



A Systemic Functional Analysis of English Public Signs: Metafunctions and Communicative Purposes in Urban Linguistic Landscapes

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ABSTRACT

English signs in urban public spaces within the linguistic landscape are not merely directional tools, but rather a reflection of identity contestation, globalization, and complex communicative functions. Through a systemic functional linguistics (SFL) perspective, these signs are understood based on the metafunctions of language. This study examines English signs in public spaces within the urban linguistic landscape through a SFL perspective. Using a qualitative descriptive design, 100 English signs were selected from a larger dataset. The research data, focusing on the functional analysis of these English-language public signs, were analyzed qualitatively and descriptively based on ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions, as well as the communicative purposes of English use. The results show that relational meaning is the most dominant ideational pattern, indicating that English is primarily used to identify locations, facilities, and commercial entities. Interpersonal meaning is dominated by neutral and persuasive functions, while textual meaning often emerges through lexical prominence and theme prominence. These signs primarily function informatively and persuasively, demonstrating that English serves not only as a means of communication but also as a social semiotic resource that regulates public space and constructs commercial meanings. These findings suggest that public signs can be valuable authentic materials in English language learning.

Keywords: systemic functional linguistics, English, public signs, metafunction, communicative purposes

Analisis Fungsional Sistemik terhadap Tanda-Tanda Publik Berbahasa Inggris: Metafungsi dan Tujuan Komunikatif dalam Lanskap Linguistik Perkotaan

ABSTRAK

Tanda-tanda berbahasa Inggris di ruang publik perkotaan dalam lanskap linguistik bukan sekadar alat petunjuk, melainkan cerminan dari kontestasi identitas, globalisasi, dan fungsi komunikatif yang kompleks. Melalui perspektif linguistik fungsional sistemik (LFS), tanda-tanda ini dipahami berdasarkan metafungsi bahasa. Penelitian ini mengkaji tanda-tanda berbahasa Inggris di ruang publik dalam lanskap linguistik perkotaan melalui perspektif LFS. Dengan menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif, sebanyak 100 tanda berbahasa Inggris dipilih dari kumpulan data yang lebih besar. Data penelitian fokus analisis fungsi terhadap tanda-tanda publik berbahasa Inggris ini dianalisis secara kualitatif deskriptif berdasarkan metafungsi ideasional, interpersonal, dan tekstual serta tujuan komunikatif penggunaan bahasa Inggris. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa makna relasional merupakan pola ideasional yang paling dominan, yang menunjukkan bahwa bahasa Inggris terutama digunakan untuk mengidentifikasi lokasi, fasilitas, dan entitas komersial. Makna interpersonal didominasi oleh fungsi netral dan persuasif, sedangkan makna tekstual sering muncul melalui penonjolan leksikal dan penonjolan tema. Tanda-tanda tersebut terutama berfungsi secara informatif dan persuasif, yang menunjukkan bahwa bahasa Inggris tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai sarana komunikasi tetapi juga sebagai sumber semiotik sosial yang mengatur ruang publik dan membangun makna komersial. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa tanda-tanda publik dapat menjadi materi autentik yang bernilai dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris.

Kata kunci: fungsional sistemik, tanda publik, bahasa Inggris, metafungsi, tujuan komunikasi

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INTRODUCTION

Language displayed in public space has become an important research area of sociolinguistics because they provide visible evidence of how languages function in everyday social life. Shop names, warning notices, advertisements, and institutional signs do not only communicate practical information. They also reflect social identities, language ideologies, and power relations within a community. The study of these visible language practices in commonly referred as linguistic landscape. Linguistics landscape defines as the language displayed on public and commercial signs within a given territory (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Mishra, 2024; Putra et al., 2024). According to them, linguistic landscapes perform both an informational function, by conveying practical messages, and symbolic function, by signalling the social value and relative status of particular languages.

