on the streets of Milan does not play the role of a lingua franca, nor is it used to address tourists. Instead, it is used as an attractive and fashionable language having a kind of prestige even though the local population does not genuinely understand it. [Ross \(1997\)](#) concluded that non-local languages, such as English in Milan are not used to index a particular ethnolinguistic group but for the instrumental purposes of commodification. The findings are similar to a study carried out by [Khazanah et al. \(2021\)](#) where English used on the signboards in Yogyakarta has a symbolic purpose, which is to reflect the city's cosmopolitanism and fashionable appearance.

2.1 Linguistic Landscape in Malaysia

There are very limited studies on the linguistic landscape carried out in Malaysia. [Syed et al. \(2015\)](#) studied how politics, economics, and identity shape the linguistic landscape of five neighbourhoods: Little India, Bukit Bintang, Bank Negara, Masjid Jamek, and China Town in Kuala Lumpur. Their findings showed that private signage

has led to the extensive use of the English language in the bilingual and multilingual signs category. It also surpasses other languages and appears in more space and size in the signage. Meanwhile, Malay is recorded in the second order after English within the same category. In contrast, Mandarin and Tamil appear remarkably in the areas of China Town and Little India.

Another study related to the language of Italian in the linguistic landscape of Kuala Lumpur at the Pavilion Shopping Mall was carried out by [Coluzzi \(2017\)](#). The study found that the use of the Italian language in the shop signages was due to the economic value and the prestige of the language even though some of the businesses available are not related to fashion or food which Italy is famous for. Besides, this language connotes the symbol of exoticism. According to [Jaworski and Yeung \(2010\)](#), the Italian language may evoke a positive image that attracts potential customers.

[Anuarudin et al. \(2013\)](#) explored the multilingual practices in 63 billboard advertisements along the highway at the area of Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) toll booth to KLIA (Kuala Lumpur International Airport). The results showed that 79.03% of the samples were categorised under privately-sponsored signs. The multilingual signs dominated the total of the overall signs compared to the monolingual signs. This is to cater to both foreigners and local people. In contrast, the government-sponsored signs appear to follow the national policy as they use the national language as the main language while other languages are used only for complementary purposes.

[Ariffin and Husin \(2013\)](#) looked at the patterns of language use in shop signs in four towns in Malaysia. The study revealed that in big towns, English was the preferred language for shop signs as it was considered a global language, whereas, in small towns, the Malay language or a mixture of Malay and English or a mixture of Malay, English, or another native language were preferred. [Ariffin and Husin \(2013\)](#) concluded that the language chosen for the signs was related to the type of township, the shop's location, and the targeted customers.

2.2 Functions of Linguistic Landscape

There are two functions in the study of linguistic landscape, namely informal and symbolic. According to [Landry and Bourhis \(1997\)](#), an informal function serves as information on the linguistic characteristics and geographical boundaries of a particular linguistic group and provides a selected language for communication in a certain area, whereas the symbolic function includes the perception of members of a language group which has values and status of their own languages.

The study of the linguistic landscape is an efficient way to identify the linguistic repertoire of a selected area. This is because there are many languages available on signs, such as unilingual, bilingual, or multilingual. The dominance of one language compared to other languages in public signs indicate the power and status of the language ([Cenoz & Gorter, 2008](#); [Dagenais et al., 2008](#); [Leeman & Modan, 2009](#); [Papen, 2012](#)). This can be seen in the number of signs using the dominant language compared to those using the weaker language ([Landry & Bourhis, 1997](#)). Similarly, the order of the languages in the signs may also reveal their importance in society, their linguistic repertoires, and the status of the ethnic group associated with each of the languages ([Backhaus, 2007](#)).

Moreover, the study of the linguistic landscape can determine the diglossic nature of a particular bilingual and multilingual setting of a certain area (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Language with a higher status used for formal functions appears more frequently in public signs compared to languages with lower status and informal functions, such as those used at home and in local communities. Therefore, this example can be set as an indicator of communication among the citizens based on their linguistic landscape.

2.3 Malaysia's Current Policy on the Use of Language in Public Signs

Based on the guidelines for business signboards from the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, there are three items pertaining to the use of language/s and their size: (1) the business type must be stated in Malay, clear, readable, and placed in the top left corner of the signboard, (2) Malay must be used in all brand names on the signboard, either on its own or together with other languages, except for special brands, and (3) the height of words in other languages must not exceed 3/4 of the height of Malay words. These guidelines serve as a general reference for business premises nationwide, but it is up to the respective local governments whether relevant adaptations are necessary (Government Gateway Online, n.d.).

