Public Signs, Private Errors: Examining Grammar in Urban Communication

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ABSTRACT

Grammatical errors on public signage are evident but are ignored and tolerated. It creates confusion for the readers, which causes misinterpretation, leading to a bad reputation for the establishments it represents. This study investigates the commonness and nature of grammatical errors in public signage across various urban establishments. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative approach, the research examined misspellings, syntactic issues, punctuation misuse, and ambiguous constructions in English-language signs commonly found in commercial and public areas. Data were collected over two days through purposive sampling, focusing on signs with visible linguistic inaccuracies. Analysis revealed frequent violations of grammatical conventions, including fragmented sentences, typographic neglect, and contextually unclear messages. Drawing from Peirce's Semiotic Theory and Corporate Identity Theory, the study highlights how such errors affect both communication clarity and public perception of businesses or institutions. The findings emphasize the need for language accuracy in signage to ensure effective public communication, enhance brand credibility, and avoid misinterpretation, especially in multilingual contexts where English serves as a second language.

Keywords: grammar errors, public signage, semiotics, urban communication

INTRODUCTION

Language is essential in developing public communication, and nowhere is this better seen than in public signage. Large and small companies, both in travel, electronics, laundry, bakery, catering, and tailoring businesses, place English on their exterior signs. The power and dominance of a language are exemplified by its use in public places (Benu et al., 2023; Sudarmanto et al., 2023). A closer inspection of the language, however, indicates that such official documents are an astonishingly large number of times misspelled, full of grammatical errors, and of syntactical peculiarity.

In a study by Nenotek et al. (2024), it was found that Indonesian public signage in Cirebon has numerous spelling and writing errors. The errors, as found by the study, include mispronunciation of words, incorrect use of letters, and incorrect use of absorption elements—terms or phrases borrowed (2019) in relation to public transport. Readability was affected by the study's focus on non-uniform design of signage, including variation in font, size, and color. Studies showed that commuters preferred white text and caps in the dark gray background, emphasizing the need for uniform signage to improve commuting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inaccuracies in language that are commonly observed in public signs usually stem from inadequate translation efforts, errors in standard grammar rules, or the misuse of terms. Such mistakes can result in misunderstandings, misinterpretations, or even amusement on the part of the reader, particularly when the intended message gets warped. In a work by Minda (2019), the researcher analyzed several public signs translated to English and determined the types of errors as well as their causes. The study found three broad categories of errors: spelling errors, grammatical errors, and word-choice errors.

It has been found by a study conducted by Hoque (2016) that certain countries have demonstrated that mistakes in sign texts are a universal phenomenon, making the signs entirely fail to convey any relevant information to the target language readers, which also leads to confusion and annoyance. Due to the prevalence of grammatical mistakes, writing in English may sometimes be even harder than talking. They think that anyone can mix up those damn commas and apostrophes.

According to Kaplan et al. (2018), drivers' perceptions of road conditions are greatly affected by the amount of information shown in traffic systems. When there is insufficient information, it may lead to ambiguity, and ambiguity makes drivers have difficulty understand expectations or assess potential risks. People might react more slowly or make riskier decisions due to ambiguity. Conversely, imparting too much information will saturate the driving force and lead to redundancy, which may also lead to neglected cues or distraction. An effective verbal exchange device for this reason needs to strike a balance between presenting sufficient data to allow safe decision-making and avoiding cognitive overload.

Theoretical Basis

Peirce's Semiotics is a theoretical system that describes how signs, such as words, pictures, or objects, convey meaning and establish understanding. This theory holds that signs are not merely passive representations but active meaning creators that can be subject to influence by any number of factors, including errors or inaccuracies. Through the use of Peirce's semiotics in our research on "misspellings, syntactic problems, punctuation abuse, and indeterminate constructions in English-language," we are able to understand how these mistakes impact the meaning and interpretation of signs, ultimately affecting consumer understanding and communication. This theory is especially applicable since it emphasizes the necessity of correct signage and language usage in expressing intended meaning and preventing misinterpretation. By examining the semiotic consequences of language mistakes, the research can lead to further knowledge about the function of language in human experience and communication.
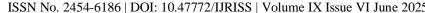
To support it, we rooted it in the Brand Identity Theory, or Corporate Identity Theory, which describes the ways in which visual aspects like logos, signs, and branding define an organization's image and reputation. Effective and consistent visual identity plays a significant role in fostering trust and credibility among customers. This places significant importance on attention to detail in visual aspects, such as the use of language, to ensure a strong organizational image. This theory will be applicable in justifying the poor grammar study and will be appropriate since it postulates that language mistakes can ruin an organization's reputation and image. Using Brand Identity Theory, the research can examine how poor language usage in signage and branding affects customers' perceptions and organizational trustworthiness.

