



E-ISSN 3032-601X & P-ISSN 3032-7105

Vol. 2, No. 1b, Januari 2025

MISTER

**Journal of Multidisciplinary Inquiry in Science,
Technology and Educational Research**

**Jurnal Penelitian Multidisiplin dalam Ilmu
Pengetahuan, Teknologi dan Pendidikan**

**UNIVERSITAS SERAMBI MEKKAH
KOTA BANDA ACEH**

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Journal of Multidisciplinary Inquiry in Science Technology
and Educational Research

Journal of MISTER

Vol. 2, No. 1b, Januari 2025

Pages : 2023–2035

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Article in Journal of MISTER

Available at : <https://jurnal.serambimekkah.ac.id/index.php/mister/index>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.32672/mister.v2i1b.2821>

How to Cite this Article

APA : Ridwan, A. F. ., Giblatar, A. ., Radityo, R., & Oktavia, I. . (2025). Semiotic Analysis of Selected Sign Interpretation in Public Space Using Saussure' s Theory. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Inquiry in Science, Technology and Educational Research*, 2(1b), 2023 - 2035.
<https://doi.org/10.32672/mister.v2i1b.2821>

Others Visit : <https://jurnal.serambimekkah.ac.id/index.php/mister/index>

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ISSN 3032-7105

ISSN 3032-601X



Semiotic Analysis of Selected Sign Interpretation in Public Space Using Saussure's Theory

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Received: 01 02, 2025 | Accepted: 01 03, 2025 | Published: 01 04, 2025

ABSTRACT

This study explores the semiotics of public signs using Ferdinand de Saussure's theory, focusing on the relationship between signifiers (visual and verbal elements) and their signified meanings. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, the research analyzes 15 visual signs, such as traffic indicators, warning symbols, and informational signage, alongside 9 verbal signs, including textual instructions and prohibitions, observed in urban environments. The findings reveal that visual signs, including colors, symbols, and imagery, effectively convey universal messages, while verbal signs enhance clarity and context, making communication accessible to diverse audiences. Together, these components ensure the messages are accessible to diverse audiences, enhancing communication, safety, and inclusivity in public spaces.

Keywords: *Semiotics, Public Signs, Ferdinand De Saussure, Visual Signs, Verbal Signs.*

PENDAHULUAN

Language is essential to human life, enabling individuals to share information and express emotions, thoughts, beliefs, behaviors, and desires. Sapir (1921) described language as a purely human method of communication that relies on a structured combination of symbols, whether spoken or written. According to Schramm (1954), in this context, communication refers to exchanging ideas or creating a mutual understanding between a sender and receiver. Written communication often employs signs and symbols as tools for interaction and meaning-making. Morris (1938) emphasized that signs and symbols are central to communication, representing shared meanings among individuals with similar ideas or emotions. However, not everyone can easily interpret these signs, so semiotics, the study of signs and their meanings, emerged to bridge this gap.

Semiotics, as introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure, focuses on how signs and symbols convey meaning. Saussure's theory revolves around the sign concept, which he defined as having two key components: the *signifier* and the *signified*. The *signifier* is the physical form of the sign, such as a word, image, or sound, while the *signified* is the mental concept or meaning associated with that sign. Together, these elements create meaning, but their relationship is arbitrary and determined by cultural and social conventions.

Public signs are an important and practical part of daily communication. They are designed to share information in a way that is both useful and meaningful. The main purpose of public signs is to catch people's attention, deliver clear messages, and guide or warn them about specific actions or situations. Besides being functional, public signs are thoughtfully created to combine visual and verbal messages. This combination helps them communicate instructions or warnings effectively while also carrying deeper meanings. For example, a stop sign doesn't just tell drivers to stop; it also represents authority and rules in a broader sense. This dual purpose of utility and symbolic meaning makes them a rich subject for analysis, especially through the lens of semiotics. A public sign relies heavily on visual elements to convey meaning. These include icons, colors, typography, shapes, and symbols. Each of these components acts as a signifier, designed to evoke certain responses and provide clear instructions or warnings. For example, a stop sign not only signals the action of stopping but also carries broader cultural and contextual meanings of authority and regulation.

This study examines various public signs found in urban settings, such as traffic signs, informational signs, and safety warnings. The approach taken was qualitative descriptive, aiming to identify and interpret the visual and verbal symbols on these signs using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory. Public signs were chosen because their visual and verbal elements are not only widely recognized but also powerful in shaping behavior and ensuring safety. Through these signs, society seeks to communicate rules, guidance, and cultural norms to individuals in shared spaces. Consequently, analyzing these visual and verbal cues can provide a more profound understanding of the significance of public signs in daily life.

