

Rambousek, Jiří

On English signboards

Brno studies in English. 2004, vol. 30, iss. 1, pp. [77]-88

ISBN 80-210-3631-1

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104317>

Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

JIŘÍ RAMBOUSEK

ON ENGLISH SIGNBOARDS

Little texts – as Halliday calls them in *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* – have become the focus of a number of linguistic studies. Halliday (1994: 392) lists the following types of little texts: headlines, telegrams, titles, product labels, short instructions (e.g. recipes), signboards, and lecture notes. Further items could be added to the list, e.g. slogans, commercial and personal advertisements (analyzed in Vlčková 1999), noticeboard announcements, and inscriptions on walls and school desks. Among the various types of little texts, newspaper headlines are by far the most frequently analyzed. This has many reasons – they are visible and attractive, they invite explanations by being difficult to understand for non-native or untrained readers, and – last but not least – the research material is relatively easy to collect.

The present article deals with another type of little texts that is governed by relatively fixed rules: public signs, i.e. announcements, regulations, information signs on signboards etc. The idea to study these signs is not new – Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) mentioned in the preface to their *Comparative Stylistics of French and English* back in 1959 that it was the comparison of French and English signs along a Canadian highway that inspired them to writing the fundamental book (Vinay and Darbelnet 1995: 1–5). But they did not deal with them in great detail in the book. Surprisingly few references to this type of texts can be found in linguistic studies, and there are no practically oriented handbooks dealing with signs. The absence of such handbooks is particularly striking. Admittedly, signs are – unlike newspaper headlines – relatively easily understood by non-native speakers of English.¹ But they are, on the other hand, *created* by non-native English speakers all over the world, and their quality can make life easier for tourists in foreign countries and influence their appreciation of the particular country.²

Sometimes authorities do realize the problem, as is clear from the decision by Beijing city officials of December 2002. Supported by students, as well as English professors and expatriates living in Beijing, they launched a campaign against “‘Chinglish’ words on road signs, public notices, menus and signs describing scenic spots, which often puzzle foreigners”.³ They announced a public phone number where people could report misspelled and grammatically incorrect English texts found in public spaces. These were then to be evaluated by a

panel of experts and “Signs discovered to fall short of standard English [...] changed” (ibid). I could not find any report about the results of the campaign. In any case, the above mentioned “standard English” could not be applied in the most common sense of the term: as has been stated, public signs and notices have their own standards, the description of which was not part of the Beijing project. Describing them – and offering the results to the authors of signs in the form of rules and/or dictionaries – would probably be a better way of coping with bad English in non-English speaking countries.

Compared to the more popular topic of newspaper headlines, signs and notices prove to be different in many respects. An obvious difference is that they represent complete texts rather than sum up an article that the reader can read in full. Halliday (1994: 392) claims that “since they [little texts] have to achieve quite a lot in that limited space, they tend to have their own grammar for doing so, which differs in certain respects from the grammar of other registers of English not constrained by such limitations”. He then lists the basic features of this grammar of little texts. Many of these features can be found in signs as well. This paper will focus on those features of signs that distinguish them from the other types of little texts.

Examined database

I started collecting signs and notices in the United States in 2001, and discovered later that the same idea occurred to Professor Aleš Klégr and his students. We agreed to create a joint database which to this date includes almost 900 English signboards (plus a smaller amount of Czech and German signs that will be used for comparative research). The present article only brings a rough outline of the field; a more detailed description of the material requires further research.

In collecting material for the database, the following rules have been applied:⁴

1. The signboard must be placed in a public space and intended for a wide public.
2. It must be non-commercial, i.e. follow “public interest” rather than that of a certain economic subject.
3. The message must be, directly or indirectly, of illocutionary nature: either it explicitly expresses an order or a restriction, or it informs the readers of circumstances that can influence their action (e.g., “The operator is required under federal law to make stop announcements”). As a result, signs necessary for basic orientation in the public space (RESTROOMS) are included, while signs offering additional information (concerning historical facts, tourist orientation, news items, etc.) are not.
4. The message must be “official”, i.e. based on the presumption on the author’s part that he/she possesses the authority to post it.⁵

5. The signboard must stand alone and be intended for immediate reception; this rule excludes texts from notice boards and other information points, as well as leaflets or other texts intended to be taken away for later reading.
6. The message may include written language material as well as other signs (icons, symbols and pictograms).
7. A signboard that meets all the formal requirements but is intended as a joke, souvenir etc. (and is therefore of meta-lingual nature) can be included but the fact has to be marked; for many analyses, the sign cannot be taken into consideration. Example: PARKING FOR CZECHS ONLY / ALL OTHERS WILL BE TOWED [200; a souvenir sign sold in San Francisco; the same sign was available for many nationalities.]⁶