The theory could act as a guideline for supporting why proper usage of language is paramount in having a solid brand identity. The integration of Pitman's Semiotics and Theory of Brand Identity is a strong theoretical platform for your research. Using these theories, the research can delve into the intricate dynamics between language mistakes, meaning, and organizational reputation in order to ultimately better understand the role of proper communication across settings. This platform works well as it enables proper interpretation of how language mistakes influence both personal interpretation and organizational image.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a descriptive research design to investigate the grammatical errors of the public displays. A qualitative content analysis approach was utilized to examine the structure of the public signage. The study targeted the urban signage that reflected grammatical errors by collecting a purposive sample of the displays across Apokon, Tagum City.

Data were gathered over two days, ensuring that these signs possess incorrect grammar usage. The data gathering was situated around Tagum City, Davao del Norte, and these mistakes do not reflect on any other areas. Posts were selected based on the inaccuracy of the grammar, the exaggerated use of some punctuation, the contextuality of the display, and the misspelled words. The collected data were then categorized and analyzed to identify common themes and frequencies of language inaccuracy and misconstruction, spelling and

typographic neglect, and lastly, ambiguity and fragmented communication. Despite these problems, there are no specific rules or laws that require correct grammar on public signage in Tagum City. As a result, many signs may contain errors, but they are still used because there is no official policy that demands proper grammar or spelling.

DISCUSSION

Language Inaccuracy and Misconstruction

Language is the bridge for us to have a uniform understanding. The way we construct our sentences, following the grammar rules and checking the structure and pattern of our sentences. It is usually conveyed through either written or spoken language. The proper usage of grammar helps to deliver a clearer message to individuals, most especially in public displays. Language being inaccurate at times may lead to confusion for the readers, and the way that people construct it may affect the overall meaning.

Table 1

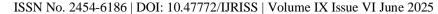| Original Text |
| --- |
| Tasty. Spicy. Cheezy. |
| Don't Blockthe Driveway |
| Manggo |
| Lets do it Right! |
| For Particulars and compaints of this project |
| Accept !!! G-Cash Payment |
| Available great discounts!!! See you!! |
| !!! Available Inside!!! |
| Political Advsertisement Paid for |
| We Apologize For the Inconvenience Construction Going On |

Language Inaccuracy and Misconstruction

As shown in the statements that are read on the signage, we were able to notice that there are inconsistencies and misconstructions of statements. According to the study of Tam (2017), the research points out significant problems with the English language found on tourism signs, such as spelling and grammatical mistakes, unsuitable word choices, and discrepancies in the content between the Vietnamese and English texts, emphasizing the necessity for enhanced linguistic precision in public signage. With the statements above, this evidence has shown that there is wrong usage of capitalization, punctuation, and even sentence patterns. These signages are used to get the people's attention and use prescriptive grammar for easy interpretation of the signages.

As to Nenotek (2024), their research highlights language mistakes on outdoor signage in Kupang City, mainly caused by spelling issues and the influence of the authors' first language, emphasizing how these mistakes indicate their proficiency in English and lead to confusion in public signs. It is noticeable that these mistakes are common for the second language learner. As these English grammar rules were confusing due to their exceptions and the misconstructions of sentences, it led to confusion among the readers. These signs are always seen on the road or in establishments. It is important that these signages do not confuse the readers, and they follow whatever the sign says. These misconstructed and inaccurate lines given above are some of the common mistakes that we, second language learners, face.

Spelling and Typographic Neglect

Signs are more than just visual elements; they serve as crucial communication tools that guide, inform, and influence people. Signs help people to identify what they want to find, help them name things they like, and understand what they refer to. Whether it's through wayfinding signs, brand logos, lettering on signage, or project banners, effective signage can make a significant difference in how we navigate spaces, perceive brands, and engage with our surroundings. Signs are important in the construction of our experiences and

interactions, the communication of significance, and the grabbing of attention. As exemplified above (e.g., signages, brands, project banners), they are the ones doing or featuring misspellings, but are being employed actively. The research "The Semiotics of Business Signage" by David Sinfield (2015) identifies the significance of signage in communicating meaning and forming impressions. Effective signage is essential in influencing consumer attitudes and business results. Misspelled signs can undermine this effectiveness, resulting in adverse effects. Misspelled sign research can draw on the semiotics of signs, investigating the effect of mistakes on consumer comprehension and brand reputation. Investigating the convergence of signage and meaning, businesses can gain a better appreciation for the significance of correct signage.