The study not only examined the individual components of visual and verbal elements but also explored how integrating these two aspects can create a deeper and more impactful message in action film posters. By understanding the unique contributions of both visual imagery and text, the study aimed to illustrate how their combination can enhance the overall effectiveness of the signs.

LITERARY REVIEW

Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics is a foundational concept in understanding how signs and symbols communicate meaning. Saussure, a Swiss linguist, proposed that a sign consists of two components: the **signifier**, which is the physical form of the sign such as a word, sound, or image, and the **signified**, which is the concept or idea the signifier represents (Saussure, 1959). For instance, the word "tree" (signifier) evokes the mental image of a tree (signified). Saussure emphasized the **arbitrariness of signs**, meaning there is no natural connection between a signifier and its signified; their relationship is based on cultural and social conventions. He also explained that meaning arises not from individual signs but from their **differences within a system of language**, such as how the word "dog" gains meaning in contrast to "cat" or "log." Saussure distinguished between **langue** (the structured system of language shared by a community) and **parole** (the actual use of language in speech or writing), highlighting the dynamic nature of communication. Additionally, he introduced the concepts of **synchronic analysis**, which examines language at a specific moment in time, and **diachronic analysis**, which studies its historical development. Saussure's theory demonstrates that meaning is shaped by cultural and social contexts rather than being inherently fixed, influencing fields beyond linguistics, including literature, cultural studies, and media analysis. Furthermore, Saussure highlighted that signs derive their meaning through their **differences** within a system, which is evident in public signage. For example, a "No Parking" sign gains its significance because it differs from other signs like "Parking Allowed" or "Pedestrian Crossing." Public signs also blend **visual and verbal elements**, with visual cues (symbols, colors) acting as universal signifiers and verbal text providing additional context, ensuring accessibility to diverse audiences.

The theory of visual and verbal elements explores how these two components work together to create effective communication. **Visual elements** include images, colors, symbols, shapes, and layouts. These are designed to quickly grab attention and convey messages universally, even without words. For example, a red circle with a line through it immediately suggests prohibition, regardless of the viewer's language or literacy level. **Verbal elements**, on the other hand, are words, phrases, or text that provide specific details, context, or instructions. They ensure clarity and add depth to the message conveyed by the visuals. Together, visual and verbal elements form a complementary relationship. The visuals attract attention and communicate the core idea at a glance, while the verbal components explain or reinforce the meaning, especially when precision is required. This combination is especially evident in public signs, advertisements, and instructional materials, where visuals provide universal appeal and accessibility, while text clarifies the message for diverse audiences. The theory aligns with Saussure's semiotics, where the signifier can be visual or verbal, and the signified is the meaning they convey. Additionally, this approach reflects dual coding theory (Paivio, 1986), which suggests that humans process visual and verbal information separately but use both to better understand and remember messages. Combining visual and verbal elements increases effectiveness by appealing to multiple cognitive pathways.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method combined with a semiotic approach to analyze the visual and verbal signs found in public signs. The analysis is based on Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics, which introduces the concepts of signifier and signified. These concepts are applied to identify and interpret the meanings conveyed by the visual and textual elements in the public signs. The data for

this research comes from various public signs, such as road signs, informational signs, and warning signs, observed in urban environments. These signs were chosen not only because they are essential for communication in public spaces, but also because they exemplify how visual and verbal strategies are employed to convey clear and effective messages to the public. The data collection was conducted through an observation technique. The process of analysis involved several steps: (1) identifying the visual and verbal signs present in each public sign, (2) interpreting these signs using Saussure's semiotic theory, and (3) documenting the findings to support the research objectives. This systematic approach ensures a thorough examination of the public signs and their role in facilitating communication and maintaining order in public spaces.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the discussion revolves around the signifier and signified signs identified in the selected public signs. Then, explain the signifier and signified significance of these public signs. Next, it will be the purpose of Saussure's semiotic theory which is divided into two parts, there the signifier and signified. Saussure proposed that a sign consists of two elements: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the physical form (what is seen), while the signified is the concept or meaning associated with the signifier.

Table 1 . Signifier and Signified of Visual Signs Found in Selected Public Signs

No.	Signifier	Signified
1.		The green visual represents the area layout where the player begins.