The collection includes 878 English signboards from the USA and Great Britain and is in the process of a more refined sorting and evaluating. The signs are stored in the same layout as they appeared on the signboards; their exact layout was either photographed (over 300 boards), or written down as precisely as possible. There are often several messages⁷ on one signboard. For most purposes, the independent messages have to be separated and analyzed as individual signs, but the original layout of the signboards was maintained because, for some aspects of the analysis, the layout may be important (one such example is the position of “attention callers” discussed below).

Information on the frequency of occurrence of the individual signs would be very useful; however, collecting such information is hardly possible. Frequency is easy to establish in a linear context, whereas the context of public signs is extra-linguistic, “three-dimensional”. Frequency information is therefore not included in the database.

Analysis

This article presents the results of the analysis of a subset of the mentioned collection, consisting of 295 signboards. The number of actual messages that occur on these signboards is, however, higher (see below). The article is divided into five sections, each paying attention to one particular feature, distinguishing signboard texts from other types of little texts:

1. Structure of a sign
2. Use of standardized patterns and formulations
3. Dependence on extra-lingual context
4. High proportion of non-text elements
5. Typography and punctuation

1 Structure of a sign

Some signs are very simple, others are longer and structured. Listed below are sections that appear repeatedly in the signs. Of these, only one is obligatory: the core that carries the message proper.

Attention caller

The attention caller – always a one-word expression – opens the message and serves mainly to attract the attention of the reader. Of the 285 boards examined, 37 open with an attention caller. They are:

Attention caller	No. of occurrences
CAUTION	9
DANGER	9
NOTICE	7
WARNING	7
POSTED	2
ATTENTION	2
HAZARD	1

With 16 occurrences, the word PLEASE is even more frequent in the opening position of a signboard. However, it cannot be considered a real attention caller: it is often used inside the messages (8), and even when placed in the initial position, it forms a part of the main message (as in PLEASE DO NOT THROW / CIGARETTE BUTTS / INTO THE COURTYARD [29]). Its function is not to attract the attention of the reader but rather to adjust the tenor of the message. An attention caller is invariably the first word of the signboard; the only exception to this rule reads: [128]

No Fires / No Alcohol
 No Glass Containers
 Pick-up Dog Litter
 DANGER-HAZARDOUS SURF

But even here, the attention caller DANGER is the first word of one of the individual signs on the signboard; this sign was emphasized on the actual signboard by capitalization.

Address

A direct address of the reader is used mainly to delimit the target group. As most signboards target the public as a whole, addresses are surprisingly rare; there were 4 instances found in the 285 signboards:

STUDENTS / NO FOOD / OR DRINK / IN FIELDHOUSE [96]

ATTENTION / YMCA / MEMBERS / THE LARGE GYMNASIUM... [69]
 ATTENTION / TRUCK DRIVERS: / STATE REGULATION... [268]
 BICYCLE RIDERS / STOP AND DISMOUNT / WALK BIKE [295]

It seems that addresses collocate with the attention caller ATTENTION: the whole database (878 signboards) contains 6 examples of ATTENTION + address, and only 3 examples of ATTENTION without an address.

Core

This section could be also named “message proper”. It includes the main part of the message. The forms it takes are analyzed in 2. *Use of standardized patterns and formulations* below. There are often more core sections – i.e., messages – on one signboard. In such case, they usually share the attention caller (with the exception of [128] stated above) and some of the additional information.

Source of authority

This section is usually only found in signs that restrict or give orders; it is rare in informational ones. It appears in different positions on the signboards, and takes various forms (sometimes, two of these forms are combined in one sign):

- (1) stating the authorizing institution – 13 occurrences.
 HARVARD UNIVERSITY POLICE [236, 240, 241, 277]
 BOSTON PARKS AND RECREATION [274]
 CONNECTICUT / DEPT. OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION [285] etc.
- (2) vague threat – 6 occurrences
 FAILURE TO DO SO COULD RESULT IN INJURY AND/OR PROSECUTION [74]
 VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED [97]
 STRICTLY ENFORCED [124]
 POLICE TAKE NOTICE [266] etc.
- (3) vague reference to law (a variation of vague threat) – 10 occurrences
 UNDER PENALTY OF THE LAW [3];
 Federal Law prohibits... [109];
 STATE LAW AND COMMON COURTESY REQUIRES... [134]
- (4) Exact citation of law – 6 occurrences
 Under Penalty of Law / Chapter LX Section IV [26];
 Section 14–1.43(e) Part 14 – NYS Sanitary Code [71];