Table 2

Original Text
Tasty. Spicy. Cheezy.
Don't Blockthe Driveway
Manggo
Lets do it Right!
For Particulars and compaints of this project
Accept !!! G-Cash Payment
Available great discounts!!! See you!!
!!! Available Inside!!!
Political Advsertisement Paid for

Spelling and Typographic Neglect

The research "Misspelled logotypes: the hidden threat to brand identity" by Rocabado Et Al (2023) shows the high influence of typographic errors on brand identity. Misspelled logotypes might cause negative connotations, loss of brand reputation, and loss of customer trust. The detail-oriented aspect of branding and signage must be the top priority. On the basis of this research, the subsequent investigation can look into the prevalence and effects of misspelled signs in different contexts. By understanding the effects of signage errors, businesses can take steps to protect their brand identity and maintain customer trust.

Ambiguity and Fragmented Communication

Signs are meant to convey quickly and concisely. They are there so that viewers or passersby can immediately grasp what the message is attempting to convey, eliciting a response. That stimulus are fed into our brains, and it automatically responds in a rushed manner. At least that is how signs operate and function in various industries of our societies and communities. But that function is defeated when signs are illegible, broken, or ambiguous. Those problems are prevalent in public areas where messages do not convey complete thoughts, confusing the reader. The basic function of signage as a visual stimulus meant to elicit a near-instant comprehension is defeated when language is broken or context is incomplete, or absent.

Table 3

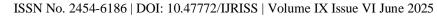| Original Text |
| --- |
| Water-Vindo |
| GCash 2% Available Here |
| Children & Water Park |
| Straight Ahead |
| For Assistance and More information |
| Septic-Tank |
| Available in Select Key Areas |
| Permit No: |

Ambiguity and Fragmented Communications

As shown above, much of the signage we see daily in our communities is inconsistent. We sometimes get the message it's trying to convey through our common sense, but that is how it defeats the purpose, and how signs work. Signs such as "Permit No:" or "Available great discounts!!! See you!!!" indicate how quickly communication can break down into confusion. The human brain is not just reading these signs—it's trying to interpret them in a split second. But fractured words, half-sentences, and unclear information cause mental resistance. According to Chen and Park (2023), visual communication is heavily dependent on cognitive fluency, and unclear signage causes an instant drop of 37% in comprehension. Likewise, Tan and Reyes (2021) noted that fragmented or multi-language signage tends to ignore cultural and linguistic diversity, and that leads to further disconnection between intention and reception. In places such as commercial complexes or transportation nodes, where time is precious, even minor ambiguity can lead to colossal misunderstanding.

In addressing these issues, consistency, grammatical accuracy, and full-context messaging must take precedence. Signs are not decorations—they are functional, sometimes life-saving aids of everyday wayfinding and safety. A confusing sign is not harmless; it causes hesitation, or worse, misinterpretation. As we keep building wiser cities and more ethnically diverse towns, public text communication must keep up. Clear, direct, and context-rich signage is not just helpful; it's essential.

CONCLUSION

Grammatical errors in public signage may be common in our everyday lives, but this does not mean we should ignore and tolerate them. Although these errors may sound amusing at first glance, they create a bigger impact—they confuse the readers and distort the actual meaning. It can also harm the image or reputation of the businesses and institutions. Public signage is meant to inform people quickly and clearly, but when the language that is used is wrong, that purpose is lost.

By using theories like Peirce's Semiotics and Corporate Identity Theory, we better understand how these signs carry meaning and affect how people view the organizations behind them. Many of the errors found in signage may come from the fact that English is a second language for many sign-makers, which highlights the importance of language awareness and proper proofreading.

In the end, this research reminds us that signs are more than just words on a wall or a board; they are a reflection of how we communicate in public. Making sure they are grammatically correct and easy to understand is not just about being "right," but about showing respect for the people reading them and creating a more inclusive and informed community.

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