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**TRACING LINGUISTIC CHANGES ON SHOP SIGNS IN MALAYSIA:
A DIACHRONIC EXAMINATION OF GEORGE TOWN, PENANG**

Keywords: Linguistic landscape, George Town, history, geosemiotics, materiality.

ABSTRACT

According to Pavlenko (2010), linguistic landscape (LL) studies cannot be fully understood without considering the past. Consistent with this idea is conceptualising LL research as a diachronic process. In this study, we explore the LL of George Town (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Penang in Malaysia, which is filled with evidence of historical changes from the past until its current state. A unique characteristic of George Town is its blend of different languages, which are displayed on shop signs and can be traced back to the late 18th century. To understand the social and historical changes that have taken place in George Town, data was gathered from several resources, including personal narratives by shop owners and historical artefacts such as postcards, books, and brochures obtained from the heritage centre. A geosemiotic approach is adopted to categorise, analyse, and interpret the subsequent collection of shop signs. In terms of the materiality of signs and their linguistic content, the findings reveal that old shop signs from the British colonial period were engraved on wooden boards and mostly written in Chinese or English. After Malaysia gained independence, metal signboards and non-standard Malay were used. In 1975, several Malay terms were changed, and shop owners started using Modern Standard Malay on signs. Currently, shop signs are more multi-modal, colourful, and most likely made of polycarbonate. More recent signs also light up at night. Through a diachronic examination of the LL, we reflect on how phenomena such as globalisation and technological innovation are having an impact on the nature of George Town's shop signs, and the materiality of these signs.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1957, Malaysia has been independent from the United Kingdom. Before independence, Malaysia was colonised by the Dutch, the British, and the Japanese. Today, there are many traces of European and Japanese influences in the history and culture of the country, which can be observed linguistically in various public spaces. Malaysia's

administration, education, and economic and cultural growth have undergone significant changes. In this respect, a diachronic analysis of shop signs is particularly relevant to track the progressive historical alterations of the linguistic landscape (LL) (Backhaus 2005; Pavlenko 2010). George Town, a city located in the state of Penang in northwest Malaysia, is a mosaic of cultural and linguistic influences that have been witnessed during its rich history. In 2008, the city was awarded the title of World Heritage Site by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee. This title has had a considerable impact on the development of the city's tourism industry. Penang island, previously known as Prince of Wales Island, has been at the crux of a significant number of ethnolinguistic influences, which can be witnessed on its LL, and traced back to the late 18th century. Some of the languages visible to visitors to George Town today are Malay (written in Rumi and Jawi), English, Chinese, Tamil, Japanese, and Thai. Interestingly, the city features both multilingual and monolingual signs, which attest to its different historical periods.

This study reports on a survey conducted during summer 2014 to track and compile evidence of the linguistic changes on George Town's shop signs from the late 18th century until the present day. Firstly, a brief definition of the term "linguistic landscape" is provided, followed by a review of studies previously conducted in this research area. Subsequently, the sociolinguistic background of George Town before and after Malaysia's independence is detailed. The methodological considerations relevant to the study are then described, consisting of the research questions and methodology adopted. The analysis of the survey items was divided into four historical periods: (1) the late 18th century to the late 19th century (circa 1780s–1900), (2) the early 20th century to the mid-20th century (1901–1966), (3) the mid-20th century to the late 20th century (1967–1974), and (4) the late 20th century to the early 21st century (1975–present). Each historical period is intended to account for the changes reflected on shop signs and reveals the influences of both shop owners and the implemented language policies.

LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE RESEARCH AND THE STUDY OF DIACHRONICITY

The term "linguistic landscape" (LL) refers to the description of the function, role, and effect of public signs in the urban landscape. Ever since Landry and Bourhis (1997) presented the definition of LL, it has been widely studied through multidisciplinary approaches from sociolinguistics, semiotics, sociology, anthropology, education, economy, history, and politics (e.g. Abas 2019; Huebner, Phoocharoensil 2017; Malinowski 2015). Most of the early LL studies (e.g. Backhaus 2007; Gorter 2009; Huebner 2006; Lock 2003) adopted a variationist perspective, with a strong emphasis on quantitative approaches. These studies focused on the number of signs and languages contained, to the detriment of a deeper discussion of the semiotic features of public signs.

