

THE USE OF NOUNS IN EXHIBITION TEXTS AT THE ISLAMIC ARTS MUSEUM MALAYSIA

Ummu Zainab Al-Abidah Zainal Abidin¹, Kamisah Ariffin²

1. Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Pahang,
26400 Bandar Tun Abdul Razak Jengka, Pahang Darul Makmur
ummuzainab.aa@gmail.com
2. Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Pahang,
26400 Bandar Tun Abdul Razak Jengka, Pahang Darul Makmur

kamisah@uitm.edu.my

Abstract

Exhibition texts are commonly found alongside exhibitions in a museum. The texts are there to serve specific purposes in the overall context of the museum, and the linguistic features that are found within the texts are as-sumed to be functional and serve the respective purposes of the museum. This paper investigates the use of one of the linguistic features, i.e nouns, in the texts that accompany displays at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. The nouns are examined in terms of their frequency of use and the extent in which the nouns function in terms of serving the purposes of exhibition texts in the museum context. The findings reveal that nouns pertaining to locations and artefacts are the most frequently used, and they reflect the context of the studied museum which is Islamic history and civilisation. In addition, different categories of nouns, such as names of people, are also found to serve the communicative purpose of the exhibition texts. This study contributes to the linguistic description of the discourse of art and explains the relations between text, museum exhibits and visitors. It may benefit linguistic scholars and practitioners as the findings also suggest that the use of linguistic features can attract visitors to look at the exhibits.

Keywords: *Exhibition texts, Linguistic features, Museum exhibits, Nouns*

Introduction

When one observes the many types of museums that can be found today, these museums can very much differ in terms of their collections (e.g. archaeology museums, arts museum, science museums), the management that runs them (e.g. government museums, university museums, private museums), the area that they serve (e.g. national museums, city museums, local museums), the audience they serve (e.g. general public museums, specialist museums) and the way collections are exhibited (e.g. traditional museums, open-air museums, interactive museums) (Ambrose and Paine, 2006, p.7). Given such specific varieties, it can be said that a museum is a specific institution that differ from other institutions, with specific environment, context and elements, and as with any other specific setting can be assumed to have its own distinctive features.

One of the features that can be assumed to be distinct to a museum is its linguistic aspects, found in the texts that accompany the museum's exhibitions. Exhibitions are considered the central operation of a museum (Suarez and Tsuitsui, 2004), and by extension the texts that come with these exhibitions are of no less important. Museums that open doors to the public audience are assumed to have considered the planning and production of the museum texts, which have considerable effect on the audience since "properly shaped elements of museums' physical context, including labels, are important conditions for a meaningful experience" (Miklosevic, 2015). In relation to this, the present study examines one linguistic feature of museum exhibition texts, i.e noun and how it is employed in exhibition texts within a museum's particular environment. Specifically, this study focuses on texts that accompany displays at the Islamic Arts Museum, Malaysia by examining its use of nouns. According to Ravelli (2009, p.12), there is a need to break down a text to its 'building blocks' to understand the role of these elements in the texts.

Literature Review

During the 38th ICOFOM (International Committee for Museology of the International Council of Museums) International Symposium, the concept of MLA (Museums-Libraries-Archives) was discussed, highlighting some of the contemporary challenges faced by these three public institutions. One of these challenges, as argued by Davis (2016, p.6-7), is the notion of 'space' and 'place', as crucial elements of identity, both at the individual level and collective level, and human need to address personal and societal identities has physically manifested as museums, libraries and archives. Cultural heritage, which produces meaning for identity (Ramadan, 2012, p.140), is a special province of museums, according to Hernandez (2016, p. 86), where they are regarded as "the social space for the collection, conservation, recording, documenting, investigation, and diffusion of the collective memory of material and immaterial heritage, which has been gathered and transmitted by a community throughout its history, as a source of information and communication for current and future generations". The preservation of the community's cultural heritage (Duncan, 1994, p.281) as well as providing one of the spaces by which the society, individually and collectively, may explore their identities at different levels, reflected by Bennet (1995, p.8) to be a "cultural right", can be considered as the underlying roles of museums in society.

