

## A Geosemiotic Analysis of Signs in the Linguistic Cityscape of Little Tokyo Blok M, Jakarta

Khairunnisa<sup>1</sup>, Haryati<sup>2</sup>

Universitas Pamulang

Email: <sup>1</sup>khairunn14@gmail.com; <sup>2</sup>dosen00511@unpam.ac.id;

### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to analyze the geosemiotic features of the linguistic landscape in Little Tokyo, Blok M, Jakarta, and to examine how these features function in representing real-world activities and sociocultural meanings. A qualitative research approach was employed using the geosemiotic framework proposed by Scollon and Scollon (2003) to categorize and interpret 402 signs displayed in the area. The signs were classified into three categories: official signs, private signs, and mixed signs, with private signs emerging as the most dominant. These included 50 restaurant signs, 82 shop signs, and 44 private advertisements. A closer geosemiotic analysis was conducted on the 50 restaurant signs by examining key components such as code preference, inscription, and emplacement. The findings reveal a strong presence of multilingualism, with Indonesian, Japanese, and English frequently used across the signage. The signs perform both informational and symbolic functions: they facilitate navigation and communication for visitors while simultaneously expressing the area's distinctive cultural identity. Overall, the study demonstrates that the signage in Little Tokyo, Blok M plays a significant role in constructing and reinforcing a unique socio-cultural and spatial landscape.*

**Keywords:** Geosemiotics, Linguistic Landscape, Little Tokyo Blok M, Multilingualism

### A. Introduction

Public signs constitute a pervasive yet often underexamined component of urban environments. Beyond their immediate informational function, public signage plays a crucial role in shaping how spaces are perceived, navigated, and socially interpreted. Linguistic Landscape (LL) studies focus on the visibility and distribution of language in public spaces, examining how written signs reflect social structures, cultural identities, power relations, and patterns of multilingualism (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). Through the analysis of signs, linguistic landscape research provides insight into the interaction between language, society, and space.

In the Indonesian context, linguistic landscape research remains relatively limited and unevenly distributed. Existing studies have largely concentrated on urban centers such as Malang (Yanuar, 2018), Surakarta (Sartono, 2018), and Jakarta more broadly (Da Silva, 2017). These studies consistently demonstrate the dominance of Bahasa Indonesia in public signage, reflecting national language policy and the prioritization of local audiences. However, such research has

tended to focus on monolingual or predominantly national-language environments, leaving multilingual and culturally hybrid urban spaces underexplored.

One such space is Little Tokyo Blok M Jakarta, a distinctive urban enclave characterized by a strong Japanese cultural presence alongside Indonesian and global influences. The area features a dense concentration of restaurants, shops, and entertainment venues that employ Japanese, Indonesian, and English in their signage. In this context, signs function not only as tools for communication and navigation but also as symbolic markers of cultural affiliation, identity construction, and transnational exchange. The coexistence of multiple languages in Little Tokyo Blok M presents a compelling site for examining how linguistic choices contribute to the construction of place identity in a multicultural urban setting.

To capture the relationship between language, space, and social meaning in such environments, this study adopts a geosemiotic perspective. Geosemiotics, as proposed by Scollon and Scollon (2003), emphasizes the importance of analyzing signs in relation to their physical placement, interaction order, and sociocultural context. By integrating linguistic landscape analysis with geosemiotics, this research moves beyond the categorization of languages to examine how signage interacts with spatial organization and everyday practices to produce meaning in public space.

Despite the growing body of linguistic landscape research in Indonesia, studies that focus specifically on multilingual urban districts and employ a geosemiotic framework remain scarce. Little Tokyo Blok M Jakarta, as a culturally hybrid space shaped by tourism, commerce, and transnational cultural flows, has not yet been systematically examined from this perspective. This gap highlights the need for research that explores how multilingual signage reflects real-world activities, social interactions, and the negotiation of cultural identities in urban Indonesia.

Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the linguistic landscape of Little Tokyo Blok M Jakarta by addressing the following research questions: (1) What varieties of signs are present in the linguistic cityscape of Little Tokyo Blok M Jakarta? and (2) What functions do these signs serve in representing real-world activities and social interactions? By answering these questions, the study contributes theoretically to linguistic landscape and geosemiotic scholarship by demonstrating how signage operates as both communicative practice and cultural symbol in multilingual urban spaces. Practically, it offers insights into the representation of cultural hybridity in public signage, providing a foundation for future research on urban multilingualism and place identity in Indonesia.

