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[Research Note]

On the Linguistic Aspects of Street Signs in the U.K.

—In Comparison to Advertisement English—

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Introduction

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Introduction

This article is designed to serve as an educational tool for college students. It researches the characteristics of language used for street, railway and indoor signs as compared with the language of advertisements and magazine covers. These two types of language have some shared characteristics. They are concise and eye-catching, because they are designed to attract people's attention and convey their messages in an effective and efficient manner. On the other hand, these language types

also serve different purposes. For example, the expressions used on street signs are direct and commanding, whereas the language of advertising must sound more attractive and appealing to interest people.

To illustrate the characteristics of the language of street and railway signs, this writer used the data he mainly collected in London and Cambridge during his stay in 2008 and 2009, during which time he took several hundred photographs of signs. To compare this data with advertisement English, he used the categorization prepared by McLoughlin (2006), in which advertisement English and magazine cover English are explained in a well organized manner.

McLoughlin states that “The front cover is the magazine’s most important advertisement,” and she illustrates some of its linguistic characteristics with examples as follows.

1. Putting words together

e.g., *Delicious cook-ahead, stress-free feast* <Bella>

As this example shows, the noun is heavily modified because the text has to provide concentrated information in a limited space. Using conjoined words is one solution. This linguistic strategy is also common in the language of magazine reports, such as *waist-length, deep-pile blond hair* (*NW Online*, 8/17/97).

Street signs, however, do not use this strategy very often. When used, established modifiers are more common rather than nonce words.

► *Pay by phone parking* <At a car park in London>

This sign was found in a parking lot in London. “Pay by phone parking” is a relatively new parking system which enables people to pay for their parking using their mobile phones.

2. Ellipses

e.g., *Lose your belly See results in 2 weeks!* <Men’s Health>

Grammatically speaking, the word “results” requires the definite article

“the,” but to save space, it is frequently omitted without changing the meaning of the text.

Street signs and indoor signs also frequently leave out determiners. The next examples illustrate that the definite article “the” is missing. The symbol Ø shows its trace position. The use of upper case or lower case letters also seems arbitrary.

- **Lower Ø window for ventilation** <In a train>
- **Please use Ø other door** <On a door in a theatre>
- **PUSH Ø BAR TO OPEN** <On a door of Transport Museum>
- **PEDESTRIANS push Ø button and wait for Ø signal opposite**
<At a street corner>

Omitted parts of speech are not limited to the definite article. Possessive pronouns, such as “your,” can also be eliminated from signs.

- **Please keep Ø feet off seats** <In a train, Plate 1>

This sign was found in underground railway cars in London. For brevity the pronoun “your” is eliminated without compromising meaning.

There are also cases in which the plural marker, -s, is missing from nouns.

- **Priority *seat* for people who are disabled, pregnant or less able to stand**^{*1} <In a National Rail train>

There is more than one such seat available in the particular section of the train. Therefore, the word “seat” on this sign is understood as shorthand for the word “seats.”

This writer will discuss ellipses on the “sentential level” in the following section.



Plate 1

3. Sentence types

McLoughlin (2006) identifies two types of sentences: major and minor.

Major sentences are regular sentences that have an overt subject and a predicate. They have at least one finite verb which shows tense or aspect, whereas “minor sentences are complete in intention but often lack a finite verb (p.16).”

Major sentences in advertisements include examples like “**Is this the luckiest girl in Britain?**” <*Tatler*>, whereas minor sentences do not overtly form a complete sentence, for example, “**Time to dance**” <*Legal Business*> .

Other varieties of minor sentences may use the “-ing” form or may lack an overt subject, in such respective examples as: “**Turning your flat into a film set**” and “**Ø Starts this week only in Bella.**” Other kinds of minor sentences are explained in more detail with photos in Crystal (2003: 216).

Street signs also use the above-mentioned constructions. Below are some examples of major sentences, mainly collected from streets and railway stations. Punctuation marks, such as the “full stop,” seem optional.