Therefore, for visitors of museums to benefit from material and immaterial heritage, the role of 'diffusion' and 'transmission' of cultural heritage by museums warrant further attention. How exactly do museums do this? When one observes the many types of museums that can be found today, the varieties of museums seem to indicate differences in their more specific objectives, which merit the establishment of the respective museums in the first place. Arts museums are seen to present history and arts with the use of "interpretive and educational tools and techniques" (Chengel, 2014, p.1).

As such, the concept of 'interpretation' becomes significant in arts museums. Edson and Dean (2013, p.153) contend that it is only through "the presentation of the physical object and the interpretation provided through explanation and exposition of the accompanying texts" that communication is able to take place, between the

mu-seum and its visitors. Miklosovic (2015) further argues that label is one of the most significant means by which visitors obtain information, where they facilitate learning in the 'self-guiding environment of a museum' and in instances when mere observation of art works or visual cues provided by them cannot be 'read' by the visitors, and visitors are helped with words that "give a new, deeper dimension to our visual experience" (Ekary, 1994, p.201, cited in Miklosovic, 2015) This highlights the role of exhibition texts in arts museums, where the texts serve as mediator between the exhibitions and visitors, simultaneously conveying the roles of museums as described above.

In order to explore how museum exhibition texts carry out their functions, two aspects should be taken into account. The first is the context of museums in which the texts occur, as context plays a large role in the meaning that can be derived from a given text (Manca, 2012, p.5). Museum context constitutes various elements (e.g. museum practitioners, visitors, communication purposes) that are unique to museums and thus warrant a closer examination. Context plays a large role in the meaning that can be derived from a given text and theories of socioliteracy advocate the view that there is no actual separation between the content of a text and the context in which it is produced (John, 1997). Therefore, studying the context in which a text (spoken or written) is embedded will provide the information to understand the meaning that the text needs to convey (Martin, 2010).

The second aspect is the exhibition texts themselves, regarding the choice of linguistic features employed by the museums, which are crucial in conveying information on exhibitions that are deemed necessary by the museums. According to Goatly (1993, p.110), "meaning depends on choice and attempts to describe the system from which these choices are made. It too, then, is comparative in that any choice made in the system implies the rejection of other choices and invites comparison between the actual choices and the possible alternatives". In this sense, it can be said that the selection of the linguistic features as used in the exhibition texts serve the objectives of the exhibition texts – and not any other – which in turn serve the purpose of the context in which they occur. The present paper focuses on the use of one of the features, which is noun in exhibition texts at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, and such its purpose in the overall context of the museum is expounded in this study.

Objective and Methodology

The purpose of this study is to identify the use of nouns in exhibition texts of Museum Islamic Arts Malaysia and the extent to which the nouns are functional within the context of the museum. Two types of analysis were carried out in this study. The first was the examination of the museum context, and secondly, the pattern of noun use in the exhibition texts, regarding its frequency and pervasiveness in the re-spective texts.

Examining the Museum Context

In this study, the context of Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia was determined through the elements of situational context or characteristics as proposed by Biber and Conrad (2009) for the study of register. Although the present study is not a full register study, nevertheless, the elements of the theoretical framework have proved useful in providing the authors the parameter in which the characteristics of the museum context may be ascertained. The situational context refers to the context and environment in which the texts occur. There are seven characteristics that can be used to identify the different parts of the museum context, namely, i) participants, ii) relations among participants, iii) channel, iv) production circumstances, vi) setting, vi) communicative purposes, and vii) topic. These characteristics are determined largely based on the analysts' experience and observation, experts' informants and previous research, which according to the framework were the main sources of situational characteristics. The identification of these characteristics enables the distinction of the museum context from the other contexts.