The Kajang Municipal Town Council (n.d.) has provided official guidelines for signage outside business premises in regards to the language and size of scripts: (1) it is compulsory to display a description of the business in Malay, which has to be written on the left, separated from other words, and (2) the font size of the description of the business must be at least 75% of that of the name of the company. As argued by Wang and Xu (2018), the presence of Malay on signs merely fulfils a symbolic function rather than an informational function, which is due to 'socio-political consideration'.

3. METHODS

A mixed method approach was employed in designing the methodology where both quantitative and qualitative procedures of research were integrated into the data collection. The quantitative research involved classifying signs identified according to the types of businesses represented and the languages found. In multilingual signs, the study applied Reh's notion of bilingual distribution of information across languages. Reh (2004) identified four types of multilingual information arrangements for interpretation. The first type is duplication where all the information is presented in more than one language. The second type is known as fragmentary where the full information is only given in one language, but some chosen parts have been translated into an additional language. The third type is called overlapping where the information part is repeated in at least one more language whereas other parts of the text stay in one language. The fourth type is known as complementary where the content of two or more languages in the signs are expressed completely differently; however, in order to comprehend the whole message, knowledge of the language is needed.

3.1 The Data

In this study, three areas in Semenyih were selected for data collection, namely Semenyih town, Pelangi Semenyih, and Setia Ecohill. They were chosen due to the following factors: (1) they are developed over a different period (time), (2) there is a high intensity of various types of shops, and (3) various patterns can be seen on a variety of shop signs. Sixty shops from each site were selected as samples for this study, making a total of 180 shop signs. The shop signs were categorised based on the order of language appearance and the letter size on the signs to determine whether they adhere to the official policies. The shops in Semenyih town have been in business for more than 50 years. The shops provide daily necessities for the residents living in the nearby villages and new neighbourhood areas. The second site, Pelangi Semenyih, was developed in 2000. Unlike Semenyih town with old shop buildings, Pelangi Semenyih has a typical commercial setup. Most of the shops have been in business for less than 10 years while some have only been in business for merely a year. Setia Ecohill, which is a new neighbourhood area, has eight blocks of shop rows that serve the residents of the surrounding neighbourhoods. There are approximately 80 shops that sell various types of goods and services.

Sample shop signs displayed outside the shop premises were photographed using a smartphone from February 2021 to April 2021. Shops that do franchise businesses in other countries, such as Pizza Hut, Domino's, Subway, McDonalds, and Kentucky Fried Chicken, are not included because the brand names are not created by the local shop owners but by the franchise owners. The participants in this study are shop owners or people in charge of the shop. Thirty-five owners responded to the questionnaires, and out of the 35 responses, five shop owners were interviewed. All guidelines have been taken into account when collecting data for this study. The shop owners were informed about the study, and a consent form was sent to all the shop owners. Only those who gave their consent participated in this study.

3.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was adopted from [Hussein et al. \(2015\)](#); it was based on a Likert scale to elicit information about the shop owners' attitudes, preferences, and opinions on the language they used for the shop signs. There was a total of 35 respondents: 6 from Semenyih town, 17 from Pelangi Semenyih, and 12 from Setia Ecohill. The questionnaire was printed in two languages, Malay and English, as some shop owners are only competent in either one of the languages.

3.3 Telephone Interviews

Of the thirty-five shop owners who gave feedback on the online questionnaire, five agreed to be interviewed. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, movement, and travel to interview the shop owners or the person in charge of the shops were not allowed; hence, the interview was done over the telephone. The researchers formulated five questions to get first-hand information on the attitude of the shop owners regarding the language choice on their shop signages. The questions aimed to identify: (1) the number of languages preferred on a shop name, (2) the importance of the chosen languages, (3) the order of the languages on the sign, (4) reasons for using languages

other than Malay, and (5) opinion on the English language on the signs. The interview was carried out in two languages, Malay and English. The shop owners' language choice revealed their preference for one language over another.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The photos of the shop signs were coded manually and transferred into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet based on their geographic locations. The signs were categorised based on the criteria set by the researchers as follows:

- the language used for the name of the shop and its description
- code combination on bilingual and multilingual signs
- the dominant language used in the signboards
- the role of English in the shop signs

These factors contribute to a better understanding of the language choices made by local shop owners and reveal the shop owners' choices in relation to the development of Semenyih. The questionnaires, which the participants completed, were coded manually into the Excel spreadsheet and recorded according to their site. Each question with the same answer was counted, and the percentage was calculated. The result was tabulated based on a five-point Likert scale that comprise the selection of 1. SA: Strongly Agree, 2. A: Agree, 3. UN: Undecided, 4. D: Disagree, and 5. SD: Strongly Disagree with each statement given. As for the interview sessions, notes were taken during each of the interviews and only the answer given by the shop owners were recorded and transcribed. The data was analysed based on two categories: (1) the order of the languages, and (2) the importance of the English language. The answers obtained from the questions (coded as R1-5 to represent respondents 1-5) were used to further explain the reasons for the respondents' language choice(s) on the signs.

