

RETHINKING STREET RENAMING: A BARTHESIAN SEMIOTIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Many studies explain the political motivations behind street renaming. However, few examine how new names become naturalized in public consciousness, as if they have always existed. This theoretical article addresses this gap by critically reviewing the literature on street renaming, from Rusu (2021) to studies published between 2022 and 2025. Political semiotics has dominated the field, but it has not fully explored the potential of Roland Barthes' semiotics. Barthes' concepts of myth and naturalization provide valuable tools to understand how meanings are formed and ideologies unconsciously accepted. Existing theories explain the reasons behind street renaming well, but they struggle to explain how new names are normalized in everyday life. This article proposes a Barthesian semiotic framework to analyze street names as signs that transform historical and political messages into everyday realities. By adopting this approach, scholars can better reveal the hidden ideological power embedded in urban naming practices.

Keywords: Street Renaming, Barthesian Semiotics, Critical Toponymy, Myth, Naturalization.

INTRODUCTION

The Street renaming is more than a mere administrative adjustment; it is a powerful tool for reshaping collective memory, consolidating political power,

and redefining public identity (Azaryahu, 1996; Alderman and Inwood, 2021). This phenomenon is also evident in Indonesia, where post-Reformasi efforts have sought

to assert new political and cultural identities (Erikha, 2021).

Rusu (2021) provides a comprehensive mapping of street renaming research. The study identifies dominant theoretical paradigms, key geographical trends, and the temporal evolution of the field. However, the analysis stops at 2021. It does not account for recent geopolitical developments, such as the derussification of urban toponyms following Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Ostash, 2023; Azaryahu, 2023). More critically, existing frameworks explain why street names change. These frameworks include political semiotics (Azaryahu, 1997, 2011; Drozdowski, 2014), conflict theory (Alderman, 2002, 2003), and governmentality (Rose-Redwood, 2008). They also include place branding (Light & Young, 2015) and linguistic landscape approaches (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). They rarely examine how these new names are internalized and naturalized by the public.

The primary unresolved issue, therefore, is the lack of micro-semiotic analysis that traces how street names, as

signs, gradually transform ideological and historical meanings into everyday realities. Current studies focus on macro-level questions of power, memory, and identity (Birnbaum, 2023; Dvořáková, 2023; Sysiö et al., 2023). However, they do not fully capture the subtle mechanisms through which ideology becomes invisible and unquestioned.

This gap limits our understanding of the processes by which street names acquire taken-for-granted legitimacy in urban life.

To address this gap, this article proposes a Barthesian semiotic framework. Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, myth, and naturalization (Barthes, 1972) provide a sharper lens to analyze not just *what* and *why* street names change, but *how* they function as ideological tools that shape public consciousness. By adopting this approach, the study aims to deepen the theoretical understanding of critical toponymy and the micro-semiotic processes underlying street renaming practices.

.METHODS

This theoretical article uses a literature review (Bowen, 2009) and comparative-theoretical analysis (Creswell and Poth, 2018) as its primary methods. Rather than collecting new primary data, the focus is on critically analyzing existing knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The research process is structured in stages. First, relevant materials are collected and analyzed. Next, theoretical gaps in street renaming studies are identified. Finally, a Barthesian semiotic approach is proposed as a solution. The analysis is reflective and ethical. It ensures that interpretations are objective and mindful of the cultural context.

The main sources consist of journal articles related to street renaming. An initial search was conducted in indexed databases, such as Scopus. This search identified 312 articles using keywords including “street renaming,” “toponymy,” “political toponymy,” “semiotics in naming,” and “Barthes and urban toponymy.” Equivalent keywords in other languages were also used. After removing duplicates, 278 articles remained. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance. Studies not related to the socio-political aspects of street renaming or lacking theoretical focus were excluded. This

process left 97 articles for full-text assessment. Finally, 65 articles met all inclusion criteria. These articles were published between 1990 and 2024. They focused on theoretical analysis or case studies and appeared in reputable journals or were published by recognized academic publishers.

