

Linguistic Landscape Analysis of Identity Representation in Public Signs at Watugong Buddhist Monastery Semarang

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47175/rielsj.v5i2.1008>

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ABSTRACT

Public signs at Watugong Monastery in Semarang serve not only as guides for visitors but also as representations of identity, meaning, and values. This study aims to uncover the meaning and representation of identity in the public signs of Watugong Monastery by considering the cultural, religious, and social contexts in accordance with the dominant ideology in the place. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method with a Barthes (1991) semiotics approach. Research data was collected through observation and documentation methods using photography techniques. The results of this study show that there are representations of cultural, religious, and socio-religious identities in the Public signs of Watugong Monastery. Religious identity comes from the interpretation of the object label signs 福 (fú), 祿 (lù), and 壽 (shòu) which reflect Chinese cultural values. Religious identity emerges from hiolo stick sign, which contains the meaning of strong faith in Buddha and his teachings through prayer and devotion supported by morality and exemplary behavior. Finally, socio-religious identity appears on the Ashoka inscription sign, the strong religious element derived from Buddhist teachings, the inscription also shows an example of social life between people of different faiths who must always teach tolerance and moderation in religion. This research is still very open for further research in various other aspects of LL, for example, visitors' perceptions of the language used at Watugong Monastery.

KEYWORDS

Linguistics Landscape; semiotics; identity; buddhist monastery

INTRODUCTION

Watugong Monastery Semarang, established in 1955, has been a silent witness to Semarang's historical and cultural journey. More than just a place of worship for Buddhists, Watugong Monastery has transformed into a religious tourism icon and an education and community center rich in noble values. Its unique architecture, consisting of two main buildings, namely the Avalokitesvara Pagoda and the Dhammasala, and several other buildings, blends elegance with spiritual values, making it a special attraction for visitors, both for sightseeing and for worship.

Behind the beauty of the architecture and the vibrant activities, there is a story carved in the language on the signs of its public spaces. Wall carvings, information boards, inscriptions, object labels, and various other signs, not only serve as guides for visitors but

also store symbols of identity and the values embraced by Watugong Monastery. Public signs like those found in the Monastery are suitable for studying with Linguistic Landscape (LL).

Linguistic Landscape Study is a branch of sociolinguistics that focuses on the study of language seen in public spaces. The use of language in public spaces, with a focus on written texts displayed in these places (Gorter, 2006; Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Furthermore, LL studies can be used to analyze the use of written language in the form of lingual and non-lingual signs (Prasetyo, et al., 2023). LL studies aim to understand how language is used to convey meaning and information in public spaces. This can help to understand cultural identity, ideology, and power relations in society. Darmawan (2019) states that LL studies refer to research on the existence, representation, meaning, and interpretation of languages displayed in public places. The objects of LL research are very broad, ranging from a city, village, tourist attractions, educational institutions, shopping centers, transportation stations, places of worship, and so on.

Linguistic Landscape studies (LL), in the context of places of worship, are still relatively minimal, especially Buddhist Monasteries. In fact, through the language that appears on public space signs, it is possible to trace the identity, meaning, and message that the Monastery managers want to convey to visitors. LL research related to places of worship in Central Java is rarely conducted, for East Java there is research from Handini et al (2021) and Ekawati et al (2023) which examine LL in mosques. Furthermore, on the island of Bali there is research by Mulyawan et al (Mulyawan et al., 2022) discussing the LL found in a Hindu Temple. All three studies discuss more about the language contestation on the related research objects. Identity representation is mentioned in connection with the distribution and use of language in the location. The three studies have not yet revealed in depth the identity contained in the Public signs of a place of worship.

This research comes to fill this gap. In LL research, a multidisciplinary approach is commonly used, combining theories and methods from linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and semiotics. Therefore, a semiotic approach is used in this research. Semiotics is a science that studies signs to reveal the meaning implied behind the signs (Prasetyo, 2019). Therefore, this approach allows us to examine the deeper meaning of public space signs, not only literal meaning, but also symbolic and connotative meaning. Public signs that will be studied in depth semiotically are signs that have a symbolic function. Landry & Bourhis (1997) divide the function of LL into two, namely the information function and the symbolic function. The information function is the function of conveying messages explicitly indicating that a language is intended for communication. While the symbolic function shows the power, values, and ideology of a group of people. Symbolic functions usually have implicit meanings. These implicit meanings are interesting because they store something important values that can show the identity representation of the users or owners of the signs. The disclosure of identity is done by first revealing the meaning.