In the current trend of LL research, the scope has progressively moved beyond quantitative approaches to interpretative ones. Scholars such as Scollon and Scollon (2003), Lou (2007), and Leeman and Modan (2009), among others, are currently examining urban landscapes qualitatively. Scollon and Scollon (2003) employed a geosemiotic

approach to compare the flow of the two Chinese writing systems, traditional and simplified, in China and Hong Kong. They conclude that the writing system in China remains mostly simplified, while in Hong Kong there is almost no trace of simplified writing, even after the change of political sovereignty. A noticeable change in both countries highlighted by the authors is the increase in Japanese language and script, a finding that can be regarded as rather unexpected. The political change in Hong Kong has not affected the writing system of the country so far, and the adoption of traditional characters has continued until today. Using a similar conceptual model, Lou (2007) examined the dialectic construction of Washington, DC's Chinatown by focusing on three aspects of geosemiotics relating to the signs: (1) language choice and code preference, (2) inscription (i.e. text vector and composition), and (3) physical placement. Adopting a diachronic perspective when analysing Chinatown's historical photographs, Lou's (2007) findings reveal that Washington DC's Chinatown is a polyvocal environment characterised by heterotopia (cf. Foucault 1967). In their examination of the same environment (Washington, DC's Chinatown), Leeman and Modan (2009) use analytical tools from the fields of geography and urban studies to investigate the visual display of Chinese. They classify their signs according to four categories: (1) language, (2) types of symbolic and ideational meanings communicated, (3) time period when the business was established, and (4) types of institution. Leeman and Modan (2009) report that Chinese writing on Chinatown's streets has become an aesthetic tool rather than a means of communication.

According to Papen (2012), most LL research focuses on analysing present-day contemporary environments. However, Pavlenko (2010: 133) argues that a 'linguistic landscape is not a state but a diachronic process and the meaning of the present day's arrangements cannot be fully understood without considering those of the past.' In addition, Blommaert and Maly (2014) observe that both the slow and rapid social change and transformation of a space can be interpreted through LL studies. Spolsky and Cooper (1991) add that political regime changes play an important role in shaping a LL.

A survey of the literature reveals that only a small set of studies have examined LLs diachronically. Backhaus (2005) looks at Tokyo's LL diachronically through large-scale data in 2003 and concludes that it is currently in a transitional state. The transition is more visible in official signs than unofficial ones because it is implemented by government officials. Pavlenko (2010) examines the languages used in Kyiv's LL at different periods of history and the influencing factors shaping the LL. She uses photographs of the present-day LL, photographic archives, photograph and postcard collections, and historical monographs as data sources. Her study finds that the change in the LL is not a reflection of language shift but the result of changes in political regimes. When an administration is changed, the LL also changes.

As far as Malaysia's LL is concerned, previous studies have focused on studying the different languages, their hierarchy in the LL, and policy involved (Anuarudin, Chan, Abdullah 2013; Coluzzi 2015, 2017; Manan, David, Dumaning, Naqeebullah 2015; Supramani, Wang, Koh, Riget 2013; Wang, Koh, Riget, Shoniah 2016; Wang, Riget,

Supramani, Koh 2017). Due to the scarcity of historical LL research in Malaysia, our study aims to fill this gap by adopting geosemiotics as a conceptual model in the examination and analysis of the linguistic changes observed on shop signs in George Town (Penang), before and after Malaysia's independence from British rule.

SOCIOLINGUISTIC BACKGROUND OF PENANG

Penang is a multiethnic, multiracial, and multilingual state in northern Peninsular Malaysia. Penang is made up of two parts — Penang Island (with George Town as its state capital) and Seberang Perai (formerly known as Wellesley Province). According to the Department of Statistics (2018), Penang has a population of 1.76 million, consisting of Malays (42.3%), Chinese (39.4%), Indians (9.4%), and other ethnicities (8.9%). The official language of administration, education, and law in Penang is Malay. English is widely spoken in schools and offices and acts as the unofficial second language. The majority of the Chinese population in Penang speaks Hokkien with a mix of Malay and English terms (Wang 2017). In most places, such as markets, restaurants, and shops, Hokkien is the main language of communication. Other ethnicities living in Penang also use Hokkien to communicate with friends and co-workers. Since George Town attained its UNESCO World Heritage Site listing in 2008, Penang's population has increased considerably, and the prices of pre-war shops/houses in George Town have doubled or tripled due to the increase in the number of tourists visiting Penang Island every month.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PENANG ISLAND AND GEORGE TOWN

Penang Island first appeared in the Chinese explorer Zheng He's written account of his expeditions during the 15th century as a trading port for Chinese sailors from the Ming dynasty. Originally part of the Malay Sultanate of Kedah, Sultan Abdullah leased Penang Island to British Captain Francis Light in exchange for military protection. On 11 August 1786, Captain Francis Light landed on the island and formally annexed it. He renamed it "Prince of Wales Island". This marked the start of Britain's official involvement in Malaya, as Penang Island became Britain's first settlement in Southeast Asia. In 1788, Captain Francis Light declared Penang Island a "free port" — a status that invited merchants to conduct trade there.