The analysis is qualitative, using theoretical content analysis and a comparative approach. Studies were first classified according to their paradigms or theoretical frameworks (political, post-colonial, socio-cultural, political-economic). Comparative analysis examined the strengths, weaknesses, similarities, and differences of each study. Special attention was given to how well each approach explains motives, social impacts, and mechanisms of meaning production. From this process, key theoretical gaps were identified. Notably, there is a lack of approaches addressing the ideological mechanisms behind the naturalization of new street names. To fill this gap, this article proposes a framework based on Roland Barthes’ semiotics (Barthes, 1972). The framework emphasizes second-order signification (connotation) and myth. These concepts show how street names, as signs, produce

and legitimize ideologies until they are

accepted as natural and unquestioned.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Review of Street Renaming Research

3.1.1 Foundation from Rusu (2021): Comprehensive Mapping Up to 2021

This literature review builds on the foundation established by Rusu (2021), which through a systematic review of 121 journal articles successfully mapped the development of research on street renaming up to 2021. The study highlights temporal evolution, key geographical hotspots, and geopolitical contexts shaping the topic, identifying four main research clusters based on the relationship between historical contexts, regions, and theories used (Rusu, 2021). Specifically, Rusu identifies geographical hotspots such as Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (83 studies), as well as main geopolitical contexts including imperialism/post-colonialism, nationalism, totalitarianism/democratization, and pluralist democracy.

From a theoretical perspective, Rusu maps five dominant paradigms: political semiotics (41%, with the city as "city-text"), conflict theory (27%),

governmentality (6%), commodification/place branding (7%), and linguistic landscape (4%).

This foundation provides a comprehensive picture of "what" and "why" behind street renaming, including decolonization practices in South Africa (Dunning, 2014) and decommunization in Eastern Europe (Light, 2004). However, as identified in the introduction, Rusu (2021) is limited to data up to 2021, thus not covering recent developments following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which brought significant changes in Eastern European toponymy, particularly with the emergence of derussification themes.

Additionally, although Rusu (2021) identifies various analytical paradigms such as political semiotics, conflict theory, and governmentality, the study does not delve deeper into the weaknesses of these theories, especially in understanding the ideological mechanisms underlying street renaming at the micro-semiotic level and the process of meaning naturalization.

3.1.2 Post-Rusu Evolution and Theoretical Limitations (2022–2025)

Post-Rusu (2022–2025), the street renaming research landscape continues to evolve. Contemporary trends include decolonization, decommunization, derussification, and themes of social justice and inclusivity (Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch, 2022; Kovalov, 2022; Buchstaller et al., 2023; Ostash, 2023; Rose-Redwood et al., 2022). Street names serve not only as tributes to heroes or historical events, such as Nelson Mandela Street in South Africa (Azaryahu, 2011), but also as diplomatic signals and tools for city branding (Birnbaum, 2023; Bigon & Ben Arrous, 2021; Light & Young, 2023). These trends show the dynamic role of street renaming in shaping collective memory, political identity, and urban symbolism.

Despite this richness, persistent theoretical limitations remain. Existing frameworks—including political semiotics, conflict theory, governmentality, place branding, and linguistic landscape approaches (Azaryahu, 1997, 2011; Drozdowski, 2014; Alderman, 2002, 2003; Rose-Redwood, 2008; Light & Young, 2015; Landry & Bourhis, 1997)—effectively explain *why* street names change. Recent

approaches, such as critical toponymy, social memory theory, symbolic capital, performative action, and cultural geography (Birnbaum, 2023; Dvořáková, 2023; Gnatiuk & Melnychuk, 2023; Sysiö et al., 2023; Kalutskov, 2023), add conceptual variations but do not expand the analytical scope significantly.

Theoretical gaps are evident in three areas. First, most studies focus on macro-level questions of power, memory, and identity, without exploring *how* names become internalized in public consciousness. Second, new studies often deepen existing theories rather than offering fresh paradigms, with repetitive use of methods and objects that reaffirm rather than challenge prior findings. Third, the micro-semiotic process of ideological naturalization remains largely unexplored.

Having identified these limitations, the next section introduces a Barthesian semiotic framework to analyze how street names, as signs, transform historical and political messages into everyday realities that appear natural and unquestioned.

3.1.3 Argument for Integrating the Barthesian Semiotic Framework

The gap in analytical approaches to street naming studies provides a compelling reason to introduce a new theoretical framework (Rusu, 2021). Many of the current themes—such as derussification, decommunization (Kovalov, 2022; Ostash, 2023; Azaryahu, 2023), gender equality (Rose-Redwood et al., 2022), and city branding (Light & Young, 2023; Vuolteenaho & Berg, 2022)—all involve the process of replacing old symbols (street names) with new ones. The ultimate goal is for the meanings attached to these new names—like "national unity," "progress," and "inclusion"—to be accepted as unquestioned truths, rather than as ideological constructs.