- ***A full range of bus tickets is available wherever you see this sign*** <At a bus stop in London>
- ***Children under 5 must be carried through the gates*** <In a railway station>
- ***For your personal safety and security, video-linked TV cameras maintain constant record surveillance of this area*** <On a street>
- ***There is currently a good service operating on all London Underground lines.*** <In a railway station>

Although major sentences are not notable for their brevity or economy, they may sound more polite or less commanding than most street signs, and often are more suitable for recommendation or request, as the following show.

- ***Using Oyster*² is cheaper than buying cash tickets*** <In a railway station>
- ***For the comfort of all of our customers we thank you for not smoking*** <In a shop>

Minor sentences found on street signs include the following. They may

often lack a subject, verb or both. They are, however, suitable for conveying the essential message in concise terms. The next examples omit the copula (sg./ pl.). The symbol Ø shows its trace position.

- **CCTV Ø in operation** <On a street>
- **POSITION Ø CLOSED** <At a teller window at a bank>
- **Soup Ø served here** <Outside of a restaurant>
- **KEYS Ø CUT HERE** <Outside of a shop, Plate 2>



Plate 2

Below are cases where both the subject and the copula are eliminated.

- **Ø Safe for use on flammable liquid fires.** <On a fire extinguisher>

The plausible subject “it” (= fire extinguisher) and the verb “is” are deleted because they are considered understood.

- **This door Ø to be kept locked shut when Ø not in use** <In a railway station>

In sentence form this notice would read, “This door is to be kept locked shut when it is not in use.”

- **Ø Under 21? If you look under 21 please do not be offended if we ask you for proof of age when you buy alcohol.** <Outside of a supermarket>

This notice is for notifying customers of the stores practice of confirming the liquor buyer’s age, and clearly the words “Are you” have been deleted from the full sentence.

- **Making everyone’s journey more pleasant** <In a train>

There seem to be various ways to reconstruct the above statement to full sentence form, but one possibility is, “We appreciate your effort at making everyone’s journey more pleasant by not exhibiting annoying behavior.”

For signs, the use of punctuation marks, such as commas and periods, and upper case or lower case seems rather arbitrary.

4. Sentence functions

There are four classic functional types of sentences: declaratives, interrogatives, imperatives, and exclamatives. Declaratives are typically used for making statements or assertions, interrogatives for asking questions, imperatives for giving commands or making requests, and exclamatives for expressing surprise or claims.

These various types of sentences are often used to serve different purposes pragmatically. For example, an interrogative sentence, such as “Are you free this afternoon?” may function as an “invitation” instead of a mere question (i.e., indirect speech act. See Searle, 1975).

These four categories are used not just for advertisements, but also frequently for street signs and indoor signs.

4.1. Declaratives

Signs using declaratives most commonly take the forms of both major and minor sentences. Major sentences include such examples as below.

► ***Obstructing the doors can be dangerous*** <In a train>

► ***This will be your next lift*** <At a tube station>

The second example is an electronic sign found above each of two lifts or elevators standing side by side, which take people to the upper-level exits of the underground stations.

Major declarative sentences are more commonly used as additional detailed statements preceded by the “headline” as examples below show.

► **Visitor entry**

The Abbey stays open for one hour after last admission.

These are the visiting times for the next week. Times vary.

<At Westminster Abbey>

► **POLICE NOTICE**

ANY BICYCLES LEFT UNATTENDED IN THIS AREA WILL BE REMOVED <At St. James Park, Plate 3>

Some varieties of minor sentences are shown below. The verb or copula

is covertly understood in each sign.

➤ **Public Toilets This Way** <At a station>

➤ **Bus stop not in use** <At a bus stop>

4.2. Interrogatives

Many signs and notices start with a question rather than a statement. This kind of presentation is quite effective in attracting people's attention. Such interrogatives usually do not appear alone, but are immediately followed by solutions, indicating what users are supposed to do or can expect next. These questions function as advisories or reminders for the users of machines, systems or facilities.