2.		☐ These drawings indicate the proper way to handle or assemble the item in the box to avoid damage or injury. ☐ The green circle suggests "This is the correct action," while the red crosses warn against incorrect actions.
3.		☐ The "H" signifies a designated landing spot for drones, similar to a helipad for helicopters. ☐ The setup indicates a controlled and safe area for drone operations, minimizing risks to people or the environment.
4.		The symbol means that vehicles causing excessive pollution (e.g., loud exhaust or smoking pipes) are not allowed.
5.		The visuals represent actions that are prohibited. The crossed-out shoe indicates not stepping on grass.

6.		The cigarette with a red circle means smoking is not allowed.
7.		This universal symbol represents that parking is not allowed in the area.
8.		This indicates that the road ahead has a steep slope, warning drivers to be cautious.
9.		This indicates a prohibition on carrying or transporting stacked vehicles in that area.

10.		This visual sign signifies that cars are not allowed in this area, with the red line universally symbolizing prohibition or "not allowed."
11.		This visual element indicates that the road ahead has sharp curves or bends.
12.		A warning to drivers that the road ahead may be slippery, especially during rain or wet conditions.
13.		The visual provides the mosque symbol and the distance (25 meters) to guide people where to go.

14.		The images help people quickly understand the rules, even if they cannot read the words.
15.		The symbols communicate the message universally, making it easier to understand for people from different backgrounds or languages. They highlight the intended users of the elevator, emphasizing inclusivity and accessibility.

The visual elements analyzed in Table 1 showcase how public signs convey messages effectively through imagery. The first result shows how the color green in a visual layout is used to represent a specific area, such as the starting point for players. This color helps people quickly understand where they need to begin, making it easier for them to navigate. The use of a clear and simple color like green ensures that everyone can recognize the designated starting area without confusion. By relying on such visual cues, the sign provides guidance in a way that is straightforward and easy to follow.

The second result highlights drawings that guide people on the correct way to handle or assemble an object. These visuals use green circles to show actions that are acceptable and red crosses to warn against wrong actions. For example, if a box needs to be assembled in a certain way, the images demonstrate how to do it safely and avoid injury or damage. This approach helps people understand the instructions quickly, even if they do not speak the language used in accompanying text.

The third result explains the "H" symbol, which resembles a helipad, but is used here as a landing spot for drones. This sign indicates a safe and controlled area for operating drones, ensuring there is minimal risk to people or the environment. By marking this space clearly, the symbol helps drone operators and the public understand the importance of using designated zones for safety.

The fourth result focuses on a sign that prohibits vehicles producing excessive pollution, such as those with loud exhausts or smoking pipes. The visual symbol ensures that people understand the area's commitment to reducing noise and air pollution. This type of sign is important for protecting the environment and improving the quality of life in public spaces.

The fifth result uses a crossed-out shoe symbol to tell people not to step on grass. This sign is often found in parks or gardens and is meant to protect the grass from damage. It is a simple and effective way to remind people to respect the space and help maintain its beauty.

The sixth result is a no-smoking sign, represented by the image of a cigarette inside a red circle with a line through it. This universal symbol is understood worldwide and clearly communicates that smoking is not allowed in the area. It is designed to promote a healthier and cleaner environment for everyone.

The seventh result explains the "No Parking" sign, where a crossed-out "P" informs people that parking is not allowed in a particular area. This sign is straightforward and helps prevent vehicles from being left in places where they could cause obstructions or safety issues.

The eighth result warns drivers about a steep slope ahead. The visual sign uses simple imagery to show the incline, helping drivers prepare for the road condition and drive more carefully. This kind of warning sign is essential for reducing accidents and ensuring safety on the road.

The ninth result shows a symbol prohibiting stacked vehicles in a specific area. This sign prevents unsafe practices, such as transporting vehicles in a way that could pose risks to others. It is an important reminder for maintaining order and safety.

The tenth result explains a sign that prohibits cars from entering a particular zone. The red line crossing over a car makes it clear that vehicles are not allowed. This type of sign is useful in pedestrian-only areas or spaces reserved for specific purposes.

The eleventh result is a warning about sharp curves on the road ahead. The visual sign uses curved lines to indicate the twists and turns, giving drivers a heads-up to slow down and navigate carefully. This sign helps prevent accidents on winding roads.

The twelfth result shows a warning for slippery roads, especially during rain. The visual imagery, such as tire tracks slipping, alerts drivers to be cautious and reduce speed to avoid accidents. It is a practical sign that prioritizes road safety.

The thirteenth result uses a mosque symbol alongside a distance marker, such as "25 meters," to guide people to the location of a nearby mosque. This sign is helpful for those looking for a place to pray, providing clear and accessible directions.