4. RESULTS

4.1 The Language(s) or Code(s) Preferred in the Shop Signages

Languages found on shop signs at all three sites comprise Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and English as illustrated in Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3.

Table 1. Language choice in Semenyih Town.

Languages	Number	Percentage
Malay	31	52%
English	26	43%
Chinese	2	3%
Tamil	1	2%
Total	60	100%

As shown in Table 1, Malay shop signs are the most popular in Semenyih town, accounting for 52% (N=31), while English names account for 43% (N=26). Chinese and Tamil signages appear the least, accounting for a total of 5% (N=3). The prevalence of Malay language signage in Semenyih town demonstrates that business owners implemented a language policy requiring that the national language be used for all advertisements, whether alone or in conjunction with other languages. As seen

in Figure 1 below, the shop name is coded in the Malay language whereas the description of the shop is in Malay and Chinese. However, the script of the Chinese coding is smaller than the Malay coding.



Figure 1. A Malay-coded shop sign in Semenyih.

The two Mandarin signs found at the premises were a traditional medical Chinese shop and a Mandarin tuition centre specifically catered for students enrolling in Chinese schools. The Tamil shop sign was identified as a shop selling religious products. It is noted that Malay shop signs were found at the shops that provided daily essential products and services, such as supermarkets, pharmacies, clinics, and bicycle repair shops.

Table 2. Language choice in Pelangi Semenyih.

Languages	Number	Percentage
Malay	10	17%
English	50	83%
Chinese	0	0%
Tamil	0	0%
Total	60	100%

In Pelangi Semenyih, as illustrated in Table 2, the Malay shop names accounted for only 17% (N=10), while the English shop names accounted for 83% (N=50). There were no signs in Mandarin and Tamil here. Malay food and Islamic daycare were among the businesses with Malay-coded shop signs. Service-oriented companies, such as hair salons, printing and photocopy shops, interior design services, tuition centres, western food outlets, cafés, and spas accounted for most English shop signs. As shown in Figure 2, shop names were coded in English. However, the Malay language was still included at the top left corner of the shop signs to adhere to the regulations made by the MPKJ.



Figure 2. English-coded shop signs.

Table 3. Language choice in Setia Ecohill.

Languages	Number	Percentage
Malay	19	32%
English	36	60%
Chinese	5	8%
Tamil	0	0%
Total	60	100%

Setia Ecohill, on the other hand, as shown in Table 3, recorded 32% of Malay store names (N=19) and 60% of English store names (N=36). The English language signs were more prevalent, similar to Pelangi Semenyih. This pattern is reaffirmed by [Shang and Guo \(2017\)](#) who stated that the dominance of English in store signs is due to language ideology, contending that English is the most important language for the country's economic prosperity. Signs in the Mandarin language accounted for 8% (N=5), while Tamil signs were non-existent in this area.

Figure 3 summarises the language preferences for signage in the studied areas. A sum of 180 samples was gathered, with 26.1% (N=47) being monolingual, 63.3% (N=114) being bilingual, and 10.6% (N=19) being multilingual. It can be noted that bilingual signs were the most common signs in the three areas, while multilingual signs are the least common here.

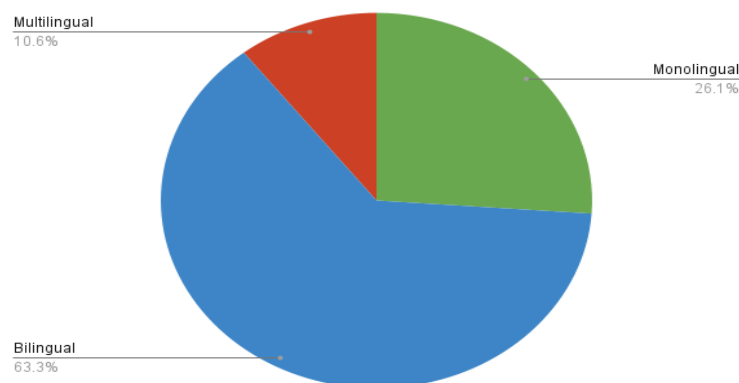


Figure 3. Prevalence of monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual signs.

In terms of language prevalence in shop signs, Malay had the highest frequency in Semenyih town, accounting for 80% of 60 store signs (N = 48). The Malay language appeared in monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual shop signs, with bilingual shop signs having the most usage. The prevalence of Mandarin coding was 63%, followed by English (55%) and Tamil (10%). Chinese and English coding, and English and Tamil coding were mostly used to describe retailers and products.