Examining the Linguistic Features

The present study examined approximately 10,500 words in selected 266 individual exhibition texts, from the galleries of Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. Identifying patterns of use is necessary to distinguish the museum exhibition texts from other comparable texts that occur in similar institutions, such as the library and archive. This includes the identification of a respective feature in the texts, which requires a systematic calculation. Similarly, the formula in determining the extent to which the linguistic features are prevalent has also been outlined by Biber and Conrad (2009, p. 62) in their study of register. It is as follows:

$$\text{Normed rate} = (\text{raw count} / \text{total word count}) \times \text{the fixed amount of text e.g. (23 nouns / 79 words total)} \times 100 \text{ words} = 29.1 \text{ nouns per 100 words}$$

The quantitative comparisons made on the normed rates of occurrences would enable the analyst to identify the extent to which a specific feature has been used, often revealing patterns that can differ from raw counts alone. In other words, using the normed rate count allows for a systematic comparison between the features, to determine which of these features are more frequently used compared to others.

Prior to the normed rate calculations, nouns were individually identified from the texts. For example, a 'mosque' and 'Taj Mahal' were identified as nouns. How the words were categorized into these commonly known categories was referred to Collins COBUILD advanced dictionary (2009) and online dictionaries. Additionally, Biber and Conrad (2009) suggested that a corpus-based reference grammar is used in identifying and analyzing the linguistic features. For this purpose, the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (1999), which is based on the study of four different registers (conversation, fiction, newspaper writing, and academic prose), was used for the present study.

Additionally, within the category of noun, it is possible to make further sub-categories based on the meaning of the words, such as nouns pertaining to people and nouns pertaining to location and could also be quantitatively analysed. However, applying the normed rate to the much smaller number of nouns would not yield apparent figures. Here, the calculation is based on the percentage of the sub-categorisation of nouns within its nouns themselves. For example, to calculate the percentage of nouns that pertain to people/person (e.g. Sultan Mahmud Syah) out of the total number of nouns, the calculation was as follows:

$$\text{Percentage based on the total number of nouns} = (\text{raw count} / \text{total word count}) \times 100 \%$$

e.g. (277 nouns pertaining to people/ 3747 nouns total) x 100% = 7.4%

Findings and Discussion

Situational characteristics of Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia

The context of Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia may be summarised in the following:

Table 1: Situational Characteristics (Biber & Conrad, 2009, p. 40)

- I. **Participants**
 - A. Addressor(s) (i.e. speaker or author)
 1. single / plural / **institutional** / unidentified
 2. Social characteristics: age, education, profession etc. **professional adult curator**
 - B. Addressees
 1. single / **plural (museum visitors)** / un-enumerated
 2. self / **other**
 - C. Are there onlookers? **no**
- II. **Relations among participants**
 - A. Interactiveness: **no direct interaction**
 - B. Social roles: relative status or power **undetermined**
 - C. Personal relationship: e.g., friends, colleagues, strangers **impersonal**
 - D. Shared knowledge: personal and specialist **varies**

III. Channel

A. Mode: speech / writing / signing

B. Specific medium:

Permanent: taped / transcribed / printed / handwritten / e-mail / etc.

Transient speech: face-to-face / telephone / radio / TV / etc.

IV. Production circumstances: real time / planned / scripted / revised and edited

V. Setting

A. Is the time and place of communication shared by the participants?

no

B. Place of communication

1. private / public

2. specific setting: galleries of Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia

C. Time: contemporary, historical time period

VI. Communication purposes

A. General purposes: narrate / report, describe, exposit / inform /

explain, persuade, how-to / procedural, entertain, edify, reveal self

B. Specific purposes: e.g., summarize information from numerous sources, describe methods, present new research findings, teach moral through personal story exhibit Islamic Arts materials

C. Factuality: factual, opinion, speculative, imaginative

D. Expression of stance: epistemic, attitudinal, no overt stance varies, not expected to be overt

VII. Topic

A. General topic “domain”: e.g., domestic, daily activities, business / workplace, science, education / academic, government / legal / politics, religion, sports, art / entertainment, etc. Islamic history and civilisation

B. Specific topic specific topics in Islamic history and civilisation, e.g. Islamic arts

C. Social status of person being referred to. not applicable

Nouns in the Museum Exhibition Texts

The following table shows examples of nouns and how they are used in different exhibition texts.