Historically, George Town has been famous as a temporary resting station for merchants. By the early 19th century, Chinese merchants and immigrants had settled in George Town, setting up small shops around Beach Street, Light Street, Chulia Street, and Pitt Street. These four main roads formed part of Captain Francis Light's earliest development plan (Wong, Friends 2014). There were shops selling sundries, joss sticks, school textbooks, coffins, and pastries, among other things. Malaya's first newspaper (*Prince of Wales Island Gazette* in 1805), Southeast Asia's oldest English school (Penang Free School established in 1816), an Anglican church (St. George Church in 1816), as well as Malaya's oldest bank (Standard Chartered Bank in 1875) were all established by the Brit-

ish in and around George Town. Campbell Market, a famous market located in Campbell Street, was opened in 1900 and is still operational today (Wong, Friends 2014).

During World War II, George Town suffered widespread devastation, with several buildings and shops bombed by the Japanese forces. After the surrender of the Japanese, the British returned to the city, but its prestige and image had been ruined due to the war. The Federation of Malaya was formed in 1948, uniting federated and unfederated Malay states in addition to the Straits Settlements, which included Penang. On 31 August 1957, Malaya gained independence from British rule. English was removed as the country's official language and the Malay language became the sole national and official language for administration, education, and the law courts. The federal government removed the free port status from Penang Island in 1969; however, George Town continued to blossom as many old shops carried on operating and conducting businesses. Carnarvon Street became a flourishing shopping area in George Town during the 1980s, with goldsmith stores and textile businesses blooming. Today, the tourism industry contributes substantially to the development of Penang Island. Most of the pre- and post-war shops and buildings have been restored, and the unique local cultures are promoted through heritage-related activities.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Research questions

As mentioned in the previous section, very few studies have looked at the LL diachronically; hence, our study aims to contribute to the existing literature. Before we started collecting the shop signs, the research questions formed were as follows:

- How have shop signs changed in George Town in terms of language content and materiality from the late 18th century until today?
- What are the factors that have influenced these changes?

The aim of our investigation is to find out how written languages have changed on shop signs at different historical periods and the reasons behind these changes. We will discuss the methodology used and the data source in the following sections.

Analytical framework

The analytical framework adopted for this study is inspired by Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotics model, which contends that the meaning of public texts such as road signs, public notices, and brand logos should be interpreted based on a relationship of co-indexicality. Specifically, the interpretation and understanding of signs ought to also include analytical elements where the physical or material components of signs are taken into consideration, in addition to the concrete, and the physical placement of the language in relation to these signs. "Geosemiotics" is defined as 'the study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs in the world' (Scollon,

Scollon 2003: 110). The term “signs” is used in this framework to refer to any semiotic system including language and discourse. Through our use of a geosemiotic model, we interpreted our data according to four criteria: (1) historical period (spanning from the 18th to the 21st century), (2) language choice (Chinese, English or Malay), (3) text vector (e.g., whether texts are read from right to left, or left to right), and (4) types of material used to fabricate the sign (e.g., wood, metal or polycarbonate). This approach allows for a holistic appreciation and understanding of the LL of George Town and its different historical periods.

Data source

The data source involved in this study consisted of photographs of shop signs collected in the heart of George Town, Penang, during summer 2014. Names of old and new shops around the city centre were recorded, and shop signs were photographed using a digital camera. Several shops displayed signs representing the different historical periods of their business operations. A total of 300 photographs were collected for this study. A directory of traditional traders and occupations (by streets) by George Town World Heritage Incorporated was used to document when the shops started operating. For some stores, the owners narrated personal stories of the history of their businesses. The narration was not structured, and the time length varied among the owners. Several shop owners were suspicious and apprehensive about providing any confidential information. In some cases, shops were taken over by a new generation of traders, and those more recent, younger owners did not know much about the history of their relatives’ and ancestors’ shops. In other cases, the historical information and photographs of the first shop signs (e.g. from the late 18th century) were obtained from the companies’ websites. The rationale behind this data source is that these photographs represent the linguistic changes that have taken place in different historical periods in George Town, starting from the late 18th century (British colonial days) to the Japanese occupation period, followed by the post-independence phase, and into the contemporary tourism-oriented era (i.e. after George Town was awarded UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 2008). Most of the shops listed are popular among locals and tourists due to their long history and their initial establishment as family businesses.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The photos of the shop signs are categorised and presented according to four historical periods:

- the late 18th century to the late 19th century (circa 1780s–1900)
- the early 20th century to the mid-20th century (1901–1966)
- the mid-20th century to the late 20th century (1967–1974)
- the late 20th century to the early 21st century (1975–present).