Some research has shown that linguistic landscapes can reveal broader social and political processes in multilingual settings. Gorter (2006) argues that visible language choices in public spaces provide insight into multilingualism by revealing how languages coexist and function within everyday social life. Similarly et al. (2009) emphasize that public signs function as ideological texts through which identity, power, and competing social interests are negotiated in shared spaces. This perspective has been further developed in later studies that view linguistic landscapes as dynamic social texts shaped by identity, mobility, and language policy in contemporary public life (Gorter, 2013; Shohamy, 2018; Makasambe et al., 2024).

Among the languages that appear in urban linguistic landscapes, English has become especially prominent in many non-English speaking societies. English frequently appears in commercial and institutional signs not only for informational purposes but also as a symbolic resource associated with prestige, modernity, and

global orientation (Foster & Welsh, 2021; Sari et al., 2025). Recent studies in Indonesia further shows that English often occupies visually prominent position in signage, suggesting that its function goes beyond communication into the construction of commercial image and social value (Oktavianus et al., 2025; Nenotek et al., 2025). This indicates that English signs should be understood as more than linguistic artifacts; it is a socially meaningful public discourse.

Despite the growing body of linguistic landscape research, many studies still focus primarily on language distribution, multilingual patterns, and symbolic functions, when investigating how meaning is linguistically constructed within the signs themselves is also a point of interest. Recent work has begun to treat public signs as discourse that can be examined linguistically rather than only descriptively. Public signs can contain complex social meanings through their lexical and grammatical choice. This suggests that public signs should be analysed not only for which languages appear, but also for how those languages function as meaning-making resources. To examine such meanings, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides a useful analytical framework. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) argue that language simultaneously realizes three metafunctions: the ideational metafunction, which represents experience; the interpersonal metafunction, which enacts social relationships; and the textual metafunction, which organizes messages into coherent discourse. Because public signs are typically short yet socially meaningful, SFL allows researchers to explain how even minimal linguistics forms can encode complex social meaning.

The connection between linguistic landscapes and language education has also gained attention in applied linguistics. Recent research shows that public sign can function as authentic language input that support language awareness and contextual learning beyond the classroom (Gorter



et al., 2021; Fegher et al., 2025). Because learners encounter the public signage naturally in their daily environment, linguistic landscapes can provide meaningful examples of how English operates in real social contexts. Although this study does not directly relate into education, analysing English signs through SFL may offer insights into how public texts can later be used as an authentic resources in English language education.

Based on these considerations, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What SFL metafunctions are evident in English signs found in public spaces?
2. What communicative purposes do these signs serve?

The purpose of this study is to analyse English public signs through SFL framework in order to identify the metafunctions embedded in the text and explain their communicative purposes.

This study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical benefits. Theoretically, it contributes to linguistic landscape research by extending analysis beyond language visibility toward the linguistic construction of meaning in public signs. Practically, it may provide insights for future research in language education by showing how authentic public texts can be interpreted as meaningful language resources in everyday contexts.

Previous studies highlight the interdisciplinary nature of linguistic landscape research across pedagogical, sociolinguistic, and policy dimensions. Work by Gorter Colleagues (2021) underscores the pedagogical value of public signage as authentic linguistic input that enhances learners' awareness of multilingual practices, positioning linguistic landscapes as both objects of inquiry and resources for language learning. In the Indonesian context, Fibriasari & Rahmadany (2023), Arkendele (2011), and Chesnut & Schulte (2013) show that linguistic choices in public and private signage reflect national language policy, with Indonesian remaining dominant while English gains visibility, illustrating ongoing language negotiation in urban spaces. Complementing this,

Foster & Welsh (2021) demonstrate that English in Indonesian signage often functions symbolically, associated with prestige, modernity, and global orientation, thereby serving not only communicative purposes but also contributing to social value and identity construction. While these studies have enriched understanding of linguistic landscapes from educational, sociolinguistic, and translational perspectives, limited attention has been given to how the linguistic features of public signs themselves realize meaning through the three metafunctions of SFL. Therefore, the novelty of the present study lies in its integration of linguistic landscape analysis with SFL to examine how English public signs construct experiential, interpersonal, and textual meanings in urban public discourse.