➤ ***Faulty machine?*** This machine is operated by Almex Information Systems on behalf of London Buses.

This particular example indicates that if a machine does not function properly, the user is encouraged to notify the company in charge.

➤ ***Have you paid?*** Please buy your ticket before you travel, otherwise you may have to pay a Penalty Fare (at least £20) <In a National Rail station>

The nature of this sign is a warning, using a Q and A format. The question part effectively serves as a reminder for customers.

Note that one of the examples in section 3 also follows exactly the same Q & A format (i.e., ***Under 21?*** If you look under 21 please do not be offended if we ask you for proof of age when you buy alcohol).

4.3. Imperatives

Imperatives are most commonly used to give orders, cautions or warnings.

➤ ***Hold children firmly*** <Beside an escalator>

➤ ***Mind your head*** <In London Victoria Sta.>

➤ ***LOOK BOTHWAYS*** <At a pedestrian crossing>



Plate 3

These signs suggest that if you do not follow the directions, something dangerous could occur.

In addition, imperative forms are pragmatically used for requests as shown below.

➤ **Have your say Tell us what you think** <In Transport Museum>

➤ **Help us keep your station tidy** <In a train>

In other words, the sentences above could be paraphrased respectively as, “Would you give us suggestions for improving this museum?” and “Would you help us keep the station tidy?”

4.4. Exclamatives

Exclamatives are useful for expressing strong feelings or a sense of immediacy, and are accompanied by an exclamation mark. They may take the form of a major or a minor sentence — a short phrase or even a single word.

Typical exclamatives start with either “what” or “how” followed by the subject and verb, such as “What a mess he’s made!” or “How terrible they look!” However, in signs as well as in ads a major or minor affirmative sentence can also function as an exclamative sentence as shown below.

➤ **BEWARE HORSES MAY KICK OR BITE ! THANK YOU**

<At HORSE GUARDS, Plate 4>

This particular example in a famous sightseeing spot in London serves as a caution. The exclamation mark is quite optional, and the first word “BEWARE” could also be accompanied by this punctuation.



Plate 4

➤ **ZIP IT**

THINK! LOOK AFTER YOUR BELONGINGS

<A notice by British Transport Police>

The command “Think!” expresses the writers strong feeling and conveys a warning to avoid possible trouble.

➤ **PRINCE OF WALES**

Famous **FOR OUR FISH & CHIPS** *perfect with a pint!* <Near Covent Garden>

The message is that the store's fish and chips go well with a pint of beer.

➤ **WARNING! SHOPLIFTERS WILL BE PROSECUTED** <In a store>

➤ **Litter!** Please give it to our staff. <London Victoria Sta.>

These two signs illustrate that a noun also can be accompanied by an exclamation mark.

All the above examples indicate that using exclamation marks for signs is quite arbitrary and effective in reflecting the writer's strong emotions.

5. Rhetoric and styles of language

Rhetoric is the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing. To attract people's attention, rhetorical techniques are often utilized in English advertisement: rhyme, assonance, alliteration, puns and deviant spelling.

Rhyme is a correspondence of sound between words or the endings of words.

e.g., **You shop, we drop.** <Catchphrase of Tesco>

Assonance means that the same vowel sound is repeated in adjacent vocabulary items.

e.g., **Early Bird Meal Deal** £5.95 <At a restaurant>

Alliteration is the use of the same letter or sound at the beginning of adjacent or closely-related words.

e.g., **BE SAFE & SOUND** <Ad of a security company>

Turn your talent to teaching. <Government announcement>

A pun is a humorous play on words, in which a word has different meanings, giving the message more than one interpretation. The following "take away" (as British people say) food shop's name is obviously a takeoff on "super-duper," which means excellent.

e.g., **souper douper** <In Baker St. Sta.>

The shop "souper douper" serves a variety of soups and snacks, such as sandwiches to go. Another pun found in the name of a store is "**Nuts about**



Plate 5

You.” They sell dried nuts and fruits, and “nuts about” also means “very much in love with” in colloquial English.