THE LATE 18TH CENTURY TO THE LATE 19TH CENTURY (CIRCA 1780S–1900)

After Sir Francis Light landed on Penang Island and declared it a free port in 1788, Chinese merchants started to occupy the island and initiate trade with the British. Other trading partner countries included Siam (currently Thailand), India, Sumatra, and Java. Some of the trading merchandise and goods consisted of rice, opium, tin, betel-nut, pepper, and spices. Today, several shops that survived from the late 18th and early 19th century have been passed down to younger generations of the same trading families. Some of these have grown internationally, while others have remained small family businesses. From our examination of the late 18th century to the late 19th century shop signs, we noticed several important characteristics. For the most part, shop signs were made of wood. Chinese characters that bore a family's district of origin in China carried the name of the shops and were manually engraved onto pieces of wooden board. These wooden shop signs documented important information regarding the family's history, such as their dialect, surname, and clan. They were hung above the front door of the shops, as the entrance is a significant point of entry of *Chi* (positive energy) in Chinese culture and beliefs (Penang Happenings 2017). The Chinese characters displayed features of traditional Chinese, which are less used today, except in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and were read from right to left. As Lou (2007) emphasises, the right to left text vector is symbolic of traditional Chinese culture. Wooden shop signs remain important in Chinese culture today as they are one of several ways Chinese people preserve and document their tradition after leaving their motherland (Any Way in a Way 2017).

The oldest surviving shop in George Town today is *Kwong Tuck Sundries*, which is located at 90 Campbell Street. The shop looks rather traditional but is well-kept, with wooden interior architecture including wooden stairs. *Kwong Tuck Sundries* started its first shop in Perak in 1785. According to our interviewee Woo, who belongs to the fifth generation in his family, his great-grandfather came to Malaya from China on a Chinese junk boat and initially settled in Perak. The great-grandfather then opened a small shop selling sundries, such as dried fish and meat. Approximately 8 to 10 years later, he moved his shop from Perak to George Town. He adopted the name *Kwong Tuck*, which is a combination of the first character (*Kwong* — pronounced in Cantonese) of his hometown, Guangdong Province (*Kwongtung* — pronounced in Cantonese) with another character, *Tuck* (pronounced in Cantonese), which means virtue. Figure 1 presents *Kwong Tuck Sundries*' first shop sign from 1785. *Kwong Tuck* is read from right to left on this ancient wooden sign, which has survived for more than 200 years. The colour of the wood has faded into light brown with white patches, and features some brown spots which can be seen on the black-coloured Chinese characters.



Figure 1: Kwong Tuck Sundries sign (circa 1785)

The second-oldest shop in George Town is *Yin Oi Tong*. *Yin Oi Tong* (translated as *Hall of Benevolence*) was founded in 1796 by Khoo Suk Chuan, a Chinese medicine peddler who migrated from Canton, and it is the oldest Chinese medical hall in southeast Asia today (Tye 2019). The original premises of *Yin Oi Tong* were located at 82 Penang Street and occupied seven shop-lots. Khoo initially traded from a small shop in Pitt Street and relocated to Penang Street in 1885. The medical hall in Penang Street survived throughout World War II; however, in later years, the business started to deteriorate as more new businesses moved into Penang Street to cater for the Indian community. By 2009, due to dwindling profits, the medical hall had to move out of its Penang Street premises. The first and second shop signs of *Yin Oi Tong* were left behind when the medical hall relocated. The first sign (see Figure 2) shows golden Chinese characters engraved on a black wooden board and reads *Yin Oi Tong* from right to left, and still looks relatively new despite being more than 200 years old. The second sign (see Figure 3) also reads *Yin Oi Tong* from right to left, but its colour has faded, and it looks older. The difference between the two images is that in Figure 3 a Romanised version of Chinese can be seen engraved below the Chinese characters. Due to the additional transcription on the second sign (Figure 3), it is possible to surmise that this sign was used during the early 20th century to attract non-Chinese customers as the population in George Town started increasing.



Figure 2: Yin Oi Tong (first shop sign)



Figure 3: Yin Oi Tong (second shop sign)

During the mid-19th century (1856), a pastry chef from Fujian Province in China was invited to Penang Island by the founder of *Ghee Hiang*. *Ghee Hiang* started its business with traditional pastries such as *tau sar pneah* (a fluffy pastry with a green bean paste filling). By the 1930s, *Ghee Hiang* had begun producing sesame oil using Chinese recipes and techniques learned in Fujian. *Ghee Hiang* soon expanded its business to property investment and merchandise, and opened concept stores nationwide. Today, *Ghee Hiang* has many outlets all over Malaysia as well as overseas. Figure 4 depicts a photo of *Ghee Hiang*'s first shop sign, which was obtained from the company's website (*Ghee Hiang Manufacturing 2009*). *Ghee Hiang*'s first shop sign, *Bi Neng Yi Xiang Shu Bing*,

reads from right to left, and is translated as *Penang's Ghee Hiang Biscuits*. It displays traditional Chinese characters that are rarely seen today. Figure 5 shows a black wooden shop sign with faded golden Chinese characters engraved on it (*Ghee Hiang*), and it was photographed at the oldest outlet located on Beach Street, George Town. In this sign, *Ghee Hiang* is also read from right to left; however, the shop employees could not recall the age of this particular shop sign. Based on our interpretation of the company's history, we estimate that the sign dates back to the early 20th century.