## **B. Method**

This study adhered to the three fundamental steps of linguistic landscape analysis proposed by Backhaus (2006): identifying the research area, establishing criteria for selecting outdoor signs as research subjects, and defining the criteria for categorizing these signs. The methodology was organized into four sections: the study approach, data sources, data collection techniques, and data analysis procedures.

The research employed a qualitative approach, which is well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena such as language use in public spaces. Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009) emphasized that qualitative methods focus on detailed descriptions and textual analysis of observed phenomena, while Creswell (2014) highlighted their utility in understanding human perspectives within natural contexts.

To analyze the linguistic landscape, this study applied Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotic theory. Data were collected through photographic documentation of various types of signs, categorized, and systematically analyzed to identify language patterns and functions. This

approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how signs in Little Tokyo Blok M contribute to the area's linguistic identity through variables such as code preference, inscription, and emplacement.

The data consisted of photographs of signs collected from the public spaces of Little Tokyo Blok M Jakarta. The study focused on capturing a range of signage, including informational signs, street signs, advertising boards, shop and restaurant signs, and private announcements. Figure 1 illustrates the research area using a map sourced from Google Maps.

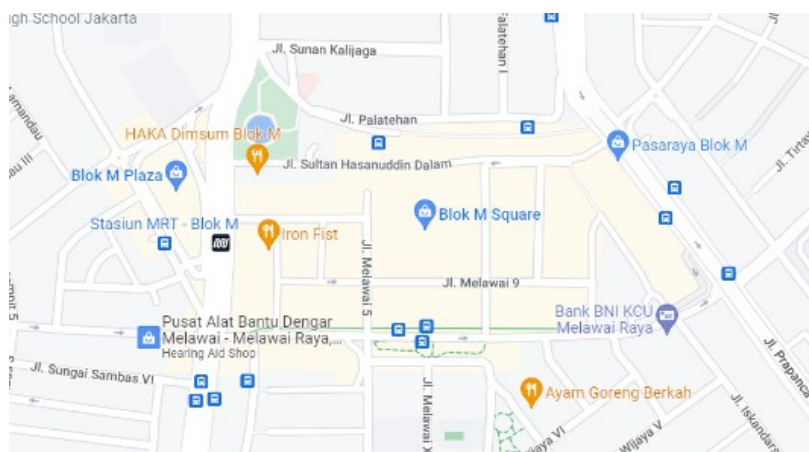


Figure 1. Little Tokyo Blok M Maps

Source: Google Maps

As noted by Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009), qualitative research may draw on a range of data sources, including texts, audiovisual materials, and interviews. In this study, visual data were employed as the primary source, as Banks (2007) emphasizes that visual materials are particularly effective for examining the cultural and social dimensions of signs and symbols. The analysis focused on the semiotics of private signs, specifically restaurant signage, examined through the geosemiotic framework at the levels of code preference, inscription, and emplacement.

Data were collected through systematic on-site photographic documentation using a smartphone camera in Little Tokyo Blok M, Jakarta. Observations concentrated on identifying and categorizing signage into official signs, private signs, and combination signs. The classification of sign types was adapted from Lu et al. (2021), who distinguish categories such as public service advertisements, road signs, shop signs, and multifunctional boards.

Data analysis followed a qualitative, multi-stage process consisting of classification, detailed semiotic analysis, and interpretation, guided by Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotic framework. First, photographs were systematically categorized based on sign type and function using the concepts of code preference (language choice and hierarchy), inscription (visual design and medium), and emplacement (physical and contextual positioning).

Subsequently, the analysis examined how linguistic choices, visual elements, and spatial placement interacted to construct meaning and reflect sociocultural dynamics. Finally, interpretation synthesized these findings to draw broader conclusions about how signage functions as a communicative resource, a marker of cultural identity, and an organizing element of urban space in Little Tokyo Blok M.

## C. Findings and Analysis

### 1. Findings

#### 1.1. Sign Classification and Quantification

Table 1 summarizes the classification and quantity of signs observed in Little Tokyo, categorized into three main types: official, private, and combined signs. A total of 402 signs were documented, with 114 official signs, 247 private signs, and 41 combination signs.