This is where Roland Barthes' semiotic framework proves to be especially valuable (Barthes, 1972). While existing theories have effectively demonstrated that street names are ideological (Azaryahu, 1997; Drozdewski, 2014), Barthes' concept of second-level signification—specifically, the processes of myth and naturalization—offers more precise analytical tools to unpack this transformation in greater depth. For example, the political semiotics approach might identify Jalan Jenderal Soedirman

as a symbol of nationalism (Azaryahu, 2023). However, a Barthesian analysis would trace the meaning shift of this name: from its initial denotative meaning (a street named after General Soedirman) to its connotative meanings (such as 'patriotism,' 'resistance,' and 'sovereignty'). Over time, with repeated use and institutional endorsement, the name becomes a myth—that is, its ideological function, in supporting a particular national narrative, becomes naturalized and invisible, no longer questioned by society (Barthes, 1972).

Therefore, the proposed integration of Barthes' framework does not replace the qualitative methods and case study approaches that remain central to street renaming studies (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Instead, it provides a more integrated and robust conceptual toolkit (Barthes, 1972). This framework can be systematically applied across various case studies—ranging from Ukraine (Kovalov, 2022; Ostash, 2023; Azaryahu, 2023), South Africa (Dunning, 2014), to Indonesia (Erikha, 2021)—enabling a more structured and detailed comparison of how street names, as toponyms, become myths. Beyond street names, Barthes' framework can also be

applied to the study of other types of toponyms, such as administrative area names, building names, or even park names.

3.1.4 Conclusion of the Review Discussion

From the discussion above, it is clear that street renaming remains a dynamic and evolving field of study, with emerging themes and ongoing theoretical development. However, signs of theoretical limitations are also apparent—specifically, the existing dominant paradigms appear insufficient in fully addressing the core process of ideological naturalization in street naming practices. This suggests that while much progress has been made, the field has reached a point where deeper theoretical refinement is necessary.

Thus, this literature review serves not only as an update to Rusu's (2021) comprehensive mapping but also as a call for the theoretical evolution of street renaming studies. The introduction of the Barthesian semiotic framework in this article represents a logical and essential next step, one that is expected to sharpen analytical tools and deepen the theoretical understanding of critical toponymy in future research.

3.2 Analysis of Street Renaming with Barthesian Semiotics: Concepts and Application

3.2.1 Conceptual Foundation of Roland Barthes' Semiotics

This analysis of street renaming is built on Roland Barthes' two-level signification model, which allows us to unpack meaning beyond simple denotation (Barthes, 1972). The core concepts for this analysis are first-level signification (denotation and connotation), second-level signification (myth), and the process of naturalization.

At the first level, denotation refers to the direct or literal meaning of a sign. In the case of street renaming, this would be the practical function of a street name as a locator. For instance, *Jalan Merdeka*, at its most basic, simply refers to a road named "Merdeka." Connotation, on the other hand, refers to the secondary, cultural, and ideological meanings that are attached to that name. The name *Jalan Merdeka* does not just point to a street, but evokes deeper associations like 'freedom,' 'struggle,' and 'nationalism.' These connotations become a space where various ideologies and values compete for legitimacy.

Moving to the second level, myth is a concept Barthes defines as a communication system that transforms history, conflict, and struggle into something that feels natural or inherent (Barthes, 1972). Myth doesn't replace connotative meaning; rather, it refines it, making it appear innocent and providing it with a sense of natural justification. In the context of street renaming, mythologization happens when the connotative meaning of a name (like *Jalan Revolusi*) is repeated through various channels—such as street signs, maps, media, and daily conversation. Over time, this repetition causes the name to be accepted as a "taken-for-granted" truth, as though the meaning it carries is something natural and unquestioned.

Finally, naturalization is the end goal of myth. This process refers to how the ideological power behind a sign becomes invisible, making it appear "reasonable" and beyond question. A street name is fully naturalized when society no longer feels the need to ask why that particular name was chosen or who benefits from it. In this way, naturalization makes the sign seem as though it has no history or political context attached to it (Barthes, 1972).