Figure 4: Bi Neng Xiang Shu Bing (translated as Penang's Ghee Hiang Biscuits)



Figure 5: Ghee Hiang

THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY TO THE MID-20TH CENTURY (1901–1966)

During the early 20th century, several streets in George Town, such as Beach Street, Chulia Street, and Campbell Street were filled with the hustle and bustle of trading activities. Many Chinese merchants started their businesses in the pre-war buildings of George Town. From our survey and analysis of the shops according to the directory (George Town World Heritage Incorporated, 2012, 2014), approximately 65%

of the businesses started in the early 20th century and were inherited by family members through subsequent generations. English was used extensively during the British colonial period because it functioned as the working language, and it continued to be used after independence as the *de facto* co-official language from 1957 to 1967 (Manan et al. 2015). Shop signs from the early 20th century have several distinctive characteristics. Firstly, most shops maintained the traditional Chinese custom of hanging wooden-engraved Chinese characters above the front shop entrance. Secondly, the characters were mostly read from right to left. Additionally, several shops used bilingual (Chinese and English) large metal plate signs, hung at the fronts and sides of buildings to attract customers' attention. On these metal plate signs, the items sold in the shops (e.g. rice, oil, grocery, or types of medication) were often listed for customers to read. These bilingual metal plate signs continued to be maintained after independence.

Thean Seng Huat was founded by Ng Poh Yong during the 1930s at 490 Beach Street. According to his son Ng Kuan Soon, the current owner and sole artisan of *Thean Seng Huat*, his father learned the skill of weaving from his hometown in the Chaoshan region of China. Ng started weaving at the age of 8 and continued his father's business when his father retired. Today, many rattan items made by Ng are for sale, such as "China bins", wholesale vegetable baskets, rattan furniture (chairs and bookshelves), and traditional paper kites. The image on the left in Figure 6 is *Thean Seng Huat*'s first shop and its shop sign, which is hung in front of the entrance. The Chinese characters of the Romanised *Thean Seng Huat* are read from right to left and painted on a metal plate in a wooden frame. The difference between shop signs before the early 20th century and the one shown in Figure 6 is the Hokkien pronunciation of the Chinese characters in the latter, which is written in Romanised letters. As this shop sign is more than 80 years old, the colour on the metal plate has faded due to the weather and the passing of time.



Figure 6: Thean Seng Huat — the building housing the shop and the first shop sign (circled)

The *Great Wall Company* was founded in 1935 at 84 Dr. Lim Chwee Leong Road. The Chinese characters, which read *Chang Cheng Gong Si* (see Figure 7) from right to left, were inscribed on the building's wall. It is understood that these Chinese characters were intended to cater for Chinese merchants and customers. However, to appeal to British customers during the early 20th century, an English version of the company's

name, *Great Wall Co.*, was drawn on a metal plate in white with a red background (see bottom of Figure 7). This metal plate sign appears to be not as visible as its Chinese counterpart. Moreover, the prevalence and salience of the Chinese characters show the prioritisation of this language by the sign designer and founder of the business. The current shop owner declined to provide information about the shop's history to us; hence, the interpretation of Figure 7 is solely based on our observation and understanding of conventions.



Figure 7: Chang Cheng Gong Si — Great Wall Co.

There are three different types of shop signs in Figure 8. *Chuan Leong* is a wholesaler of oil and rice founded by the late Ong Eng Keat in 1948, who started the business with 9 of his friends. Later, his friends sold off their shares, and he became the sole owner of *Chuan Leong*. The original premise of *Chuan Leong* was located at 18 Maxwell Road until the famous Prangin wholesale market (better known as *Siao Boey*) and buildings were demolished in 2009 for future development (personal communication). Today, *Chuan Leong* is run by Ong's grandchildren at 8 Sungai Pinang Street. As seen in Figure 8, the first shop sign (bottom) is a black wooden sign with the golden engraved characters of *Chuan Leong & Sons* in both Chinese and English. The Chinese characters are read from right to left. After independence, a second shop sign (see top sign in Figure 8), which was made of metal plate, was hung at the front entrance. The items sold at *Chuan Leong* are written in Chinese characters, which are centred, and in a larger font size. On the left side of the plate sign is *General Merchants & Commission Agents* in English, and at the bottom of the sign is *Sharikat Chuan Leong* in the old Malay spelling (i.e. Modern Standard Malay — *Syarikat*). When *Chuan Leong* expanded its business in the 1980s, the owner placed his shop's name on a window shade (see middle sign in Figure 8), which was also hung at the front entrance. *Chuan Leong & Sons Sdn. Bhd.* (in blue) is written below the red Chinese characters (read from left to right) to prioritise the Chinese language as an important symbolic marker of the ethnolinguistic identity of the business owner. These three layers of signage indicate distinct phases

in the history of the business and are symptomatic of the language dynamics at the time of their design. Notably, rather than removing the more dated signs, the business owner decided to keep all of them.



