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A Semantic Analysis of Selected Billboards in Lagos State

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Abstract

This study examines the semantic dimensions of commercial billboards in Lagos State, Nigeria, focusing on denotative, connotative, referential, and componential meanings. Twenty billboards were randomly selected from high-traffic urban areas and analyzed using referential and componential theories of meaning. Findings reveal that billboard language employs simple vocabulary for immediate comprehension,

with common nouns predominant and lexical items carrying deeper connotative layers that enhance persuasion. Proper nouns consistently denote product brands. The analysis highlights semantics as a vital tool in outdoor advertising, influencing consumer perception and response. Recommendations emphasize maximizing linguistic precision for optimal impact.

Keywords: Semantics, Billboards, Denotation, Connotation, Referential Meaning, Componential Analysis, Advertising Language

Introduction

Background to the Study

Semantics, the study of meaning in language, extends beyond surface interpretations to include arbitrariness, conventionality, denotation, connotation, lexical and sentential relations, ambiguity, and vagueness. As defined by Wikipedia, semantics explores the relationship between signifiers (words, phrases, signs, symbols) and their denotations. Within linguistics, semantics plays a crucial role in relating meaning across levels, preventing chaos akin to the biblical Tower of Babel.

Language serves as the medium for semantics, enabling communication of emotions, ideas, and thoughts (Murthy, 2007) ^[10]. This study assesses the semantics of linguistic terms on billboards, large outdoor advertising structures in high-traffic areas, featuring witty slogans and visuals for pedestrians and drivers (Wikipedia). In Nigeria, billboards vary by type (e.g., digital LED boards, backlits, bridges, gantries, large format, portrait, scrolling, unipole, rooftops, wall drops, 96 / 16 sheets), each with costs and preferences, often displaying pictures or short sayings (New Crystal Communications).

Nigeria's economy, driven by industries and businesses, heightens billboard demand, particularly in Lagos State-the nation's economic hub, created in 1967 and home to major enterprises like the American Business Council, First Bank plc., and MTN (Ngex; Wikipedia; Finelib, 2016). Products like Dangote Cement and Indomie also advertise via billboards. This work analyzes semantic relations (denotative, connotative, componential, referential) to uncover meanings beyond non-linguist interpretations.

Statement of the Problem

Billboards, designed for brief outdoor viewing, require critical semantic analysis to ensure messages are grasped by moving audiences.

Aim and Objectives

The aim is to semantically analyze selected billboards in Lagos State. Specific objectives include: revealing connotative/denotative meanings in commercial billboards; investigating semantic relations among words/sentences; and uncovering hidden meanings overlooked by pedestrians.

Significance of the Study

This study illuminates semantics in billboards, revealing hidden meanings and assessing pedestrian comprehension of linguistic terms.

Scope and Limitations

Limited to commercial billboards in Lagos areas (e.g., Ikeja, Badagry, Iyana-Ipaja, Agege, Ayobo, Oshodi, Apapa) due to time/resource constraints.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Linguistics and Semantics

Linguistics, the science of language, encompasses semantics as the study of meaning (Yule, 1985^[21]; Palmer, 1978; Lyons, 1977). Palmer (1976)^[11] views language as a communication system associating messages (meanings) with signs. This study posits semantics and linguistics as interdependent for illuminating meaning.

Semantics studies word, phrase, and sentence meanings, focusing on conventional rather than speaker-intended senses (Yule, 1985:14)^[21]. Originating with Michel Bréal in 1883, it evolved in the 1970s via linguistic-philosophical cross-fertilization (Keith, 2016^[7]; Pauline, 2014). Key concepts include denotative (dictionary meaning) and connotative (implied/figurative) levels (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 7th ed.; Murphy *et al.*, 2010^[9]).

- Denotative Meaning: Literal, e.g., "lion" as a carnivorous animal.
- Connotative Meaning: Implied, e.g., "pig" for a dirty person.

Semantics exhibits arbitrariness (no inherent link between form and meaning; Murphy *et al.*, 2010^[9]) and conventionality (societal agreement on usage; Oxford, 7th ed.).

Semantic Relations Among Words

-Synonyms: Similar meanings, e.g., sweet-tasty (not always interchangeable).