	Example
Nouns pertaining to:	
People/ person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Located in Agra near Delhi, it was built by <u>Shah Jahan</u> as a mausoleum for his favourite <u>wife, Mumtaz. (ABA13s02)</u> It was constructed over the site of an earlier 12th century mosque built by the Qarakhanid <u>ruler Arslan Khan</u>, of which only the massive minaret survived. (ABC16s05)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. COIN TREE DURING <u>SULTAN MAHMUD SYAH</u> REIGN (MWC180)
Place/Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>North Africa</u> and <u>Arabia</u> hypostyle mosques (ABB02s02) The <u>Taj Mahal</u> took 22 years to construct with a labour force of 20,000 workers. (ABC04s06) Each <u>region</u> of the Malay <u>Archipelago</u> such as <u>Java</u>, the Malay <u>Peninsula</u> and Southern <u>Philippines</u>, has keris hilts and sheaths of distinct shape.(MWB06s05) <u>Jerusalem/Damascus</u>(AC08) <u>Cordoba</u>, it's <u>capital</u>, soon emerged as the intellectual <u>centre</u> of <u>Europe</u> and the Islamic <u>world</u> (ABA07s02)
Dynasties/ governments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In 998 AD, Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna seized control of Khorasan from the Samanid <u>Sultanate</u> of Central Asia. (ABA08s01) ARCHITECTURE IN THE OTTOMAN <u>EMPIRE</u> (ABA11T)
Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Islam was introduced to the Archipelago as early as the 10th <u>century</u> AD / 4th <u>century</u> AH. (MWA01s04) Under the reign of Aurangzeb, son of Shah Jahan, construction of the mosque took only 2 <u>years</u> to complete. (ABC05s04) The architecture of the <u>period</u> reflected this newly consolidated power. (ABA12s06)
Artefacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CARVED <u>STONE FRAGMENT</u> (AC05) WOODEN <u>PANEL</u> (AC09) 18. <u>TUMBUK LADA DAGGER</u> (MWC45) <u>AL-OUR'AN</u> WITH <u>CASE</u> (MW113) 1. <u>SONGKET KEBAYA</u> AND MATCHING <u>SA-RONG</u> (MW163)

Numerically, noun is the most pervasive category of lexical words, in comparison to verbs and adjectives. This can be seen in the following chart:

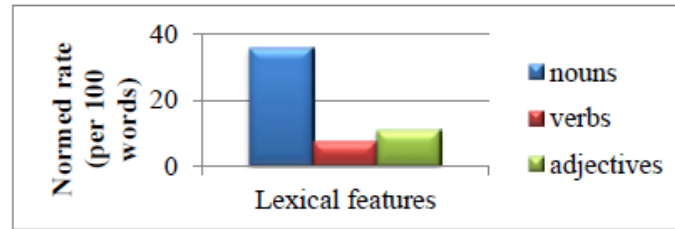


Fig.1 Normed Rate for Lexical Features

In studies of other texts, the use of nouns can range from being very commonly used (e.g. newspapers; academic prose) to less commonly used (e.g. conversation) (Biber & Conrad, 2009). In this study, the nouns were categorised from their usage in the texts, in terms of the meaning that they carry. For example, the name of a historical figure (e.g. Muhammad) or a title (e.g. Prophet) was categorised under ‘people’ or ‘person’. The name of a place (e.g. North Africa) was categorised as ‘place’ or ‘location’. The frequency of nouns as used in the exhibition texts is as follows:

Table 3: Normed Rate for Nouns

NOUNS	Normed rate (per 100 words)
Total nouns	35.8
Words pertaining to:	
• People/person	2.6
• Place/location	7.3
• Dynasties/governments	0.6
• Time	2.5
• Artefacts	4.3