3.2.2 Connection of Barthes' Concepts with the Street Renaming Phenomenon

Roland Barthes' concepts offer a powerful lens for understanding the street renaming phenomenon. Street renaming, at its core, is not just about replacing labels; it is a process of signification, imbued with ideological meanings, designed to make new names feel naturalized—that is, accepted as unquestionable parts of reality. Barthes provides valuable analytical tools to show that street renaming is more than an administrative change; it is, in fact, a process of myth-making tied to political identity, national history, and collective memory (Barthes, 1972).

When a new regime renames a street, they are doing more than just changing a sign or putting a new label on a public space. They are actively shaping myths (narratives that aim to construct national identity and legitimize political power). For example, renaming a street from *Jalan Penjajah X* (Colonial Street) to *Jalan Pahlawan Y* (Hero Street) serves as a strategy to rewrite history, turning a narrative that once celebrated colonial dominance into one that focuses on independence and national struggle. The new name, over time, evolves beyond a

simple label to become an accepted "fact" within the urban landscape. This process subtly erases more complex historical realities and reconfigures them into something easier for society to accept as part of its shared identity.

At a deeper level, street renaming unfolds in stages of signification (denotation, connotation, and myth). Denotation is the basic, literal meaning of the sign, like when a new street name is announced and displayed on a sign ("This is Jalan Z"). At this stage, the name serves purely as an informational label. However, the connotation level brings additional layers of meaning. A new street name carries values, ideologies, and memories that those in power wish to promote. For instance, the name could symbolize heroism, the spirit of reform, or certain religious values that the state seeks to preserve and spread. These connotative meanings are more abstract and subjective, reflecting the ideals and agendas behind the name change (Barthes, 1972).

Through repetition and reinforcement by state institutions and other social mechanisms, the connotative values begin to take root and are accepted as truths. Eventually, *Jalan Z* ceases to be seen as a political decision subject to

debate; it becomes part of the city's and the nation's identity, internalized by the public. This process makes what was once a contentious issue—the reason behind the name change—appear natural and inevitable. Over time, the ideological motives behind the renaming become obscured, and the new name is integrated into a stable social structure, no longer questioned (Barthes, 1972).

From this perspective, street renaming is not simply about changing geographic or administrative identities. It is, in essence, an ideological struggle where those in power seek to redefine the meaning of public space and shape collective memory in ways that support their political agenda. Barthes' framework, with its focus on how signs construct myths, provides a sharper understanding of *how* this transformation happens and how ideology becomes embedded in social structures through seemingly simple symbols—symbols that, over time, have profound and far-reaching effects.

3.2.3 Operational Steps for Street Renaming Analysis with Barthesian Semiotics

To analyze the phenomenon of street renaming through Roland Barthes'

semiotic lens, the following structured steps can guide the process. These steps are designed to dive deeper into the ideological meanings behind the name change and to understand how street names, as signs, help shape broader social and political realities.

3.2.3.1 Identification and Description of the Sign (New Street Name)

The first step is to identify and describe the sign, which in this case is the new street name. Researchers should collect data on both the old and new street names and explore the historical and political context behind the change. This involves considering factors like when the name change occurred, who initiated it, and the political or social situation that influenced the decision. For example, did the name change follow a significant event, such as a change in regime or a political upheaval? This step is essential for understanding the temporal and political dimensions that influence the renaming process.

3.2.3.2 Denotative Level Analysis

Once the sign is identified, the next step is to examine its denotative level, which refers to the literal meaning of the new name. Researchers should ask:

what is the direct, factual meaning of this new name? For instance, if the new street name is *Jalan A. Yani*, denotatively, it refers to a street named after General A. Yani. This stage focuses on the name's surface meaning, without delving into the deeper, ideological meanings that might lie beneath.

3.2.3.3 Connotative Level Analysis

The next step is to analyze the connotative level of the name change—looking at the values, ideologies, and emotions that the new name evokes. Researchers should investigate who is promoting these meanings and in what social or political context these meanings are being spread. The name may represent certain values, such as nationalism, heroism, or a particular political ideology. It is also crucial to understand the historical narrative or collective memory that the new name seeks to construct. To enhance the analysis, tools such as discourse analysis of official documents, media coverage, and public statements made during the renaming process can help identify the messages intended to be conveyed (Barthes, 1972).