However, in Pelangi Semenyih, English had the highest occurrence in shop signs, accounting for 85% overall (N=51) instead of Malay coding, which accounted for 48%. English can be seen in all sign styles; however, bilingual store signs were the most common ones. English coding was frequently used in conjunction with Malay in business names and the description element of business signs.

The frequency of English language coding in Setia Ecohill was 77% (N=43), higher than the Malay frequency of 27%. The English language appeared in all sign patterns, as it did in Pelangi Semenyih, though it was most prevalent in bilingual store signs. Along with the Malay language, the English code was incorporated into shop

names and sign descriptions. In terms of Mandarin coding, Setia Ecohill had a more extensive distribution than Pelangi Semenyih. The same was true of the Tamil language.

4.2 The Relationship between the Language Choice on Shop Signs with the Development of the Area

The languages used to name stores were decided by the shop owners that included the shop owners' identity, target customers, and nature of the businesses. The value of the company was also coded in some of the store signs to describe the types of business. The data obtained yielded three types of linguistic patterns: monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual coding, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Language prevalence in Semenyih.

Languages	Semenyih Town		Pelangi Semenyih		Setia Ecohill	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Malay	7	11.6%	9	15%	10	16.7%
English	2	3.3%	28	46.7%	15	25%
Chinese	2	3.3%	0	0%	0	0%
Malay + English	15	25%	15	25%	22	38.4%
Malay + Chinese	16	26.7%	2	3.3%	3	5%
Malay + Tamil	1	1.7%	0	0%	0	0%
English + Chinese	4	6.7%	2	3.3%	8	13.3%
Malay + English + Chinese	13	21.7%	4	6.7%	2	3.3%
Total	60	100%	60	100%	60	100%

From Table 4, it can be seen that bilingual shop signs are the most common ones in the three sites, followed by monolingual and multilingual shop signs.

The appearance of monolingual and multilingual shop signs in Semenyih town was at 18.3% (N=11) and 21.7% (N=13) respectively, while bilingual shop signs were the highest at 60% (N=36). In these bilingual signs, the code combination of Malay/Chinese was the most prominent. As shown in Figure 4, the shop sign was mainly coded in Malay and placed at the top position, accompanied by Chinese characters at the bottom.



Figure 4. Bilingual shop sign in Semenyih Town.

Many signboards in Semenyih town had this pattern of coding due to a high percentage of the Chinese population (70%) in Semenyih town, whereas the numbers of Malay and Indian people residing here were lower at 27% and 3%, respectively (City Population, 2020). The percentage of monolingual shop signs was mainly contributed by Chinese traders running restaurants, gold shops, and pawn shops for over 50 years. Shop signs coded in Malay typically belonged to sundry traditional shops, Malay restaurants, and clinics. Shop signs with Tamil coding appeared the least

and were generally owned by shops selling goods for Hindu prayers and culture-related activities.

In Pelangi Semenyih, 61.7% of shop signs were monolingual, 31.7% were bilingual, and only 6.7% were multilingual. The monolingual shop signs were mostly coded in English, and the shops using this pattern of coding were mostly service-oriented businesses, such as barbers, hair salons, and printing services. Fashion, accessories, and food outlets also displayed this pattern of shop signs. As for the bilingual shop signs, the highest percentage of the coding was contributed by the combination of English/Malay coding. Most of the shop names used English names with the Malay description or Malay names with the English description.

The percentage of monolingual signs in Setia Ecohill was higher than that in Semenyih town, but it was lower than that of Pelangi Semenyih. The monolingual code was mostly seen in restaurants and Islamic childcare centres. As for multilingual shop signs, Setia Ecohill had slightly fewer multilingual shop signs than Pelangi Semenyih. Shops with multilingual signs generally target consumers from all ethnicities. An example of this is in Figure 5, in which the shop sign had Malay, English, Mandarin, and Tamil. Even though the languages were crammed into the display, the shop owner did this to attract customers speaking the languages to purchase their products.



Figure 5. A multilingual sign in Semenyih Town.

From the multilingual shop signs found in all three areas, it can be seen that the first type of Reh's (2004) multilingual information arrangement, namely duplication, was applied to all signs. As illustrated in Figure 5, the entire displayed text was translated into other languages. There are three other types that Reh identified, namely fragmentary, overlapping, and complementary, which were non-existent in the shop signs being studied. This could be due to the fact that knowledge of other languages is needed to comprehend the information given in the other three types. Lacking this knowledge may not serve the purpose intended by the shop owners.