Table 4: Intra-Feature Percentage for Nouns

NOUNS	Percentage based on the total number of nouns
Words pertaining to:	
• People/person	7.4
• Place/location	20.3
• Dynasties/government	1.6
• Time	7
• Time	12

The most pervasive use of nouns is in the place or location category, followed by nouns that pertain to artefacts. As shown in Table 3, nouns have a normed rate of 35.8, the highest use in the lexical category. From this number, nouns that pertain to place or location occur around 7.3 times in every hundred words and make up 20.3% of the total noun use. The following examples show how nouns pertaining to place or location are employed in the exhibition texts:

Names of place or location are part of a text's larger elaboration on a specific topic

ARCHITECTURE OF THE ABBASID CALIPHATE

The Abbasid era has been regarded as the golden age of the Islamic civilisation. The Abbasid Caliphate saw the transfer of the seat of government from Syria to Iraq, where the authorities embarked on massive construction projects for new cities, monuments and centres of education.

Caliph Al-Mansur (754 – 775 AD) ordered the construction of the round city of Baghdad, with a mosque and palace at its centre and four equidistant boulevards leading to the major cities of Kufa, Basra, Damascus, and Herat. Baghdad soon flourished and became an intellectual centre, giving rise to institutions such as the ‘House of Wisdom’.

The reign of Caliph Haroun al Rashid (786 – 808) was marked by intellectual, artistic and architectural achievements as well as the advancement of Muslim scholarship.

Caliph al Mutawakkil (847) ordered the construction of an immense mosque at the newly established city of Samarra to stand as testimony to the grandeur of the Abbasid dynasty.

Fig. 2 Nouns Pertaining to Locations (e.g. ABA02)

Name of place or location that indicate the origin of artefact or model on display

IBN TULUN MOSQUE

Cairo, Egypt
9th century AD / 3rd century AH

The Ibn Tulun Mosque is the oldest intact and functioning mosque in Cairo. It was built by Ahmad ibn Tulun, the Abbasid governor who established the Tulunid dynasty in Egypt. The mosque, built in 876-79, is the only surviving edifice of the new royal city of al-Qata'i. Following the tradition of the hypostyle mosque, it pioneered the use of brick pillars as an alternative to columns to support the arcades and decorated them in stucco. Its minaret is modeled after the spiral minaret of Samara. The domed ablution fountain at its centre was an addition by Sultan Lajin in 1296.

Fig. 3 Nouns Pertaining to Locations (e.g. ABC17)

5. TIN COIN
Patani-Ligor, Southern Thailand
1830 AD / 1246 AH
1998.1.4615

Fig. 4 Nouns Pertaining to Locations (e.g. MWC200)

The second highest use of nouns is the ones that pertain to artefacts, which occur 4.3 times per 100 words and constitute 12% of the total noun's occurrences.

DOOR KNOCKER
Mamluk Egypt / Syria
14th or 15th Century AD / 8th or 9th century AD
2006.10.5

Fig. 5: Noun Pertaining to Artefact (e.g. AC03)

5. **NECKLACE**
Malay Peninsula
20th century AD / 14th century AH
1998.1.4253

Fig.6 Noun pertaining to artefact (e.g. MWC167)

Based on the analysis, nouns are found to be used in the following ways:

Nouns that denote place and location

Nouns that denote place and location are the most pervasive category of nouns that can be found in the museum texts (7.3 per 100 words; 20.3% of total nouns), in comparison to other nouns. While no study has been found to explicitly support why the names of places and locations are particularly significant in a museum setting, the researchers are convinced that this has to do with these names belonging to a larger category which is topic-centered. The category is Islamic history and is further discussed in the total nouns pertaining to place, artefacts, time, people and dynasties section below.