Deviant spelling is another way to catch people’s eyes. In slogans, “the spelling often aids memorability, as in such famous cases as *Beanz Meanz Heinz* or the KFC line *They’re finger-lickin’ good* (Crystal, 2003: 275).”

These italicized words would conventionally be spelled “beans,” “means,” and “finger-licking” and might be objectionable from an educational point of view. Other examples include *KWIK SAVE FOOD STORE* and *Shoe Repairs While-U-Wait*, in which the spellings “quick” for “kwik” and “you” for “U” would be used in standard English.

In the earlier part of this section the rhetoric of language in advertisements was discussed. However, the above-mentioned word forms are basically not often utilized for street signs or notices. The main reason is this rhetoric may more or less involve “plays on words” in terms of sound or spelling, whereas messages on street signs are more formal, serious and straightforward in nature. One of the few street signs found in London using such rhetoric, is a crime prevention warning from the police (See Plate 5).

➤ *REMOVE IT OR LOSE IT*

The phrase has not only rhyme but also the repeated word, “it,” which indicates a satellite navigation device in this context. The whole message warns not to leave such a device in your car. Otherwise, somebody may steal it.

Another example of a street sign which uses rhetoric is introduced in Schafer (1997: 176-177).

➤ *Road Workers Give’em a BRAKE* <At a construction site, USA>

The last word, “brake” is a play on the word “break.” “Give me a break” is a fixed colloquial expression, meaning “Stop joking,” or “I’ve had enough.” This sign found in the U.S. means “There are road construction

workers ahead. When you approach them, slow down your car using your brake.”

In signs and notices, formal vocabulary items and expressions are preferred to rhetoric, as in the following.

- ***Due to*** the licensing laws, alcohol cannot be ***purchased*** between 10.55pm and 8.00am <In Tesco, Thornton Heath, Plate 6>

“***Due to***” and “***purchase***” are more formal than “because of” and “buy” respectively. Other examples include the following.

- ***STOP DO NOT PROCEED BEYOND THIS POINT UNTIL INSTRUCTED BY THE GUARD*** <At the venue of London marathon>
- Passengers must not pass this point ***Offenders*** will be prosecuted <At a tube station>
- Please be prepared to ***vacate*** this space for a wheelchair user passenger <In a bus>

The words “***proceed***,” “***instruct***,” “***offender***,” and “***vacate***” in these notices are also considered formal words. Other formal examples of verbs or verb phrases include “***notify***” rather than “tell,” “***retain***” rather than “keep,” “***inquire with***” rather than “talk to,” and “***apprehend***” instead of “arrest.”

Besides formal vocabulary words, the “passive voice” is also frequently used in English street signs. The passive voice is a grammatical construction in which the subject of a sentence or clause is not the agent of the action but its object.

- ***Hard hats and Protective footwear must be worn*** <At a construction site>
- ***Help Point***
CALLS FROM THIS HELP POINT MAY ***BE RECORDED AND***

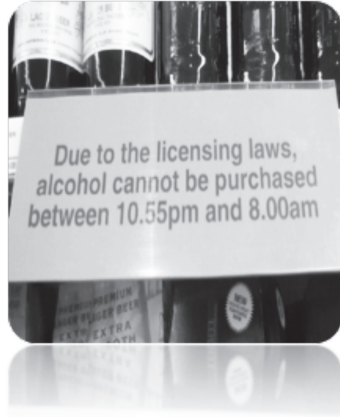


Plate 6

MONITORED <On a platform of a railway station>

➤From 1 June 2008 drinking alcohol *is prohibited* on public transport

<In a bus>

➤NO PARKING AT ALL TIMES. UNAUTHORISED VEHICLES WILL
BE CLAMPED <In front of private premises>

The above examples show that passives are most appropriate in “an impersonal style, which can be very useful in contexts where it is irrelevant to state who actually carried out an action (Crystal, 2003: 225).”