-Antonyms: Opposites, e.g., beautiful-ugly.

-Polysemy: Related meanings, e.g., "bright" (shining/intelligent).

-Homophony: Same pronunciation, different meanings/spellings, e.g., write/right.

Among Sentences

-Paraphrase: Same truth conditions, e.g., "It is unfortunate that the team lost" /

"Unfortunately, the team lost."

-Entailment: Asymmetrical implication, e.g., "Mrs. Bassey cooked the food" entails "The food is cooked" (not vice versa).

Billboards and Advertising Language

Billboards, dating to pre-1900s, create quick, memorable impressions (Wikipedia). Language must be readable in seconds for mobile audiences.

Theoretical Framework

- Referential Theory: Meaning as reference to entities (John, 1997), e.g., "table" refers to a four-legged object.
- Componential Analysis: Words via semantic features, e.g., "girl" [+human, -male, - mature] (Wikipedia).

Methodology

Subject of the Study

Twenty commercial billboards from Lagos urban areas (e.g., Ikeja, Oshodi) were randomly selected for semantic analysis. Billboards are labeled A-T; images follow analyses (not included here).

Method of Data Analysis

Personal observation analyzed data using semantics concepts: denotative/connotative meanings, referential/componential analysis, lexical semantics/deviations.

Results and Analysis

Twenty billboards were analyzed for semantic layers. Below are representative examples; patterns across all include simple vocabulary, common nouns, and deeper connotations.

Billboard A: "Mr Chef... Correct! Enjoy di real taste of home"

Referential: "Mr Chef" refers to iodized salt/seasoning brand.

Componential: Mr Chef [-human, -animate]; Home [-human, -animate].

Denotative: Product gives home-like taste; "chef" as presiding cook.

Connotative: Right choice evoking family memories/experiences.

Homophones: "di" /ði/ for "the" /ði/.

- Lexical Deviation: "Di" for uniqueness/attention.

Billboard B: "Eagle Aromatic Schnapps: Redefining Originality.

Respect Tradition. Enjoy Tradition."

- Componential: Eagle [-human, -tame, +animate, +carnivorous].

Referential: Brand name; aromatic schnapps as spicy distilled drink.

- Denotative: Gin exuding originality, encouraging tradition.

Connotative: "Eagle" implies distinction/superiority.

Billboard C: "Power bitters... Power to enjoy"

- Componential: Power bitters [-human, +inanimate].

Referential: Local Nigerian beverage.

Denotative: Tonic/detoxifier providing enjoyment strength.

Connotative: Grants physical prowess for life's benefits.

Billboard D: "Bull dark rum... Top up your game. Ride on to satisfaction"

Componential: Rum [-human, -animate]; Bull [-human, +animate, -female, +male, +uncastrated].

- Referential: Strong alcoholic drink.
- Denotative: Distilled spirit for enhanced performance/satisfaction.
- Connotative: Bull-like strength; dark suggests exciting danger.

Billboard E: "Ariston: The water heater leaders in Nigeria"

- Componential: Ariston [-human, -animate]; Water [-human, +animate]; Nigeria [-human, -animate, +country].

Referential: Electronic water heater brand.

- Denotative: Foremost water heater in Nigeria.

Connotative: Superiority/leadership over competitors.

Billboard F: "Virgin Hair Fertilizer... Self Revelation"

Componential: Hair [-human, +animate]; Fertilizer [-human, -animate, +nutrient].

- Referential: Hair growth product for virgin hair.

Denotative: Hastens growth; reveals efficacy.

- Connotative: New/outstanding cream for tough new hair.

Billboard G: "Sabrina... Feel Da Gin"

Componential: Sabrina [-human, +animate]; Gin [-human, +hard, +inanimate, +alcohol].

- Referential: Distilled gin brand.
- Denotative: Test via drinking.
- Connotative: Confident challenge to experience uniqueness.

Lexical Deviation: "Da" for "the" (musical pattern).

Billboard H: "Honourable lo mo honourable... Crisps and refreshing"

(Translation: Honourable knows honourable)

Componential: Honourable [+human, -animate, +/-male, +recognition, +dignity, +respect] (person); [-human, -animate] (drink).