Figure 8: Chuan Leong & Sons (three types of shop signs)

THE MID-20TH CENTURY TO THE LATE 20TH CENTURY (1967–1974)

In 1967, the Federal Constitution of Malaysia declared Malay as the country's sole national and official language. Malay was regarded as a symbol of national unity (Manan et al. 2015) and, as Asmah (1997) observes, it acted as Malaysia's lingua franca. This declaration marked a drastic change in the country's language policy. Having been the official language until 1957 and co-official until 1967, English was removed from most official documents. By the 1970s, English-medium schools were converted to Malay-medium schools. The Malay parliament had to switch to the Malay language, with all

members having to converse fully in Malay by the 1980s. Penang Island's free port status was also revoked shortly afterwards. The new language policy operated as a nationalist strategy to unite multiracial citizens under Malay dominance following independence (Fei et al. 2012). During this 7-year period, different shops started introducing their business names in the Malay language alongside Chinese or English. Old Romanised Malay was also visible in most shop signs.

Figure 9 shows a shop sign that uses old Romanised Malay — *Sharikat Phek Leng Berhad* (Modern Standard Malay — *Syarikat*). This metal plate sign was placed at the entrance, above the shop's door. At the top, the English *Phek Leng & Co. Ltd.* is written in blue capital letters and shaped in a semi-circle. The Chinese translated shop name is written in red in the middle and is read from right to left. The non-standard Malay version in green capital letters is located at the bottom. The English version is written in a larger font than the other two languages, which may indicate that the shop owner was not familiar with the Malay language even after independence, and English remained the most prominent language despite the government's emphasis on Malay. It also shows the leniency and flexibility of the government in enforcing the language policy in place.



Figure 9: Sharikat Phek Leng Berhad (Phek Leng & Co. Ltd.)

Another example of old Romanised Malay use after independence can be seen in Figure 10. *Peralatan Eletrik*, which means electrical items, is written in green capital letters at the very top of the metal plate signboard. In modern standard Malay, *eletrik* should be spelled *elektrik*. The Chinese name of the company is inscribed in red and again placed in the middle. It is read from left to right (the modern way of reading Chinese). *Advance Trading Co.* is written at the bottom in large capital letters. This shop sign shows the emphasis on promoting Malay as the country's national and official language because it is placed at the top (even though *Peralatan Eletrik* was not the shop's name). This important detail marks a clear difference between shop signs before and after independence.



Figure 10: Trilingual sign in Malay, Chinese, and English

THE LATE 20TH CENTURY TO THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY (1975–PRESENT)

Modern standard Malay was introduced in 1975 after the common graphic system for Malaysia and Indonesia was established in 1972 and *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (DBP) implemented new rules for formulating technical terms. Committees were established within the DBP to discuss and standardise new terms based on translation, pronunciation, and spelling. All national schools started using the Malay language as a medium of instruction, and textbooks were converted to Malay. English was taught as a second language in schools and universities, which has continued until the present day. Although there were several changes in the national language policy for education throughout this period, a strong emphasis has been placed on the Malay language as representing the national identity of Malaysia and on using it to unite Malaysians. An excerpt from the Verification Procedures of National Language in Advertising (Federal Territory) by-law 1982 (see Appendix A) states that ‘an advertisement has to be in the Malay language on its own or together with other language(s)’ and ‘the wordings in the Malay language have to be given priority in terms of colour and have to be placed in a clearer position than wordings of other language(s).’

Several characteristics have been observed from the analysis of shop signs from 1975 onwards. First, the Malay language was included in almost all shop signs, regardless of the font size in relation to English or Chinese. The position of the Malay language varied according to different sign writers. English was seen more prominently than other languages in most signs, which represents a flouting of the official language policy of the country. In this way, sign writers have taken charge to use the preferred language, most probably for commercial and economic purposes. Spolsky and Cooper (1991) believe sign writers commonly write in the language(s) readers can read — a situation we also observed in the current shop signs in George Town. Colours, different fonts, and sophisticated shop names are used to attract customers’ attention. Logos that symbolise the types of trading being undertaken are used as trademarks and representations of the shops. Chinese characters are read from left to right, which is a move to modernise the literacy practices of the Chinese language (Lou 2007). Different types of materials, such as polycarbonate and light bulbs, are used to decorate

the shop signs and light them up at night, which is very different from the way signs were designed in the past.