METHOD

This study applied a qualitative descriptive design using document analysis to investigate the metafunctions and communicative purposes of English public signs in urban linguistic landscape. Abubakar (2021), Razak (2017), and Afifuddin, & Saebani, (2002), state that qualitative research is commonly used in various social research including language research.

Qualitative document analysis was considered appropriate because the study focused on interpreting linguistics meaning embedded in naturally occurring written text. The data were taken from a larger corpus of approximately 1,500 photograph of public signs previously collected in urban public spaces by the second author as part of his independent research. From this corpus, 100 signs were purposely selected for the present study based on several criteria: the signs contained English text, were clearly visible and legible, functioned in public settings, and represented different categories of public communication such as commercial, informational, warning, directional, and promotional signs. The unit of analysis was the individual sign text, including both monolingual and bilingual signs in which English formed a meaningful part of the message.

The selected signs were analyzed using the SFL framework proposed by M.A.K. Halliday and Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen, focusing on the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. Each sign was then interpreted according to its communicative purpose, including informational, regulatory, persuasive, and symbolic functions. The analysis was conducted through four stages: organizing the selected signs by type, coding the linguistic features based on metafunctional categories, identifying the communicative purpose of each sign, and interpreting recurring patterns to explain how English functions as a social semiotic resource in public space.

RESULT

To identify the dominant linguistic patterns in the dataset, the 100 selected English signs were coded according to the three metafunctions of SFL (ideational, interpersonal, and textual), as well as their primary communicative purposes. The coding results were then quantified to determine the frequency of each category across the dataset. The following tables summarize the distribution of metafunctional meanings and communicative functions, providing an overview of how English is used as a social semiotic resource in public space.

Table-1
 Frequency of Ideational Metafunctions

Ideational Category	f	%
Relational meanings	72	72
Material meanings	24	24
Existential meanings	3	3
Mental meanings	1	1
Total	100	100

The predominance of relational meanings (72%) indicates that most English signs were used to identify places, facilities, brands, and services in public space.

Table-2

Frequency of Interpersonal Meanings		
Ideational Category	f	%
Neutral	46	46
Persuasive	23	23
Invitational	18	18
Symbolic	7	7
Authoritative	6	6
Total	100	100

The dominance of neutral interpersonal meanings (46%) shows that many signs primarily served orientation functions, while commercial signs contributed to persuasive and invitational interaction.

Table-3
 Frequency of Textual Meanings

Textual Category	f	%
Thematic foregrounding	28	28%
Lexical salience	24	24%
Listing structure	23	23%
Lexical compression	18	18%
Other textual forms	7	7%
Total	100	100%

Thematic foregrounding (28%) appeared most frequently, suggesting that many signs were designed to direct immediate attention to key information.

Table 4
 Frequency of Communicative Purposes

Communicative Purpose	f	%
Persuasive	42	42%
Informational	38	38%
Directional	8	8%
Symbolic	7	7%
Regulatory	5	5%
Total	100	100%



The high frequency of persuasive signs (42%) suggests that English was strongly associated with commercial promotion, while informational signs remained a major function of English in public space.

Overall, the frequency analysis demonstrates that relational meanings were the most dominant ideational pattern, occurring in 72% of the dataset. This indicates that English was primarily used to identify locations, facilities, and commercial entities in the public environment. In interpersonal terms, neutral meanings appeared most frequently (46%), reflecting the orientation function of many signs. However, persuasive communicative purposes accounted for 42% of the signs, showing that English also played a significant role in commercial promotion and consumer engagement within the linguistic landscape.