Scollon and Scollon (2003) state that the dominant language/s for shop names contributes to the reasons for different scripted patterns in other languages. It reveals why a particular language/s is scripted in a certain manner. The prominent name can be seen as the major name on store signs, whereas other variations are extra or auxiliary in function. Therefore, the font size and layout sequence of the languages presented on shop signs is observed to determine the most dominant language/s for the shop signs. This is only applied to bilingual and multilingual shop signs. Generally, a language script presented larger than the other languages shows the prominence of that language, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 shows that in Semenyih town, languages other than Malay and English were most likely supplementary to their functions. The presence of shop signs with Malay and English scripts presented larger in size than the other scripts accounted for 43% (N=26) each, whereas the presence of shop signs with the same script written in

equal size was 14% (N=8). In contrast, shops in Pelangi Semenyih and Setia Ecohill showed that the presentation of English script in shop signs predominated the Malay script with 63% (N=38) and 47% (N=35), respectively. This demonstrates that the English script is more prevalent in usage and function than the Malay language. According to [Lai \(2013\)](#), signs written in capital letters and larger font size command more attention from the targeted audiences.

Table 5. The font size of signs in Semenyih.

Language Font Size	Semenyih town		Pelangi Semenyih		Setia Ecohill	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Equal font size	8	14%	6	10%	13	27%
Malay font size >	26	43%	16	27%	12	26%
English font size >	26	43%	38	63%	35	47%
Total	60	100%	60	100%	60	100%

Table 6 presents the main language choice of the shop owners for their signboards in each research location. Malay and English language were the most dominant languages used in the 180 signboards. Table 6 shows that Malay was the main language used in signboards in Semenyih town while signboards in English as the main language were prevalent in Pelangi Semenyih and Setia Ecohill. This attests to the fact that the development of Semenyih influences the usage of English in the signboards. Pelangi Semenyih and Setia Ecohill are newly-developed areas with shops operating for less than ten years. Shops in Semenyih town, on the other hand, have been in business since the 1970s.

Table 6. Main language choices for the shop signs in Semenyih.

Languages	Semenyih Town		Pelangi Semenyih		Setia Ecohill	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Malay	31	52%	10	17%	19	32%
English	26	43%	50	83%	36	60%
Mandarin	2	3%	0	0%	5	8%
Tamil	1	2%	0	0%	0	0%
Total	60	100%	60	100%	60	100%

4.3 Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

4.3.1 Questionnaire

Table 7 displays the results of the Likert-scale questionnaire designed to ascertain the shop owners' attitudes, preferences, and opinions regarding their choice of shop signs.

Table 7. Owners' attitudes, preferences, and opinions regarding shop signs.

No.	Statements	SA	A	UN	D	SD
1.	Attitudes towards English names are positive.	17 (49%)	10 (29%)		8 (22%)	
2.	English shop names can attract more customers.	16 (46%)	13 (37%)	3 (9%)	2 (6%)	1 (3%)
3.	English names are more stylish and prestigious.	10 (29%)	19 (54%)	1 (3%)	5 (14%)	

Table 7. Continued...

4.	The type of goods I sell plays a role in deciding the type of name.	12 (34%)	16 (46%)		7 (20%)	
5.	The educational level of my customers plays a role in the choice of my business name.		17 (48%)	2 (6%)	16 (46%)	

The five questions in Table 7 were divided into two categories: a) attitudinal and linguistic factors, and b) commercial and other factors.

a. *Attitudinal and linguistic factor*

Questions 1 to 3 reflected the attitude and linguistic factors of the shop owners' language choice for the shop sign. Based on Table 7, shop owners had a positive attitude towards shop names in the English language, accounting for 78% (N=27). Hussein et al. (2015) discovered that using foreign names on shop signs was influenced by prestige, positive attitudes toward foreign names, commercial interests, types of goods/services provided, and educational and economic levels of the customers. Besides, most shop owners shared the same perception that shop signs in English are more stylish and prestigious. This resonates with Ross' (1997) finding that English is seen as an attractive and fashionable language with prestige although it is not widely understood by the local population he studied.

b. *Commercial and other factors*

Questions 4 and 5 determined whether the types of goods and customer educational levels play a part in shop signs. The main reason for setting up businesses is to gain commercial profits. Therefore, shop owners tend to do their best to create a positive image of their shops, including choosing suitable shop names with the right language. In other words, the names should not only be suitable for their business but should also be attractive to the target customers. This is reflected in the results in which 80% (N=28) of the shop owners agreed that the types of products determine the type of name chosen. Additionally, Leung (2010) mentioned that English is the predominant language associated with the development of a city, thus opening more opportunities in the economic sector and frequently representing the identity of the upper-class group. In terms of the customers' educational levels, over half of the owners, or 48% (N=17) agreed that this factor did not play a role in the language chosen for the shop signs while the rest, or 46% (N=16) stated otherwise.