Another characteristic of street signs and notices is that many of them carry words, such as “caution,” “notice,” “danger” and “warning” in isolation as the first word of the sign.

➤**CAUTION** Door opens outwards

➤**Danger** Keep everything clear of the doors

➤**SECURITY NOTICE**

If you see an unattended package or bag anywhere on a station or train:

●Keep calm ●Don't touch ●Tell any member of staff or police officer immediately ●Tell other people to leave the area ●Never ignore

➤**Warning** Do not trespass on the Railway

Penalty £ 1000

Street signs are also used to forbid the general public from doing some particular activities in specified areas. Therefore, the expressions which start with “Do not” or “No” are commonplace. The following examples also show that the use of punctuation, such as full stops, is not obligatory, and capitalization is arbitrary.



Plate 7

➤**Do not** obstruct doorway

➤**Do not** take heavy bags on the escalator

➤**DO NOT** use in confined spaces.

➤**Don't** forget — customers are reminded that only food and drink purchased in the coffee bar can be consumed here

- **NO ENTRY**
- *No* mobile phones
- *No* unauthorized access
- *No* rubbish to be left in this area Offenders will be prosecuted
- **NO HEAVY EQUIPMENT OR MATERIALS. THIS STAIRCASE IS FOR PASSENGERS ONLY** <In a station>
- *No* loading at any time <On a street>
- **NO SITTING ON THE STEPS AT ANY TIME**



Plate 8

This sign, Plate 8, found in the foot tunnel in London, carries a long list of forbidden actions. “Cycling” means “riding a bicycle,” and “busking” indicates “playing music (for voluntary donations).” “Animal fouling” means “animal defecation” and “littering” means “leaving rubbish lying untidily.” “Loitering” is “standing or waiting around idly without any particular purpose.”

Summary

English expressions used for street and indoor signs and notices can be summarized as follows.

1) While advertising English often uses series of adjectival expressions in front of nouns, street signs do not use such patterns as often (e.g., Pay by phone parking).

2) Similar to advertisements, street signs frequently (but not mandatorily) lack function words, such as the definite article, “the” and pronoun, “your” for brevity sake.

3) Both “major sentences” and “minor sentences” are used for English signs and advertising English. Major sentences may sound more polite or less commanding than minor sentences. They are often more suitable for recommendations or requests. Minor sentences, on the other hand, are excellent for brevity and economy of words, providing only the main points

of the messages.

4) Four types of sentence functions (i.e., declaratives, interrogatives, imperatives, and exclamatives) are observed in signs as well as in advertisements. Interrogatives do not usually appear alone, but are immediately followed by “solutions,” indicating what users are supposed to do or can expect in particular situations. Imperatives are commonly used to give orders or warnings but are also pragmatically used for requests.

5) Unlike in advertising English, rhetorical techniques, such as rhyme, assonance, alliteration, puns and deviant spelling are not often used for street signs and notices.

6) In signs and notices, formal vocabulary items, such as “proceed,” “offender” and “vacate” are preferred.

7) The passive voice is frequently used for signs in contexts where it is irrelevant to state who actually carries out an action, as in the example, “Unauthorised vehicles will *be clamped*.”

8) For signs and notices there are no rigid rules for punctuation (e.g., full stops, exclamation marks) or the use of upper or lower case letters.

9) Street signs and notices often carry words, such as “caution,” “notice,” “danger” and “warning” in isolation as the first word of texts.

10) Many street and railway signs start with “Do not” or “No” to discourage undesired behavior in particular situations.

Notes: *1 Priority seats are also used in Japan, but it is interesting to note that the British sign does not make mention of “elderly people,” unlike Japanese signs.

*2 “Oyster” is an electronic ticketing card used on public transport within the Greater London area.

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