Figures 11, 12, and 13 show various types of modern shop signs photographed in George Town. On the sign in Figure 11, the name of the shop, *GM*, is written in white with a blue background in the top left corner of the sign. Malay (*Perniagaan Alat-Alat Tulis*) is placed prominently at the top of the sign, thereby emphasising it as the national and official language. The Chinese translation is placed in the middle, read from left to right, and written in red, which is an important colour in Chinese culture symbolising good fortune (Huang 2011). English (*Stationery Trading*) is placed at the bottom but represented in bold print. As the larger, bolder print makes the English version stand out among the three languages, this shop sign shows the importance of English as a commercial and global language.



Figure 11: GM Stationery Trading

The shop signs for *Café The Leaf* (see Figure 12) evoke a retro atmosphere due to the use of a wooden board and window shades as materials. The Malay version of the shop name (*Kafe The Leaf*) is placed on a wooden board and arranged at the top of the shop building. Due to the location of the wooden sign at the entrance to the shop (as discussed in earlier sections), it was hypothesised and later confirmed that the owner is of Chinese ethnicity. *The Leaf*, which is repeated twice, is written in a large font and takes up the entire space in the middle of the wooden board and shades to show a preference for and emphasis on the English language. Manan et al. (2015) state that English plays both informative and symbolic functions in the socio-demographic environment of Malaysia. The signs in Figure 12 are examples of English being used as a prominent and commercial language in today's "internationalised" George Town. English — a more recent language — is conjoined with the use of materials indexing an earlier history, which combine to create a sense of authenticity and historicity for the shop. Placed on the edge of the sign, Chinese appears marginalised and serves a more "decorative" function in its position on the right side of the sign.



Figure 12: Café The Leaf

Compared to the other collected signs, the one in Figure 13 is more modern, stylish, and creative (Ben Said, Ong 2019). The shop owner has inserted light bulbs into the shop name, *Sugar Honey*, which illuminate at night. The sign is composed of red-coloured steel in a large, capitalised font, followed by the short, generic terms *travel*, *bite*, *coffee*, and *tea*, written in white and placed below *Sugar Honey*. Customers can immediately recognise the business as a café due to the use of the words *coffee* and *tea*. Neither Chinese nor Malay is included in the store sign, and only English is used. In this respect, English is used as a commodity (Rubdy, Tan 2008) and functions as the language of higher transactional value and prestige. Although located in an older building, the inside of the store is furnished with modern amenities, furniture, and air conditioning. However, the location retains an old look that also combines elements of chic contemporaneity. Cakes and ice-blended coffees are served, and Wi-Fi is provided to customers. The *Sugar Honey* shop is an example of a thriving modernised café in today's globalised George Town, and contrasts with older coffee shops and businesses, such as the ones presented above.



Figure 13: Sugar Honey Café

FACTORS INFLUENCING CHANGES IN GEORGE TOWN'S LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

In this survey of shop signs from the late 18th century until the present day, we observed several changes over the centuries. They can be attributed to historical developments, economic progress, globalisation, and modernity. A significant number of businesses that date back to the 18th and 19th centuries did not survive and had to close due to the obsolescence of their goods and manufactured products, such as rattan furniture. With the advent of new technologies and the increasing use of electronic devices such as smartphones and tablets, online shopping has had a negative impact on the sustainability of conventional shops. More customers are purchasing goods online instead of physically visiting stores, and delivery services have become more widespread across the island. Some of the businesses that originated in the 19th and 20th centuries are now expanding to wholesale import and export, property investment, franchising, and international trading. Following an informal discussion with an anonymous officer from George Town World Heritage Incorporated, it was revealed through his testimony that:

Today, old shops have to follow the current trend in order to continue trading. As Penang is growing faster each year, the “young” generation who inherited the old shops have new and creative ideas to expand their businesses. Traditional trades such as weaving rattan furniture, making joss sticks, and engraving wooden signboards are dying now. This is because of the invention of machines which can produce the furniture and joss sticks faster and in huge quantities, yet at lower costs. Due to human evolution, these traditional cultures are hard to protect and preserve. Even shop signs are becoming newer and much more attractive.

Due to this situation, older shop owners are forced to close their businesses and retire because of dwindling profits. Alternatively, some business owners are changing to another form of trade to remain competitive and keep their businesses going. As a result of marginal profits, a significant number of traditional handicraft artisans are also moving out of their shops due to the rising cost of rent.