Barthes (1991) explains semiotic theory in revealing meaning has several stages, namely denotation which is the literal or dictionary meaning of a sign, then connotation, and additional meaning generated by a sign, which can be cultural, social, or personal. There is also a system of meaning that is ideological, called myth. This system of meaning is structured and coherent, which is used to explain and legitimize social reality. This stage of interpretation is what will be used in this research to delve into Public signs at Watugong Monastery Semarang.

Public signs at Watugong Monastery Semarang that are approached semiotically are important because of several things such as revealing the identity of the Monastery, Public

signs store implicit meanings such as the Buddhist values that are adhered to, and the messages that they want to convey to the congregation and visitors. Next, understanding cultural and ideological meanings because Watugong Monastery is both a place of worship and a religious tourism icon. Semiotic studies can help to understand how this culture and ideology are represented and constructed through language. Furthermore, to improve cross-cultural understanding, it helps to improve understanding of the culture and values held by Buddhists. This can encourage tolerance and respect among religious believers. In addition, to enrich the study of Linguistic Landscape, this research can provide a new contribution to the field of LL by examining Public signs of Buddhist places of worship semiotically.

This study aims to uncover the meaning and representation of the identity of Public signs of Watugong Monastery by considering the cultural, religious, and social contexts under the dominant ideology of the place.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method with a semiotic approach proposed by Barthes (1991). Research data was collected through observation and documentation methods using photography of Public signs at Watugong Monastery Semarang. Data collection was carried out in October 2023. The collected data is divided into two types of LL functions as described by Landry & Bourhis (1997), namely the information function and the symbolic function. This study will only focus on the second function, namely the symbolic function because according to Prasetyo et al (2023), the symbolic function of language in public spaces has implicit meanings that show the power, values, and ideology of a society or ethnic group. This is what can reveal the meaning and identity of a sign. The data is then analyzed using semiotic theory to extract the meaning contained in these signs. The meaning obtained shows the identity representation of the sign in question. Barker (2008) states that representation depends on the interpretation of signs. Representation is not a static reflection of reality, but a dynamic and ever-changing social construct.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research data collected through observation and documentation at Watugong Monastery found 167 public space signs. These signs consist of 15 sign groups, namely: Information boards, prohibitions, lanterns, directions, nameplates, wall carvings, Instructions, inscriptions, incense sticks, donation boxes, object labels, announcements, cleanliness, donor plaques, and lights.

Table 1. The function of Public Signs at Watugong Monastery

No	Sign	Function	
		Informative	Symbolic
1	Information boards	2	
2	Prohibitions	7	
3	Lanterns		62
4	Directions	2	
5	Nameplates	5	
6	Wall carvings		38
7	Instructions	5	
8	Inscriptions	4	5
9	<i>Hiolo</i>	1	6
10	Donation boxes	2	

11	Object labels	8	1
12	Announcements	10	
13	Cleanliness	4	
14	Donor plaques	3	
15	Lights		2
Total		53	114

The analysis of sign functions revealed that 12 sign groups primarily served an informative function, while 6 sign groups primarily served a symbolic function. However, in terms of overall quantity, symbolic function signs dominated with a total of 114 signs. This abundance of symbolic function signs is largely due to the large number of lanterns found in the pagoda area. Each lantern is inscribed with prayers and hopes from the congregation. Public signs of lanterns account for a significant portion of the overall sign, with 62 signs or 37.1% of the total. Additionally, the wall carving sign group is also quite significant, with 38 signs that also serve a symbolic function. A more detailed breakdown of sign functions can be seen in Table 1.



Figure 1. Sample of Informative Function Sign Groups

Signs with an informative function use clear, concise, and straightforward language. All signs use language that is easy to understand without requiring further interpretation. In this informative function, Public signs have the main function of providing a safe, comfortable, and well-maintained public space for visitors, including the signs in the public space. The languages used are Chinese, English, and Indonesian. The sign groups that function as Information include information boards, prohibitions, directions, nameplates, instructions, inscriptions, *hiolo*, donation boxes, object labels, announcements, cleanliness, donor plaques.