Table 1. Sign Classification & Quantity of Little Tokyo Blok M

|                                                         |                                    |    |     |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----|-----|-----|
| Official signs<br>(Top-down signage)                    | Public Signs of General Interest   | 80 | 114 | 402 |
|                                                         | Public Service Advertisement (PSA) | 12 |     |     |
|                                                         | Street (Road Name)                 | 22 |     |     |
| Private signs<br>(Bottom-up signage)                    | Building / Place Name              | 71 | 247 |     |
|                                                         | Restaurant Signs                   | 50 |     |     |
|                                                         | Shop Signs                         | 82 |     |     |
|                                                         | Private Announcements (Ads)        | 44 |     |     |
| Official and private<br>combination signs<br>(New type) | Multifunctional Board              | 8  | 41  |     |
|                                                         | Indicator Board                    | 33 |     |     |

Private signs outnumbered official ones (247 vs. 114), illustrating a vibrant commercial atmosphere where businesses actively use signage for communication and attraction. The presence of combination signs, though limited, contributes to multifunctional and navigational purposes, enhancing the cultural and commercial identity of Little Tokyo Blok M.

#### 1.2. Code Preferences in Restaurant Signs

The linguistic analysis of 50 restaurant signs revealed a strong preference for foreign languages, particularly Japanese and English, underscoring the area's international appeal. Table 2 illustrates the code preferences.

Table 2. Code Preference in Restaurant Signs

| Category /<br>Signs | Code size            |                     |             |        | Number of Languages |           |              |                |
|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-------------|--------|---------------------|-----------|--------------|----------------|
|                     | Indonesian<br>Bigger | Foreign<br>Language | The<br>same | Others | Monolingual         | Bilingual | Multilingual | Symbol<br>Only |
| Restaurant<br>Signs | 3                    | 37                  | 4           | 6      | 25                  | 20        | 1            | 4              |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>50</b>            |                     |             |        | <b>50</b>           |           |              |                |

Signs with bilingual and multilingual codes reflect efforts to address a diverse audience. Meanwhile, symbol-only signs rely on universal imagery to overcome linguistic barriers, emphasizing cultural inclusivity.

#### 1.3. Inscriptions in Restaurant Signs

Table 3 provides insights into the inscriptions used in restaurant signs, highlighting their design and visual appeal.

Table 3. Inscriptions in Restaurant Signs

| Category / Signs | Font From |                   |             | Display Mode |           |        |
|------------------|-----------|-------------------|-------------|--------------|-----------|--------|
|                  | Text-Only | Visual Data Added | Symbol Only | Print        | Sculpture | Others |
| Restaurant Signs | 32        | 15                | 3           | 17           | 5         | 28     |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>50</b> |                   |             | <b>50</b>    |           |        |

The majority of signs use text-only inscriptions with printed designs, ensuring clarity and ease of communication. Some signs incorporate visual elements, enhancing their aesthetic appeal, while sculpted signs showcase greater investment in craftsmanship, contributing to uniqueness and branding.

#### 1.4. Emplacement in Restaurant Signs

The analysis of emplacement reveals a dominant use of situated semiotics, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Emplacement in Restaurant Signs

| Category / Signs | Decontextualized semiotics | Transgressive semiotics | Situated Semiotics |
|------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Restaurant Signs | 6                          | 0                       | 44                 |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>50</b>                  |                         |                    |

Situated semiotics dominate the restaurant signs, indicating a strong adaptation to the local environment. These signs are designed to integrate seamlessly with their surroundings, reinforcing the cultural identity of Little Tokyo Blok M. The absence of transgressive semiotics highlights a lack of provocations or culturally dissonant elements.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. Varieties of Sign

This section examines the various types of signs in the Little Tokyo Blok M Jakarta cityscape, concentrating on two key elements of place semiotics: code preference and inscriptions. Below are brief descriptions of various signs and their functions.



Figure 2. Haka Dimsum Shop

Haka Dimsum Shop (Figure 2) displays a bilingual sign that combines Chinese characters (點心) with English text ("DIMSUM SHOP"), addressing both the Chinese community and a wider international audience. The minimalist, text-only inscription enhances legibility and ensures clear communication of the establishment's function.