CONCLUSION

The central purpose of this study was to examine the linguistic changes that have taken place on shop signs in George Town over the different periods in Malaysia's history and to understand the factors that influenced these changes. From our examination, the choice of languages used — both historically and today — can be explained by the implemented language policy set by the government and the influence of economic globalisation. English was used extensively on shop signs during the British colonial period. As most of the shops were Chinese-owned, Chinese was seen everywhere and was traditionally read from right to left. After independence, it became compulsory to display the Malay language on shop signs. As the excerpt from the Verification Procedures of National Language in Advertising shows, a penalty was imposed for violations of the language provisions. Nevertheless, English is still widely encountered on contemporary shop

signs as the language of commercial transactions and higher prestige. This phenomenon is partly attributable to the influx of tourists in George Town as a world heritage city. Manan et al. (2015) argue that English has significant commercial and advertising functions in the city's LL, while Gorter and Cenoz (2008) explain that English serves the multiple symbolic functions of westernisation, internationalisation, and modernisation. Similarly, Kingsley (2012) contends that the increasing use of English in public spaces is often related to economic and cultural globalisation.

We also observed that the material for crafting shop signs during the early trading days was of wood, while polycarbonate and other recent materials are used in the contemporary era. However, our interviews with shop owners revealed that old objects such as wooden boards and window shades are being reinstated as important materials for constructing shop signs. Although George Town is growing internationally today, due to its history and cultural heritage, many efforts are being made to bring back memories of this historical site. To preserve and protect the living culture and tradition of George Town, new shop owners are making use of old materials, yet incorporating new methods to create vibrant and appealing shop signs. A close examination of the shop signs enabled us to understand the complexity of today's George Town. As Blommaert (2010: 1) notes, 'the world has not become a village, rather a tremendously complex web of villages, towns, neighbourhoods, settlements connected by material and symbolic ties in often unpredictable ways.'

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APPENDIX A

An excerpt from the Verification Procedures of National Language in Advertising (Malaysia)

6.0. ADVERTISEMENTS

6.1. Characteristics of advertisements

6.11. Abide the guidelines as exemplified under the Advertisement by-law

6.12. The advertisements must abide by the related Act and regulations such as the advertisement by-law (Federal Territory) 1982 stated in the Local Council Act 1976 as follows:

(1) An advertisement has to be in the Malay language on its own or together with other language(s) (PU (A) 364/85).

(2) The wordings or letters in the Malay language have to be given priority in terms of colour and have to be placed in a clearer position than wordings

or letters or writings in other language(s) and their size must not be bigger than the ones in the Malay language (PU (A) 364/85).

(3) Any advertisement that does not abide to paragraphs (1) and (2) cannot be displayed or caused to be displayed or is allowed to be displayed by anyone (PU (A) 187/82).

(4) Regardless of the allotment in paragraph (3), if the name of any firm, association or company registered under the Business Registration Act 1956, Company Act 1965 or Organization Act 1966 consists of words that are or inclusive of language(s) which are not in the Malay language, translation to the Malay language is not needed (PU (A) 187/82).

(5) Regardless of the allotment in paragraph (4), the Mayor may ask for the business', company's or association's details to abide to the allotment in paragraphs (1) and (2) (PU (A) 364/85).

STRESZCZENIE

Badanie zmian językowych na szyldach sklepów w Malezji: studium diachroniczne w George Town w stanie Penang

Słowa kluczowe: krajobraz językowy, George Town, historia, geosemiotyka, materialność.

Według Pavlenki (2010) badania krajobrazu językowego (KJ) nie mogą być w pełni zrozumiałe bez znajomości przeszłości. Rozwinięciem tej idei jest traktowanie badań KJ jako procesu diachronicznego. W artykule analizujemy KJ George Town (obiekt z Listy Światowego Dziedzictwa UNESCO) w stanie Penang w Malezji, gdzie istnieje wiele świadectw dokumentujących zmiany zachodzące w czasie. Za wyjątkową cechę George Town należy uznać mieszkankę języków pojawiającą się na szyldach sklepów, wśród nich znajdują się egzemplarze pochodzące jeszcze z końca XVIII wieku. W celu zrozumienia zmian społecznych i historycznych, jakie zachodziły w George Town, zebrano dane z wielu źródeł, były to m.in. opowieści właścicieli sklepów, informacje z obiektów historycznych (np. kartek pocztowych i książek) i broszury dostępne w centrum historycznym. Do analizy, kategoryzowania i interpretowania szyldów zastosowano podejście geosemiotyczne. Z badań szyldów i ich treści wynika, że stare szyldy z okresu brytyjskiej kolonizacji były wykonane z drewna a napisy były w większości pisane po chińsku i angielsku. Po uzyskaniu niepodległości przez Malezję zaczęto używać metalu i niestandardowej odmiany języka malajskiego. W roku 1975 zmieniono kilka malajskich zwrotów i właściciele sklepów zaczęli używać standardowego malajskiego. Współczesne szyldy są kolorowe, multimodalne i w większości z tworzyw sztucznych. Najnowocześniejsze z nich także świecą w nocy. Diachroniczne badanie KJ skłania autorów do refleksji, w jaki sposób globalizacja i postęp technologiczny wpływają na treść i wygląd szyldów sklepowych w George Town.