DISCUSSION

The results show that English signs serve as more than just written labels in public areas. The idea that language is a social semiotic system is supported by the frequency patterns, which show that English functions concurrently as a commercial symbol, a spatial organizer, and a resource for meaning-making (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). English was most commonly used to designate locations, facilities, and business entities, according to the ideational metafunction's predominance of relational meanings. This is in line with Halliday's theory that relational processes give individuals, things, and places identities in order to categorize and describe the world. Signs like TOILET, LIFT, and FIRST FLOOR served as shortened relational clauses, aiding in the organization of the public space. Similar results were observed by M. P. S. Vitasari and Y. Setyawan (2025), who discovered that English is often used in Indonesian public signs to arrange urban commercial spaces through classification.

The interpersonal findings also demonstrate that, depending on the type of sign, English signs create distinct social interactions. While

commercial messages often had persuasive and invitational connotations, functional signs were characterized by a neutral interpersonal position. Interpersonal meaning enables language users to negotiate social relations through mood, assessment, and address, claim Halliday & Matthiessen (2014). Promotional signage like "SHOP ONLINE" and "BUY 1 GET 1 FREE" positioned readers in the current study as customers rather than passive spectators. This is consistent with research by Safitri (2025), which show that such signs often employ persuasive and affective strategies to attract and engage potential customers, rather than merely conveying information. Similarly, Gorter & Cenoz (2021) suggest that English in public space increasingly functions as interactive tool that encourages engagement with global consumer culture.

The textual findings also support the argument that public signs rely heavily on visual and linguistic economy. The frequent use of thematic foregrounding, lexical salience, and listing structures reflects the need for signs to communicate rapidly in public environments. Halliday (2014) explains that textual meaning organizes language into coherent messages by determining what information receives prominence. In this study, signs such as SPECIAL OFFER, SALE, and NEW STORE OPENING SOON placed key information in thematic position to attract immediate attention. Elana Shohamy and Durk Gorter (2009) made similar observations, pointing out that how language is arranged in public signage influences how urban texts are socially perceived.

The frequency of persuasive communicative purposes in the dataset also suggests that English has symbolic significance outside of its informational function. Although informational signs remained common, commercial signs represented the largest communicative category, indicating that English is strongly associated with branding and consumer culture. This supports the long-standing argument that English in non-

English-speaking environments frequently reflects globalization, cosmopolitan identity, and prestige (Backhaus, 2007).

From a broader linguistic landscape perspective, the findings confirm that public signs should be viewed as socially situated texts rather than discrete lexical units from the standpoint of a larger linguistic environment. English signs simultaneously influence social interaction and spatial experience, as evidenced by the confluence of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings. This bolsters research that suggests linguistic landscapes should be analyzed not only in terms of language visibility but also in terms of discourse and semiotic meaning (Gorter, 2021). The current study, which draws on Halliday's systemic functional paradigm, demonstrates how even simple signs can encode several levels of meaning that represent both more general social values and practical communication.

CONCLUSION

This study examined English signs in public space through the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics to identify the metafunctions they realize and the communicative purposes they serve. The findings showed that relational meanings were the most dominant ideational pattern, indicating that English was primarily used to identify places, facilities, and commercial entities within the linguistic landscape. In interpersonal terms, English signs displayed both neutral and persuasive meanings, reflecting their dual role in guiding visitors and engaging consumers. Textually, the frequent use of thematic foregrounding, lexical salience, and listing structures demonstrated how English signs are designed for immediate readability in public environments.

These findings suggest that English in public signage functions not only as a practical means of communication but also as a social semiotic resource that organizes space, shapes social

interaction, and projects symbolic value in urban settings. By integrating linguistic landscape research with SFL, this study shows that even short public signs can reveal complex layers of meaning. The study also highlights the potential of public signage as authentic language material that may contribute to English language education by helping learners understand how language operates in real social contexts.

For future research, a larger comparative study across different public settings may provide deeper insight into how English functions across varied sociocultural environments.

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