Nouns that pertain to artefacts

Nouns that pertain to artefacts are the second most pervasive category of nouns. This is related to a topic within Islamic history, which is Islamic arts. The proportion of texts dedicated to Islamic arts in the museum far outweigh the texts that are solely dedicated to historical narrative. Additionally, texts that are dedicated to artefacts also rely heavily on the use of names indicating place and time, thus increasing the use of nouns that pertain to place and time.

Edson and Dean (2013) state that people come to the museum to see the genuine object or the ‘real thing’. They believe that “[t]his is the particular domain in which museum hold undisputed sway, and is their source of uniqueness among all other public institutions” (p.147). Therefore, the high frequency of nouns relating to artefacts is linked to the setting of the museum, as a site where artefacts are displayed.

Total nouns that pertain to place, artefacts, time, people and dynasties

The above two categorisations of nouns, along with nouns pertaining to time, people and also dynasties, can be grouped together in one broad category: nouns that are centred on a particular topic, or topical nouns. Of the total nouns used in the exhibition texts, 48.5% denote topical meanings. As mentioned above, much of these have to do with the topic of history. Nouns of place, time and people are necessary elements in the telling of history, or what is called historical narrative. In particular, when the names of place and people are examined, these names are linked to Islamic historical locations and figures in the history of Islamic civilisation.

Nouns that pertain to people name the ‘participants’ in history (Eggins, Wignell & Martin, 1993) and despite the smaller number used in the texts compared to other nouns (2.6 per 100 words; 7.4% of total nouns), it forms an essential part of Islamic history. Serrel (1994) believes that museum texts tell “meaningful stories”, and “many of the stories in the museums are about people” (p.14). One of the elements of the stories is ‘characters’. Similarly, dynasties and governments are also participants in history and thus contribute as narrative elements in the exhibition texts.

Nouns of time are essential as well, particularly the use of the word ‘century’, and is always paired with the abbreviation AD (addomino) and AH (after hijrah), a common usage in historical books as well. AH especially, is a unique feature of Islamic historical narrative, which refers to the lunar calendar used by Muslims in all significant events.

Therefore, it can be said that collectively, nouns that pertain to location, people, time and artefacts are topically linked to the museum context, where these nouns provide the nouns in Islamic history and civilisation, which is a broad topic at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, while specifically, the names of people are associated with the participants in the history, and incidentally contribute to the communicative purpose of historical narrative in the museum. Artefacts are also linked to another specific topic, which is Islamic arts.

Conclusion

This study looks at the linguistic features of arts museum exhibition texts, in light of the museum context, based on the claim that language is functional, i.e. it serves specific purposes, and existing linguistic features should be interpretable based on the situational context of use. In other words, particular uses of language are there for good reasons. Linguistic features that can be found in the museum exhibition texts should be explainable from the context in which it occurs. As such, the identification of individual linguistic features of the exhibition texts becomes one of the main tasks in understanding the functional use of language in the museum. For the purpose of the present study, only one feature, which is noun is examined. Noun is studied in terms of patterns of use, including its frequency and pervasiveness in the exhibition texts. Only then the function of this linguistic feature in the museum context can be discussed, in regard to its relation to the museum context, which otherwise may not be apparent from initial observation.

Findings from the study may provide insights into the use of language in museum texts and the role they play in supporting the underlying objectives of a respective museum. This can create awareness among museum practitioners (e.g. curators) who are involved with the production of exhibition texts that the choices they make in terms of selecting linguistic items for the texts affect the museum and the audience that these texts serve. Having a larger understanding and awareness of how lexical and grammatical items function in the museum setting could also help museum practitioners in producing texts that are more reflective of the museum's aims and objectives.

Additionally, it is also hoped that the study contributes to a better understanding of the different text varieties in the study of registers. Biber and Conrad (2009, p.4) believe that proficiency with different text varieties offer many benefits, where 'receptive mastery of different text varieties increases access to information, while productive mastery increases the ability to participate in varying communities'. Museum texts is a variety that has not been explored in the field of register and thus, findings from this study can offer new insights to the field.

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