Figure 2. Sample of Symbolic Function Sign Groups

In contrast, signs with a symbolic function use beautiful language choices to convey a particular message. Some of these signs are taken from verses of sacred texts. In addition, they take the form of poems full of meaning based on the spiritual and cultural aspects of the users of the signs. Public signs that function symbolically can be found in monolingual and bilingual forms. The languages used include Indonesian, Chinese, and Pali. The sign groups that have a symbolic function are signs of lanterns, wall carvings, inscriptions, *hiolo*, object labels, and light.

From the data found, several public space sign data that function symbolically were randomly selected for semiotic analysis to reveal the meaning and representation of identity in the public space of Watugong Monastery Semarang. There are three public signs discussed, namely signs of *hiolo*, object labels, and inscriptions.

Meaning and Identity Representation of Hiolo Signs

Hiolo is a collective term for public signs consisting of a place for incense burning, which has a lingual form, placed in front of altars of Buddha, deities, Bodhisattvas, or other revered figures, commonly found in Chinese Temples or viharas (Buddhist Monasteries). The data sample for this discussion is drawn from the *hiolo* sign located at the Avalokitesvara Pagoda within the Watugong Monastery complex in Semarang. This public space sign *hiolo* is situated in front of the altar of the Goddess Kwan Im Watugong Monastery is a Buddhist Monastery located in Semarang, Indonesia. The Monastery is home to a variety of public space signs, including *hiolo* signs.



Figure 3. Public Sign of *Hiolo*

The interpretation of the sign begins with the denotation stage. At this stage, it depicts a *hiolo* (incense vessel) made of brass with a distinct Chinese design. This sign is placed in front of the altar of Goddess Kwan Im at the Avalokitesvara Pagoda. The Avalokitesvara Pagoda is a sacred structure in Buddhism dedicated to Bodhisattva Kwan Im, the goddess of compassion and mercy. The *hiolo* sign bears the phrase 安民泰國 (guó tài mín ān), which translates to 'a prosperous nation, people living in peace' in English. Additionally, there are four elephant heads at the base of the *hiolo* sign supporting it.

The *hiolo* sign connotes spirituality, religiosity, and reverence. *Hiolo* serves as a symbol of offering and prayer in Buddhism. The incense burned in *hiolo* is believed to convey prayers and hopes to Buddha or other deities. The phrase 'a prosperous nation, people living in peace' carries moral and ethical meanings emphasizing the importance of peace and prosperity for the people, achievable through wise leadership and harmonious society. This aligns with the presence of elephant heads at the four sides of the *hiolo*. According to Eberhard (2006), elephants are regarded as animals with high moral standards. Sexual intercourse between elephants only occurs underwater, demonstrating their respect for privacy.

Moving beyond connotation, the myth stage of interpreting the *hiolo* sign signifies spiritual enlightenment. It illustrates that through prayer and devotion, adherents can attain peace and prosperity as implied by the written phrase. *Hiolo* is a ritualistic symbol used in various religious traditions, including Buddhism. It symbolizes offering, prayer, and hope for peace and enlightenment. In the context of the phrase 'a prosperous nation, people living in peace', the sign can be seen as a symbol of spiritual efforts to achieve peace and well-being in the real world. Furthermore, the elephant ornaments also support the phrase on the *hiolo*.

Based on Chinese tales and Buddhism, elephants are special creatures. Eberhard (2006) notes that since the 3rd century BC, elephants have been tamed, and in popular stories, heroes often rode elephants. Includes a story about a man plowing with an elephant which refers to Emperor Shun, an emperor thought to be an exemplary, devoted leader, who lived to be 100 years old.

The elephant also symbolizes strength and intelligence, with its power predominantly vested in its trunk. The elephant's trunk was once highly esteemed among the Chinese (Williams, 2006), and thus its placement as a supporting element in the *hiolo* emblem can be understood. According to Chinese Buddhist legend, the elephant is also one of the Seven Treasures or *Sapta Ratna*, representing the possessions of *Chakravartin*, the universal ruler. Therefore, through the *hiolo* emblem, it is expressed that with strong faith in Buddha and his teachings, through prayer and dedication upheld by morality and exemplary conduct, the hope for a prosperous nation and peaceful lives for the people can be achieved.