The fourteenth result emphasizes how visuals are designed to communicate messages universally. Even people who cannot read can understand the rules or guidance through these images. This makes the signs effective for diverse audiences.

The fifteenth result focuses on inclusivity, with symbols on elevators indicating their accessibility for wheelchairs, strollers, and other users. This ensures that people of all abilities can use public facilities comfortably and safely. The sign highlights the importance of inclusiveness in public spaces.

Table 2. Signifier and Signified of Verbal Signs Found in *Selected Public Signs*.

No.	Signifier	Signified
1.		The text provides information about a specific spot on a golf course. "Par 3" means a good player should take 3 strokes to complete the hole. "HstR 6" indicates the level of difficulty or ranking of the hole.
2.		It suggests taking action, possibly encouraging someone to contact or approach.
3.		These instructions clarify specific warnings or actions not to take, reinforcing the visual signs.
4.		The text asks people to drive responsibly and politely in the area of the Darul Ulum Mosque, showing respect for the place.

5.		The message asks visitors to avoid stepping on the grass because it is under maintenance.
6.		The message asks visitors to avoid smoking in the area for a healthier environment.
7.		This is a direct prohibition of parking, reinforcing the visual symbol.
8.		The accompanying text, "Tikungan Ganda / Zigzag," translates to "double curves or zigzag" and provides a verbal explanation to ensure clarity for road users.
9.		This written text reinforces the visual warning, providing additional details about the nature of the hazard.

9.		"No Flip-Flops," "No Sitting," "No Wheelchair," "No Stroller," and "Keep Safe Distance." These phrases describe specific actions that are prohibited or encouraged on the escalator. The meanings are clear instructions or rules to ensure the safety of people using the escalator.
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The verbal elements in Table 2 complement the visual components by providing additional clarity and context. The first result in Table 2 explains the verbal details used on a golf course sign. It uses phrases like "Par 3" to inform players that it typically takes three strokes for a skilled player to complete the hole. The term "HstR 6" provides additional information about the hole's difficulty level. These verbal signs help players understand the challenges of the course and prepare accordingly.

The second result shows a verbal sign that encourages specific actions, such as contacting or approaching someone for assistance. These words provide clarity and direction, making it easier for people to understand what is expected of them.

The third result focuses on verbal instructions that support visual warnings. For instance, written text may explain why certain actions are not allowed, reinforcing the meaning of the accompanying visual signs. This combination helps ensure that the rules are clear to everyone.

The fourth result highlights a polite message asking drivers to behave responsibly in the area around the Darul Ulum Mosque. This verbal sign shows respect for the religious setting and reminds people to maintain a peaceful environment.

The fifth result involves a message asking visitors not to step on the grass because it is under maintenance. This text complements visual signs and ensures that everyone understands the importance of preserving the area.

The sixth result focuses on verbal no-smoking messages that promote a healthier environment. These signs make it clear that smoking is not allowed and aim to protect public health and cleanliness.

The seventh result explains how written text like "No Parking" reinforces the visual no-parking symbol. Together, these signs ensure that people are aware of parking restrictions and can follow the rules more easily.

The eighth result uses text such as "Tikungan Ganda/Zigzag" to describe double curves or zigzag roads. This verbal explanation supports the visual warning and ensures drivers are well-informed about road conditions.

The ninth result focuses on verbal instructions like "No Flip-Flops," "No Sitting," and "Keep Safe Distance," often seen on escalators. These words provide clear guidance on what actions are prohibited or encouraged to ensure user safety. Combining these phrases with visuals helps everyone understand the rules effectively.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, public signs are an important part of communication in public spaces. They are designed to share messages that guide people, warn them of potential dangers, or give them important information. These signs work by combining two main elements: visual and verbal components. The visual signs, like colors, symbols, and shapes, are created to be simple and easy to recognize. For example, a red circle with a line through it is universally understood as meaning "not allowed." These visual cues are helpful because they can be understood quickly, even by people who do not speak the local language or cannot read. The verbal components, like written text, add extra information to make the signs clearer. They can explain the rules, give specific instructions, or provide warnings that may not be obvious from the visuals alone. Using both visual and verbal elements together, public signs become more effective at delivering their messages. Visuals grab attention and make the main message clear at a glance, while the words provide context and details for those who need it. This combination ensures that public signs can be understood by a wide range of people, including those from different cultures or with different levels of literacy. Moreover, these signs are not just about giving instructions; they also reflect important values like safety, respect for the environment, and inclusivity, as seen in signs that ensure accessibility for people with disabilities.

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