4.3.2 Interviews

The questions from the interview results were divided into two categories: a) the order of the languages, and b) the importance of the English language.

a. *The order of the languages*

Questions 1 to 3 reflected the shop owners' preference for the number of languages used and their orders on the shop signs. Respondent 1, the owner of a pet

shop, said that she preferred two languages in her signboard, namely Malay and English. Below is her response:

- (1) R1 : My customers are all from different races and different age groups. They live in nearby neighbourhoods. Many speak Malay and English.

Regardless of their ethnicity, most of her customers spoke Malay and English: hence, she chose to use both languages with Malay being at the top position and English at the bottom. She mentioned that the use of Malay in the sign is to comply with the MPKJ's requirements to avoid any summons or penalties.

Respondent 2 preferred Malay and Chinese as he was running a Chinese food restaurant. Similar to Respondent 1, Malay was coded first. The following excerpt contains his opinion:

- (2) R2 : *Bahasa Melayu letak dulu dalam papan tanda, lepas itu Cina. Nama Cina itu diberi oleh datuk saya punya bapak. Orang Cina datang kedai saya. Bukan semua Cina boleh baca Cina ma, kena letak Melayu kerana semua orang boleh baca Melayu ma.*
[Malay language should be allocated first in the signage, followed by Mandarin. The name of the shop is in Chinese characters because it was the name given by my great-grandfather. My customers are all Chinese. Not all Chinese can read Mandarin. Thus, the Malay language has to be included as everyone can read it.]

Similar to Respondent 1, Respondent 2 believed that all shop owners must follow the local council's regulations. He used Malay and Mandarin the sign with Malay being coded first, followed by Chinese characters.

Respondent 3 was running a printing business in Pelangi Semenyih and used both English and Malay on his signboard. Below is his statement:

- (3) R3 : I actually prefer having only one language on my sign, which is English. However, I cannot have it only in English as I need to follow the rules set by MPKJ, so my signboard has both Malay and English.

The excerpt in (3) revealed that, although he preferred his sign to be in English, he still included a brief description of the shop in Malay at the top left of the sign to adhere to the rules imposed by the town council.

Respondent 4 selling Indian traditional clothes preferred having three languages on her signboard, namely Malay, English, and Tamil.

- (4) R4 : My sign has three languages cause most people living here speaking Malay and also speak English so important. Tamil is a must cause my shop sells traditional clothes for Indian people.

In terms of language orders, Respondent 4 placed Malay at the top position, followed by English and Tamil at the subsequent positions. Similar to the other respondents, the Malay language was prioritised.

Respondent 5 preferred both English and Malay language in his shop sign. His shop sold vapes, and most of his customers were young people who can speak Malay and English. In his signboard, English was coded first, followed by Malay.

- (5) R5 : My customers are young and look trendy and speak Malay and English. Many customers from the Middle East and China come to my shop.

All of the shop owners included Malay in their shop signs to comply with the local council's requirements. Malay was given a higher emphasis, reflected by its placement in the first order. English was placed in the second position after Malay, as revealed in the interviews with four of the five shop owners.

b. The importance of the English language

Questions 4 and 5 provided insight into the shop owners' reasons for choosing languages other than Malay, particularly English. Respondent 1 argued that English must be included in her shop sign because of the increasing number of foreign buyers visiting her shop, especially those from Arab, Bangladesh, and China. She also believed that English is important if she wants to open another branch for her pet shop in cities, such as Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya. Below is her excerpt:

- (6) R1 : My customers are from Arab countries. I also have from Bangladesh and China. All foreigners so my signboard must be in English. I also want to open branches in big cities like KL (Kuala Lumpur) and PJ (Petaling Jaya) so English is important.

Respondent 2, the owner of a Chinese restaurant, did not include English in his shop sign but argued that English is important for certain types of business, especially those dealing with foreigners or even locals who cannot speak Malay.

Respondent 3 perceived English as the most suitable language for his shop sign. Below is the excerpt:

- (7) R3 : English is very important for my shop sign as the word 'printing services' does not have the correct meaning in the Malay language.

Respondent 3 perceived that the service he provided would not translate well to Malay; hence, having the sign coded in English is important.

Respondent 4 believed that English is crucial for its role as a global language, driving her to use English in her signboard. Tamil was also included in the sign as her shop was selling Indian traditional clothes. There was a Tamil-coded script as well, but it was mainly to create a cultural image and identity for her shop. Below is her excerpt:

- (8) R4 : The majority of my customers are Indians but not all understand and read Tamil. Some only speak a little Tamil. I put the Tamil language on the sign cause I sell Indian clothes.

Respondent 5 emphasised the importance of English in signage, as stated in the following excerpt:

- (9) R5 : Must have English in the shop sign as you know, it sounds more stylish and classier. That's why the main language in the sign of my shop is English

Respondent 5 also considered English important because many foreigners, especially those from the Middle East and China, patronised his shop.