The *hiolo* public space emblem represents a very strong religious or spiritual identity, specifically that of Buddhism. Based on the interpretations made, the *hiolo* conveys messages and moral values rooted in Chinese Buddhism. This is closely associated with Mahayana Buddhism, which is closely intertwined with Chinese culture. The religiosity and spirituality of Buddhism emerge distinctly, reflecting the *hiolo*'s function as a place to burn incense, a practice integral to Buddhist worship. Further supported by the phrase 'prosperous nation and peaceful lives for the people,' which aligns with one of Buddhism's goals to bring peace to all beings.

Meaning and Identity Representation of Object Label Signs

Object Label Signs are a group of Public signs that take the form of labels or name tags for objects at a location. These labels can include the label of statues, temples, tombs, and plants. A randomly selected dataset for analysis focuses on the group of object label signs specifically related to statue labels. The majority of these object label signs serve an informative function, with only a few instances indicating a symbolic function. One such sample is presented below.



Figure 4. Public Space Sign Object Label

The denotative meaning, as an initial stage of interpretation, reveals Hanzi characters positioned above the backs of three statues. These characters are 福 (fú), 祿 (lù), and 壽 (shòu). The Hanzi 福 (fu) literally means 'luck' or 'fortune'. Next, 祿 (lù) denotes 'wealth' or 'prosperity'. Lastly, 壽 (shòu) means 'longevity'. These object labels refer to three statues of men dressed in traditional Chinese attire. They are commonly known as 三星 (sanxing) or 'three stars' in English.

The stars *Fu*, *Lu*, and *Shou* not only symbolize luck, wealth, and longevity but also carry deeper meanings. In the connotative stage, these three stars represent the hopes and aspirations of the Chinese community for a good life. These symbols are considered blessings from heaven and are often worshiped during the Chinese New Year by offering water and oranges. Additionally, they are frequently displayed in homes and businesses as a way to attract positive energy and luck.

The character *Fu* (福), besides its literal meaning of luck, also connotes happiness, prosperity, and good fortune. It is often associated with the idea of a life filled with joy, abundance, and success. Next, *Lu* (祿), which literally means wealth, also connotes material abundance, financial gain, and career advancement. The term is frequently associated with the concept of a successful and prosperous life. Furthermore, *Shou* (壽), besides its literal meaning of longevity, also connotes good health, long life, and a peaceful death. *Shou* is often associated with the idea of living a full life free from illness and suffering.

The stars *Fu*, *Lu*, and *Shou* are part of a larger mythology in Chinese culture revolving around the concept of Sanxing (三星), or the Three Stars. These stars are believed to be responsible for bestowing luck, wealth, and longevity upon people in the world. They are often depicted as elderly figures with benevolent faces, and are frequently accompanied by symbols of their respective blessings, such as gold coins, peaches, and cranes. In the realm of myth, the concept of Sanxing is deeply ingrained and has served as a source of comfort and inspiration for the Chinese community, not only in Indonesia but globally as well. These Public signs serve as a reminder that even in times of difficulty, there is always hope for a better future.

Such interpretations generate meanings across various stages, highlighting the representation of cultural identity in these object label signs. Cultural identity emerges in each interpretation, emphasizing values highly esteemed in Chinese culture and integral to its identity, such as luck, wealth, longevity, health, happiness, and success. These cultural values are deeply embedded in every individual of Chinese descent, evident in home decorations, business settings, and celebrations. Moreover, the Public signs related to the stars *Fu*, *Lu*, and *Shou* reflect traditional Chinese beliefs in deities and supernatural powers. These beliefs are a crucial part of Chinese cultural identity and have been passed down for centuries.

Meaning and Identity Representation of Inscription Monument Signs

Inscription monuments are a group of Public signs related to commemorative plaques or writings engraved on solid surfaces such as marble, stone, or large concrete buildings. The data used is a sample of an inscription monument located at Watugong Buddhist Monastery in Semarang.

Denotatively, the inscription at Watugong Buddhist Monastery in Semarang contains an edict of King Asoka, as depicted in the image, made from stone indicating its permanent and durable nature. The inscription reads: '*Jangan membanggakan agama sendiri dengan mencela agama lain, dengan menghargai agama lain maka akan bermanfaat bagi agama*

sendiri dan agama lain, bila berbuat sebaliknya akan merugikan agama sendiri dengan agama lain (Raja Asoka 269 – 232 SM) (Do not boast of your own religion by condemning others; rather, respect other religions, so that your own and others may benefit. By acting otherwise, you harm your own religion and others (King Asoka 269 – 232 BC)’. This text conveys a message of religious tolerance, compassion, and peace.