PURSUANT TO SECTION 375.1(i) OF THE NYSPOPRHP
RULES & REGULATIONS... [74])

(5) Exact statement of penalty (a variation of the exact citation of
law)

GENERAL LAWS CHAPTER 272 SEC. 43a, PUNISHABLE BY
IMPRISONMENT FOR NOT MORE THAN 10 DAYS OR BY A
FINE OF NOT MORE THAN \$50. OR BOTH [105];
PURSUANT TO CLARK COUNTY CODE CHAPTER 16.12.
MAXIMUM PENALTY-SIX MONTHS IMPRISONMENT
AND/OR \$1000 fine [143])

Some signs open with the name of the location in which the sign is placed: the name of the city, county, park, or region (ROCK CREEK PARK [229]; HECK-SHER SOFTBALL FIELDS [8]). It is questionable whether these place names should be considered statements of the source of authority; in the above statistics, only those signs are included in which a specific body, institution or office is mentioned. Borderline cases like CITY OF REVERE [281], in which the name could refer to the City authorities as well as the place, were not included.

Out of 285 signboards, 33 (11.6 %) included an authority statement. This proportion is relatively high, compared to the frequency ascertained in the limited Czech and German material that has been collected so far.

Additional information

Additional information is not vital for conveying the message. It may include explanations (WARNING / DO NOT FEED, ATTRACT, OR HARASS / RACCOONS OR ANY WILDLIFE / **FEEDING CAN BE HARMFUL TO WILDLIFE / AND CONTACT WITH DISEASED ANIMALS / CAN THREATEN YOUR HEALTH AND SAFETY...** [287, my emphasis]), ask for the understanding of the readers (WARNING / **FOR YOUR SAFETY** / NO STANDING / ON BENCHES [10, my emphasis]), or provide any other supplementary information the author feels necessary to add.

Additional information appears in various positions on the signboard, often there are two or more such sections on one board. Of the 285 signboards, 44 included some kind of additional information.

Thanks

Four of the 285 signs end with "THANK YOU", on one the thanks are used as part of the core: THANK YOU FOR NOT SMOKING [54].

Technical information

This is the information on the maker/producer of the signboard, usually in very small print. The mere presence of producer's name could be considered as increasing the "official tone" of the message, and the name could therefore be seen as an authority statement. This technical information is, however, never intended

as part of the message; this fact is indicated by the size and placement of the text. Readers therefore usually do not read it at all.⁸ Accordingly, technical information is not included in the database.

2 Use of standardized formulations and constructions

The tendency to use standardized formulations in public signs can be expected in all languages: it is desirable for the sake of efficiency that the signs are standardized to a high degree so that they convey a ready-made meaning which can be understood by the reader without too much effort.⁹ Unlike newspaper headlines, they are not written to surprise or amuse. Formulations such as NO SMOKING and DO NOT ENTER have almost become icons in themselves and can hardly be seen as original texts created by a specific author.¹⁰ But even texts that are not so highly standardized conform to a very limited number of grammatical patterns. These patterns are listed in Table 1, together with their frequency. The analysis is based on 283 signboards; however, as stated above, many signs comprise multiple messages, so that the total number of analyzed messages amounts to 380. Only core sections of the messages were analyzed.

Type	Example	No of occurrences	%
imperative construction		99	26.0
– positive imperative	LEASH DOGS IN RAMBLE AT ALL TIMES [17]	(67)	(17.6)
– negative imperative	Do not leave personal property unattended [7]	(32)	(8.4)
prohibitive “No” + noun phrase or -ing *	NO OPEN FIRES / LITTERING / BARBECUING [15]	60	15.8
noun phrase	ELEVATORS DOWN ONLY & BACK TO STREET LEVEL [5] WHEELCHAIR ACCESS [49]	114	30.0
indicative clause with an ellipted finite verb	SKATEBOARDS STRICTLY PROHIBITED [58] PLAY BY PERMIT ONLY [8]	44	11.6
indicative clause with an ellipted nominal sentence element	NOT MAINTAINED DURING WINTER [133]	13	3.4
complete sentence	THE OPERATOR IS REQUIRED UNDER FEDERAL LAW TO MAKE STOP ANNOUNCEMENTS [108]; WHEN CYCLE IS FINISHED, LAUNDRY LEFT UN-ATTENDED IN WASHERS OR DRYERS MAY BE REMOVED BY NEXT WAITING CUSTOMER. [263]	50	13.2
Total		380	100.0