All of the shop owners acknowledged the importance of the English language as it caters to their foreign customers. Even Respondent 2, who did not have English in his signage due to the nature of his business, also shared the same opinion about this.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 The Language(s) or Code(s) Preferred in the Shop Signages

The data showed that the Malay language appeared in different sections of the shop signs. Malay, which is Malaysia's official language, appeared on most shop signs, either as the shop's name or as a description of the business characteristics. In Pelangi Semenyih and Setia Ecohill, shop names in English were more dominant (83% and 60%, respectively) while the remaining shop signs were coded in Malay and other ethnic languages. Despite the regulations imposed by the local authorities (MPKJ), many shop owners did not strictly follow them for reasons related to the target market, culture, and business traits. This is supported by [Wang and Xu \(2018\)](#) that the inclusion of Malay in shop signboards serves only as a symbolic role rather than an informational role due to socio-political considerations. As Malaysia is a multilingual country, one can see that language use on shop signs is likely to be varied, as a means of reflecting national ethnolinguistic diversity. Shop owners might choose a language other than Malay (e.g., English) as the dominant language on a sign to show modernity, boost commercial opportunities, and attract shoppers who are familiar with English (but not Malay, Chinese or Tamil, the latter two being in a non-Romanised script) prestige, as suggested by [Ariffin and Husin \(2013\)](#). They argue the use of foreign words and phrases, especially English, for the local name places such as residential areas, streets, and shops has become a very common practice in Malaysia. Their analysis has indicated that English is the preferred language for the store signs in larger cities while those in the smaller and provincial towns for different reasons.

The findings also revealed that English outperformed other languages in text size, space, and prominence in Pelangi Semenyih and Setia Ecohill, accounting for 70.79% of the total samples. This indicates that the visibility of the English language is more prominent in these areas. Meanwhile, Malay and English were allocated approximately equal sizes in 43% of the signs in Semenyih town. This suggests that despite the official policy that the Malay language should have a prominent position in signs, English is still considered as essential as Malay, even in public signage. Similar results can be found in the previous studies carried out by [Cenoz and Gorter \(2006\)](#). They reported that 28% of the signs in Friesland and 37% in Ljouwer-Leeuwarden contain the presence of English. Besides, the use of English is also associated with success, sophistication, and international orientation ([Piller, 2001](#)). Furthermore, [Cenoz \(2009\)](#) mentioned that the use of English on signage could increase sales for economic reasons.

[Scollon and Scollon \(2003\)](#), drawing upon [Kress and van Leeuwen \(1996\)](#), note that the preference for one code, or dominance of one code over another, can often be read from its position relative to the non-dominant code. They explain, "the preferred code is on top, on the left, or in the centre and the marginalised code is on the bottom, on the right, or the margins" ([Scollon and Scollon 2003, p. 120](#); [Shohamy & Gorter 2008, p. 108](#)). This is in line with the findings, where it should be noted that neighbourhood stores operated at the lower-end marketplaces with their target customers being the residents of the surrounding areas. According to [Leeman and Modan \(2009\)](#), signs printed in non-Roman scripts transmit different meanings to differing viewers. Some potential customers are housewives or elderly people who do not speak Malay or English and as a result, shop names in Mandarin can provide

necessary information to them. This explains the use of Mandarin in shop signage as it is the most practical language both for shoppers and shop owners.

The prevalence of Tamil was the lowest due to the population markup being only 3%. Nevertheless, Tamil shop signs can still be spotted in Semenyih town whereas they were non-existent in Pelangi Semenyih and Setia Ecohill. Businesses with Tamil signs are typically shops selling religious products for the Hindu community or providing barber service. This proves that they practise the language policy of displaying Bahasa Melayu on the sign as [Shohamy \(2006\)](#) stated that the presence of languages in public space indicates symbolic messages about the importance, power, significance, and relevance of certain languages than the others. Besides, this is another way to uphold the status of the Malay language chiefly for nationalistic and political reasons ([Omar, 1987](#)). However, other languages such as Tamil and Chinese are of relatively minor significance in the linguistic landscape of both areas. Hence, the visibility of these languages demonstrates the enrichment of linguistic diversity in the setting chosen.

5.2 The Relationship between the Language Choice on Shop Signs with the Development of the Area

In Semenyih town, businesses operating for more than 50 years have their shop signs coded in Malay accompanied by other ethnic or foreign languages. Because Malay is the country's official language, it is natural for the shops to have codes in Malay. It is also expected that the target customers will understand the language. Another important reason for the presence of Malay code on the shop signs is to comply with the government's regulations.