Figure 3. Toast Box Eatery

Toast Box Eatery (Figure 3) features an English-only sign in a modern font, aligning with a branding strategy that targets a global or English-speaking audience. Its minimalist design enhances both visibility and legibility.



Figure 4. A&W Restaurant

A&W Restaurant (Figure 4) features a symbol-only sign with a bold, colorful logo that relies on visual identity rather than language, effectively conveying the brand through its illuminated design.



Figure 5. Lawless Burger Bar

Lawless Burger Bar (Figure 5) uses bold English text and a stylized burger image to appeal to a wide audience, emphasizing brand identity through modern, illuminated typography.



Figure 6. Starbucks



Starbucks (Figure 6), the globally recognized symbol-only sign, emphasizes brand identity without text, relying on the iconic Starbucks logo.



Figure 7. Coffee and Toast Eatery

The sign for Coffee and Toast Eatery (Figure 7), which combines bilingual text with visual icons such as a coffee cup and a sandwich, enhances communication and makes it easily accessible to both local and international customers.



Figure 8. Japanese Bar

At the Japanese Bar (see Figure 8), a bilingual sign incorporates English and Japanese alongside visual cues that highlight the bar's character and services, effectively attracting both local customers and international visitors.



Figure 9. Korean Restaurant

The sign in Figure 9 combines Korean and English to appeal to both Korean-speaking customers and international visitors, using bold colors and imagery to enhance clarity and visual appeal.



Figure 10. Hiyori Restaurant

The multilingual signage at Hiyori Restaurant (Figure 10), featuring Japanese, English, and Indonesian, enhances accessibility for a diverse audience. The illuminated display further improves visibility.



Figure 11. Steak House

Steak House (Figure 11), the English-only sign with a three-dimensional, illuminated design reflects the global identity of the Outback Steakhouse chain, ensuring recognition and appeal to both local and international customers.

These signs reflect the multicultural and multilingual nature of Little Tokyo Blok M Jakarta, showcasing the blending of traditional and modern elements to appeal to diverse audiences.

## **2.2. The Functions of Sign Through Emplacement**

The placement of signs in Little Tokyo Blok M Jakarta plays a key role in connecting them with the local culture, space, and social context. The physical context of each sign influences its function and meaning, shaping how it interacts with its surroundings.

For instance, signs such as the banner in Figure 2 represent situated semiotics, where the sign above the shop front maximizes visibility to pedestrians and drivers along Jalan Melawai 1. This positioning not only locates the business but also increases its community exposure, serving as a marketing tool. On the other hand, signs like the one in Figure 3 exemplify decontextualized



semiotics, standing out independently on the building's facade to establish a dominant brand presence without relying on its surroundings.

The A&W sign in Figure 4, with its bright illuminated logo, is another example of decontextualized semiotics, where high visibility and brand recognition are key. Similarly, Figure 5 shows a sign that blends well with its environment through design and color, making it a situated semiotic that integrates with the local architectural and street landscape.

In contrast, the Starbucks logo in Figure 5, as a decontextualized semiotic, carries a consistent brand meaning regardless of location. Similarly, signs in Figures 6 to 11 are predominantly situated semiotics, where their strategic placement and design work together to increase visibility, communicate brand identity, and blend seamlessly with their urban environment, reflecting the area's multicultural landscape.

The emplacement of signs in Little Tokyo Blok M serves as both a functional and aesthetic element, ensuring visibility, enhancing brand presence, and fostering a sense of place.

## D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that signage in Little Tokyo Blok M Jakarta plays a significant role in shaping the area's linguistic, cultural, and spatial identity. The prevalence of bilingual and multilingual signs reflects deliberate strategies to accommodate diverse audiences while simultaneously expressing cultural affiliation and hybridity. Through the use of multiple languages, visual symbols, and culturally specific inscriptions, signage functions not only as a medium of information and commercial promotion but also as a marker of identity and belonging.

Moreover, the strategic emplacement of signs enhances visibility and reinforces the commercial vitality of the area, illustrating how linguistic and visual choices are closely intertwined with spatial organization and economic activity. By applying a geosemiotic framework, this study highlights how language, design, and placement collectively contribute to the construction of Little Tokyo Blok M as a distinctive multicultural urban space. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of public signage as both a communicative resource and a socio-cultural practice that actively shapes urban identities in multilingual contexts.

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