* In the category *prohibitive “no” + noun phrase or -ing*, informative signs like NO SHOULDER [36] or NO VEHICULAR ACCESS TO COIT TOWER [87] are not included. They are ranked with the noun phrase category. In one instance, a combination of these two formally identical messages appeared on the same signboard:

NO
LIFEGUARD
ON DUTY

NO GLASS
IN POOL
AREA

This sign might be used to support the argument that English speakers, in comparison to speakers of Czech, are less conscious of the formal aspects of language, and rely more on a pragmatic capacity of the readers.

The percentage of noun phrases is much higher in public signs than it is in other types of little texts. Jan Chovanec (2003: 91) examined non-finite main clauses in newspaper headlines and found that they included 61.2% of ellipted clauses (which correspond to “ellipted finite verb” in the above table) and 38.8% of nominal clauses (which correspond to the “noun phrase” type). In signs, the ratio of the two sentence types is reversed: 44 clauses with ellipted finite verb and 114 noun phrases represent 27.8% and 72.2%, respectively. Imperatives and “no + noun phrase” constructions were left out as they are specific to signs and do not appear in significant numbers in other text types.

In public signs, we could expect a high degree of correspondence between formal structure and meaning, since this correspondence increases the clarity of a message: e.g. we would expect the imperative to be used for instructions/commands, negative imperative for prohibiting, noun phrase for orientation information, etc. Finding out whether this correspondence is higher in public signs than in other texts would require an analysis using a comparable corpus of texts other than signs. The high number of imperatives found in the database of signs seems to suggest that the above expectation is correct: in other types of discourse, imperative forms are often replaced by other structures and the orders/instructions are expressed indirectly.

3 Dependence on extra-linguistic context

A sign can only fulfill its function if set in the correct location. It is hard to think of another type of text that would so strongly depend on an extra-lingual context: most texts have to be taken to a completely different culture to lose their function completely. Many signs therefore rely on the extra-lingual context to such a degree that objects surrounding them take over the role of (parts of) sentence elements. In DO NOT PLAY / ON OR AROUND [212], the full sentence would be “around the container” as the sign was placed on a garbage container. Even more often, the substituting object takes over the role of the subject:

To Call / POLICE [251, on a special phone in a park]
RESERVED FOR BELLMAN [184, on a parking place]
RESERVED / BIG JOHN'S ONLY / OTHERS WILL BE TOWED
[284, on a parking place]

SLIPPERY / WHEN WET / DEPT OF TRANSPORTATION [294,
on a road]
NO DUMPING! / DRAINS TO BAY [139, on a sewage sink]
NOT MAINTAINED / DURING WINTER / NOV / TO / MAY
[133, on a road]

4 Use of non-text elements

While pictures, icons, schemes, and other graphic devices are commonly used to accompany all sorts of texts, they usually remain isolated: either they support a parallel message that is expressed in words, or they are the only means to convey a message (e.g., a map). On signboards, graphic signs are sometimes used inside a text as logograms, i.e. they replace words or collocations. The sign used most often in such a way is the wheelchair pictogram, standing for “disabled persons”:

MEMORIAL HALL / [pictogram: wheelchair] / ACCESSIBLE
ENTRANCE... [47];
[pictogram: wheelchair] PARKING ONLY [140];
BOUNDARY [pictogram: camping] [130].

In most cases, however, pictograms are used to accompany a complete message written in alphabetical characters, or to replace the entire text of the message.

5 Typography and punctuation

In public notices, punctuation is often omitted. Below are examples of an omitted comma. Out of the 295 notices examined, only 15 [13, 19, 52, 53, 69, 74, 105, 109, 209, 252, 253, 263, 274, 286, 287] included a comma.

Interestingly, this number includes the following inscription:

NO Shirt,
NO Shoes,
NO Problem!
[53]

This is not a proper public notice (and was, accordingly, hand-written, not printed) but rather a humorous paraphrase of the commonly used

NO SHIRT
NO SHOES
NO SERVICE
[66]

This difference in the use of commas can be seen as characteristic: while left out in official notices, punctuation is seen as a natural element of written language in all other usage, and was therefore, probably unconsciously, added to the paraphrased text.

Two more of the notices with commas were not official either and had a humorous touch to them, although they were meant seriously:

No / Skates! / (In-line, Out-of-line, or other wise!) [209]
Please, / Let Us Grow [52; on an alley tree in Santa Barbara].