- Denotative: Titled person recognizes drink's crisp taste.
- Connotative: Innate honorables associate with drink for status.

Billboard I: "Haier Thermocool... Always There for You"

- Componential: Haier Thermocool [-human, -animate].

- Referential: Cooling appliance brand.

- Denotative: Reliable temperature maintainer.

Connotative: Unfailing promise in all seasons.

Billboard J: "Let the Taste do the Talking... with Maggi Every Woman is a Star"

Componential: Maggi [-human, +inanimate, +cooking]; Woman [+human, -animate, +female, +mature]; Star [-human, +light, +heavenly body, +inanimate].

Referential: Seasoning brand.

Denotative: Taste speaks; makes women stars.

Connotative: Builds trust; elevates cooks to celebrated status.

Billboard K: "Need fresh breathe? Choose CLORETS"

Componential: Breathe [-human, +inanimate]; Clorets [-human, +inanimate].

Referential: Breath freshener.

Denotative: Solves bad breath.

- Connotative: Addresses stale breath; top choice via question.

Billboard L: "Delete sugar... upload herbs. Action bitters"

Componential: Sugar [-human, +sweetening, +inanimate]; Herbs [-human, +inanimate, +medicine].

- Referential: Herbal bitters.

Denotative: Replace sugar with herbs.

Connotative: Health warning (sugar bad, herbs good); preventive/curative.

Billboard M: "Beer wey make sense! ... A Smart Choice"

- Componential: Beer [-human, +inanimate, +hard, +beverage].

Referential: Brewed alcoholic drink.

Denotative: Sensible/smart choice.

- Connotative: Meets sensory standards.

Billboard N: "The Right Drink for a Queen... Julius"

Componential: Drink [-human, +inanimate, -/+hard]; Queen [+human, +animate, +female, +royalty, +mature].

Referential: Beverage brand.

Denotative: Appropriate for queens.

Connotative: For high-standing women; gendered exclusion.

Billboard O: "Celebrate every moment... Veleta"

Componential: Veleta [-human, +inanimate, +drink, +soft].

Referential: Fruit wine.

Denotative: Essential for celebrations.

- Connotative: Life's moments as gifts to cherish.

Billboard P: "Binatone. Simply Better... the Best Range of Fans"

Componential: Binatone [-human, +electronics, +inanimate]; Fans [-human, +inanimate, +electronics].

- Referential: Home appliance brand.
- Denotative: Improved efficient fans.

Connotative: Superior to competitors.

Billboard Q: "Gulder... Quality Always Stand out"

- Componential: Gulder [-human, +inanimate, +drink, +hard].

Referential: Beer brand.

Denotative: Quality is obvious.

- Connotative: Unique confidence in standing out.

Billboard R: "Pepsi. Turn Down...Turn Up"

Componential: Pepsi [-human, +animate, +soft, +drink].

- Referential: Soft drink.

Denotative: Changes position/direction.

- Connotative: Relaxes or boosts energy.

Billboard S: "De Rok quality café liqueur. Premium coffee flavour. Creamy taste"

Componential: De Rok [-human, +inanimate, +drink, +hard]; Café [-human, +inanimate];

Liqueur [-human, +inanimate, +hard, +beverage]; Coffee [-human, +inanimate, +drink, +caffeine].

Referential: Alcoholic, Liquor

- Denotative: High-quality flavored drink.

Connotative: Mouth-watering premium attributes.

Billboard T: "Subscribe Today Red TV"

Componential: Red [-human, +inanimate, +colour]; TV [-human, +inanimate, +electronics].

- Referential: Satellite TV station.
- Denotative: Urgent subscription call.
- Connotative: Hottest/fiery channel offering the best.

Discussion

The analyses demonstrate semantics' role in persuasive advertising. Simple English ensures accessibility, while connotations add emotional depth (e.g., superiority in "Leaders," challenge in "Feel Da Gin"). Lexical deviations (e.g., "di," "da") create uniqueness. Common nouns dominate, proper nouns denote brands, and deeper connotations reveal persuasion beyond literals.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study reveals semantics' utility in billboard efficacy, unveiling multi-layered meanings for consumer engagement. Recommendations: Exploit language instrumentality for maximum response; prioritize proper usage for conviction; treat billboard language professionally.

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