The use of English coding in shop names and descriptions chosen by shop owners symbolised the shop's identity and provided business details for marketing purposes. In Pelangi Semenyih and Setia Ecohill, English coding in shop signs was widely used, either as the name of the shop or as the description of the business, as these are new residential areas. The frequency of English coding usage has increased over the years due to the towns' development. For example, Nottingham University in Semenyih has both local and international students, whereas Tenby International School in Setia Ecohill serves both locals and foreigners. [Syed et al. \(2015\)](#) stated that English has become the most common second language in the world, thus serving as a communication bridge. Languages are never neutral. In this case, the role of English reflects its supra-national position. It gives advantages to local elites, expatriates, and foreign tourists, thus marginalising those who do not know English. It acts as a linguistic resource that benefits certain groups, such as elite locals, expatriate residents, and foreign tourists (cf. [Ben-Rafael et. al. 2006](#)), offering not only information but subliminally privileging English in the linguistic landscape of Semenyih.

The occurrences of English coding in the store signs were based on the most recent development of the sites. It appeared in monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual signs, showing the increasing awareness of the shop owners of the correlation between English and prestige. Shop signs in English help potential customers from various linguistic communities understand the gist of the information delivered in the signs. In this sense, English shop names serve as universal advertisements delivered to all customers. Thus, shop signs in English fulfil the symbolic function, allowing the shop owners to keep abreast of business trends in the world. These factors might be the

reasons why most shop signs have a space, big or small, reserved for English shop names.

The existence of the other local languages in the shop signs is closely related to the demographic structure of the area. For instance, in the town of Semenyih, shop signs coded in Mandarin were higher in number than in Pelangi Semenyih and Setia Ecohill. Since the Chinese are the largest ethnic group in Semenyih town, it is understandable that business owners here used Mandarin for their shop names to attract customers from the same ethnic group. Shop signs in Mandarin can easily be found in Semenyih town, typically at Chinese food restaurants, traditional Chinese medical shops, and Chinese kindergartens. On the other hand, Tamil is not a preferred language for the signs in Semenyih due to the lack of target customers.

The determination of what the ‘dominance’ of one code means, however, is subject to a further, or simultaneous, reading of the sign’s source. Gorter (2006), in his introduction to the *International Journal of Multilingualism’s* special issue on Linguistic Landscape, notes that almost all writing on this topic assumes a fundamental difference in choice of code and other sign elements by the producers of ‘top-down’ signs (governments and public agencies) and the non-official interests that make signs from the ‘bottom-up’. Remarking that choices such as which code to place in the ‘dominant’ position vary significantly between top-down and bottom-up authors. He writes, “the main difference between these two wide categories of Linguistic Landscape elements resides in the fact that the former are expected to reflect a general commitment to the dominant culture while the latter is designed much more freely according to individual strategies” (Gorter, 2006, p. 10). This sense is echoed by Ben-Rafael et al. (2006, p. 26), who claims, “LL analysis focuses at the same time on the simultaneous actions of institutions and autonomous actors which together give shape to the linguistics of the public space”.

6. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and discussion, it can be summed up that the linguistic choices available on these sites represented the businesses’ social, economic, and cultural importance. The linguistic landscape changed following the rate of development in Semenyih town, Pelangi Semenyih, and Setia Ecohill. This is clearly shown by the use of the English language in the new development areas, namely Pelangi Semenyih and Setia Ecohill. The shop owners’ choice of code for shop signs was primarily influenced by prestige, marketability, and the shop owner’s knowledge of the language. The use of English codes on shop signs increased in all three sites as these new areas kept growing. Furthermore, most business owners believed that a business sign in the English language is more elegant and sophisticated, attracting customers and can be remembered easily by the public. Regardless of such opinions, the inclusion of Malay on signage serves a symbolic function because it is the national language of Malaysia and helps to solidify Malaysian identity on business premises.

The findings of this study contribute to the understanding that languages used as codes in shop signages have specific intentions and are also influenced by the development of a town. Each language represents certain meanings intended to be understood by the public and reflect the business’s identity. The environment has an impact on the wording chosen for coding as well as English influences the landscape

of the new communities. Even though the local council compels shop owners to observe the criteria for the display of shop signs, the sign guidelines are downplayed for their symbolic function rather than their informational function.

The current study, however, does have some limitations. The data collected were partial to specific locations in Semenyih; therefore, the findings cannot be generalised. Out of 60 shops, only 35 shop owners agreed to participate in the questionnaire, and only five shop owners gave consent for a telephone interview. To gain a better understanding of the language choices in signs, it is recommended that more research into the linguistic landscape of Malaysian cities and towns be conducted. Additional research conducted will contribute to gaining insights relevant to the current trends in language selection for signage. Furthermore, a comparison of the linguistic landscape between rural and urban areas is recommended for future investigations to understand deeper the relationship between a site's development and language.

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