Missing punctuation can be found in other little texts as well. However, there is one feature that distinguishes signboards from all other types of little texts, with the possible exception of advertisements: punctuation is often replaced by means of typography:

NO
FOOD OR DRINK
IN THIS ROOM
STRICTLY ENFORCED
[124]

While the context as well as readers' cooperation usually guarantee that the text would be understood correctly even without punctuation, the typographic distinctions suggest that the authors feel the need to support the correct reading (although not in all cases, as is clear from the last example):¹¹

DANGER / KEEP OUT [101]
NO TRESPASSING / UNDER PENALTY / OF THE LAW [3]
WOMEN / FOR STAFF ONLY [123]
SNOW PLAY / PARKING / PROHIBITED [131]
SLOW / PEDESTRIAN / CROSSING [282]
BUCKLE UP / STATE LAW [168]

Conclusion

Public signs and signboards in English show some differences from other types of little texts. The most prominent syntactic feature of signs is the use of a very limited number of sentence structures. The two most frequent of them – noun phrases (29.7%) and imperatives (26.1%) – are used in 55.8% of all messages. Complete sentences are rare (13.8%), and in incomplete constructions, noun phrases are much more frequent than indicative clauses with an ellipited finite verb. The weak syntactic variation in signs suggests a strong tendency towards standardization.

The structure of the signs includes some specific sections that are not found in other types of little texts, the most prominent being the “attention caller”. Atten-

tion callers display a very weak lexical variation (only 7 different lexical items), which is in correspondence with the above mentioned standardization in syntax.

Another specific feature of signboards is the use of graphic elements that either accompany, become part of, or completely replace written messages. Typographic differentiation is sometimes used to compensate for missing punctuation.

Being straightforward in meaning and limited in the use of grammatical means, signs, notices and public announcements represent an interesting segment in language usage. Further investigation into this field is necessary.

Notes

- ¹ There are, however, exceptions: signs like METER FEEDING IS ILLEGAL, WILL CALL PARKING may pose a problem. Even a sign as frequent as PED XING is difficult for foreigners because neither of the two words is found in common dictionaries.
- ² That people do reflect the quality of notices is evident from the number of humorous collections of notices including bad English usage that circulate on the Internet and occasionally occur in newspapers; they are almost invariably collections made by English speaking tourists abroad.
- ³ Xiong Yumei, vice-director of the Beijing Tourism Bureau, quoted in "Campaign to wipe out Chinglish," in: *China Daily* (North American ed.). New York, N.Y. 6 December 2002. 3.
- ⁴ The complete collection of notices may include some texts that do not meet some of the criteria; these were excluded from the analyzed material, or, if they are mentioned, this fact is noted in the text.
- ⁵ The rule is listed separately though it could be seen as implicitly expressed in (3) since an illocutionary act involves the authority of the speaker.
- ⁶ Square brackets are used throughout the text to indicate the serial number of the signboard in the database.
- ⁷ The term "message" is used to refer to a semantic unit comprising one instruction, command, prohibition, piece of information. For example, the signboard No Dogs / (NOT EVEN ON A LEASH) [75] was dealt with as one message; the signboard DANGEROUS DROP / KEEP OFF [76] was counted as two messages.
- ⁸ The technical information is often not even readable from the same distance as the other parts of the signboard.
- ⁹ Even in newspaper headlines, we can find fixed formulations, mainly the titles of regular columns; however, they are fewer and not typical.
- ¹⁰ Moreover, authorship is hardly ever an issue in these texts: even if the "author" is occasionally stated explicitly, it is always a corporate author (an institution) and is stated in order to increase the authoritativeness of the text rather than to identify the actual author.
- ¹¹ In these examples, bold print is used to replace typographic distinctions that are sometimes achieved by means of size or typeface.

Works Cited

- Chovanec, Jan (2003). "The Uses of the Present Tense in Headlines". *Theory and Practice of English Studies*. Vol. I. Proceedings from the 7th Conference of British, American and Canadian Studies in Brno, September 2002. Brno: Masaryk UP, 2003. 83–92.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold, 1994.
- Vinay, Jean-Paul and Jean Darbelnet (1995). *Comparative Stylistics of French and English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1995.

Vlčková, Jitka (1999). "Do they mean what they say? Nationalism and Racial Coding in Australian Personal Advertisement". *Australian Nationalism Reconsidered: Maintaining a Monocultural Tradition in a Multicultural Society*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg: 139–147, 1999.