Figure 5. Public Space Sign Inscription Monument

In addition to its denotative meaning, this inscription also holds deeper connotative meanings. The inscription containing King Asoka's edict carries moral and spiritual messages about tolerance, peace, and compassion. It promotes respect and appreciation for the beliefs and traditions of others, even if they differ from one's own beliefs and traditions. This reflects the importance of tolerance and pluralism in diverse societies. Furthermore, this edict is an adaptation of King Asoka's edicts inscribed on Asoka pillars in India. This adaptation demonstrates that universal messages of tolerance, peace, and compassion can be applied in different cultural and religious contexts. It shows the relevance and flexibility of Buddhist teachings in addressing various human needs and challenges. The presence of this inscription at Watugong Buddhist Monastery also signifies a close connection between King Asoka's edict and Buddhist values that can be applied in Indonesia, serving as a reminder to all visitors who read it.

Next, at the stage of myth interpretation, it is linked to why King Asoka issued the edict. King Asoka wrote the edict on tolerance and peace after experiencing a profound spiritual conversion. Previously known as a cruel and ruthless ruler, he led conquests and bloody wars. However, after witnessing the horrors of the Kalinga War, he was overwhelmed with remorse and decided to change his ways. Asoka embraced Buddhism and diligently followed its teachings. The teachings of Buddhism, emphasizing *metta* (loving-kindness) and *karuna* (compassion), deeply influenced him (Thapar, 2012). Thus, King Asoka sought to atone for his past sins and spread messages of peace and tolerance throughout his kingdom. The Edicts of Asoka had a significant and enduring impact. They helped spread Buddhist teachings across Asia and laid the foundation for religious tolerance and pluralism in India (Dhammika, 1993).

This inscription monument reflects the wisdom of King Asoka, one of the most renowned rulers in Buddhist history. The inscription text is considered a reference source of wisdom and moral guidance for Buddhists to live together in tolerance. The message of religious tolerance in this inscription is highly relevant to Indonesia's diverse society. The monument serves as a reminder of the importance of respecting religious differences and living together peacefully. The teachings of compassion and peace in this inscription align with Indonesian cultural values emphasizing harmony and balance. The monument symbolizes hope for achieving a more harmonious and peaceful society. These noble and universal values are crucial to uphold and preserve.

Through semiotic interpretation, the inscription containing King Asoka's edict represents a strong socio-religious identity. The Buddhist-related religious identity is reflected through messages and values of tolerance, peace, compassion, mutual respect, and honor. The Edicts of King Asoka at Watugong Buddhist Monastery Gong Semarang hold rich and complex values. The denotation of the inscription provides factual information about the text inscribed on it. The connotation of the inscription refers to deeper and implied meanings, such as the moral and spiritual values conveyed in King Asoka's message. The myth of the inscription connects King Asoka's message with stories and legends that reinforce its meaning and make it easier to understand and remember. The messages about tolerance, peace, and compassion remain relevant today and can serve as a guide for everyone in building a better life. Thus, they can continue the tradition of religious tolerance that still echoes today in the concept of religious moderation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis conducted, it can be concluded that the Public signs at Watugong Buddhist Monastery Semarang represent cultural, religious, and socio-religious identities. The religious identity stems from the interpretation of the object label signs 福 (fú), 祿 (lù), and 壽 (shòu). These signs reflect cultural values deeply rooted in every Chinese individual, related to belief in supernatural powers that are an integral part of Chinese cultural identity and have been passed down for centuries. The religious identity emerges from one of the *hiolo* signs containing meanings of strong faith in Buddha and his teachings through prayer and devotion supported by morality and exemplary behavior. Meanwhile, the socio-religious identity arises from the inscription monument of King Asoka. Besides the strong religious elements stemming from Buddhist teachings, the inscription also serves as an example of social living among people of different religions, emphasizing the importance of teaching tolerance and religious moderation.

This study represents an initial exploration of the Linguistic Landscape with a semiotic approach in a Buddhist place of worship. Therefore, research on the meanings and representations of identity within this Linguistic Landscape remains open for further investigation by subsequent researchers, particularly those interested in LL studies. It is also important to examine the perceptions and attitudes of visitors or worshippers visiting viharas regarding the presence of specific languages associated with identity.

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