3.2.3.4 Myth Formation Analysis and Naturalization Process

An important step in the analysis is to explore how the myth surrounding the new name is formed and the accompanying process of naturalization. According to Barthes (1972), myth is created through the repetition of connotative meanings until they are widely accepted as dominant in society. This involves examining how the media, educational systems, and everyday practices (such as using the new street name in daily life or in address forms) play a role in reinforcing the myth. The naturalization process refers to how the new name gradually becomes accepted without significant resistance or criticism. Researchers must evaluate whether the myth created by the new name has been fully embraced by society or whether there are still groups resisting the change. Resistance could suggest that the naturalization process is not yet complete, and the name may still be a subject of debate (Barthes, 1972).

3.2.3.5 Impact of Naturalization

The final step is to assess the impact of the naturalization of the new street name. What are the consequences of accepting the myth formed through the

renaming? Does it consolidate certain political power or ideology? Does it obscure other historical narratives or memories, or does it help forge new collective identities for the city or country? Understanding the impact of naturalization provides deeper insight into how street renaming can be a powerful ideological tool in shaping how society perceives space, history, and identity. By critically analyzing this process, researchers can gain a better understanding of how street renaming not only reflects but also actively shapes social and political structures.

By following these operational steps, the analysis of the street renaming phenomenon will not only answer the "what" and "why" behind the name change, but also uncover "how" the change functions as an ideological force, quietly shaping our perceptions of space, history, and identity. The Barthesian framework provides the right tools for dissecting the underlying mechanisms of meaning production in toponymy, including street names. This approach fills the theoretical gaps previously identified and offers new insights into how signs in urban naming landscapes can have profound ideological impacts.

3.2.4 Example of Barthesian Semiotic Analysis Application to Street Renaming Case

The following example demonstrates how Barthesian semiotics can be applied to the street renaming phenomenon, using the case of the name change from *Jalan Nangka* to *Jalan Tuanku Tambusai* in Pekanbaru, Riau. Tuanku Tambusai is a local hero known for his resistance against Dutch colonization. This renaming illustrates how a street name can carry profound ideological weight, particularly within local and national historical contexts, and how such naming practices can be strategically used to reinforce certain political narratives.

1) Context and Sign Identification

This street renaming took place within a context of honoring local heroes and reinforcing local identity within the broader framework of the Indonesian national narrative. The old name, *Jalan Nangka*, was a more generic, neutral designation with no strong historical or cultural associations. In contrast, the new name, *Jalan Tuanku Tambusai*, was chosen to honor a local hero who fought against Dutch colonization, particularly in the Riau region. By changing the name, the Pekanbaru City Government not only altered the geographical identity

of the street but also transformed the symbolic landscape, strengthening the discourse of independence, struggle, and local nationalism.

2) Denotative Level Analysis

At the denotative level, the new name literally refers to a street in Pekanbaru. The signifier here is the nameplate bearing the words *Jalan Tuanku Tambusai*. The name simply identifies a physical road that leads to downtown Pekanbaru and connects major roads like *Jalan Air Hitam*, *Jalan S.M. Amin*, and *Jalan Soekarno-Hatta*. This denotation is functional and informational—it tells us that the road is now named after a local hero. It provides the basic, practical identification of the street without delving into any deeper meanings.

3) Connotative Level Analysis

At the connotative level, however, the name *Tuanku Tambusai* carries much deeper and more complex meanings. The name reflects ideological values that the government seeks to promote, including heroism, resistance to colonization, local identity, and a connection to the broader narrative of Indonesian independence. For example, *Tuanku Tambusai* symbolizes heroism and resistance against Dutch colonial rule, linking the street to the ideals of independence and

nationalism. The name also reinforces local identity, as Tuanku Tambusai is a highly respected figure in Riau. By naming a street after him, the city acknowledges the local pride in his courage and struggles. Additionally, the name connects to the larger Indonesian independence narrative, bridging local heroism with national unity and the fight against colonialism. In this way, the name transcends mere identification, becoming a powerful symbol of resistance and national solidarity (Barthes, 1972).

4) Myth and Naturalization Analysis

This name change does not stop at giving a new name; it involves a process of mythologization and naturalization, where the ideological meanings associated with the name become deeply ingrained in society.

Myth Formation

The myth related to the new name is formed through various stages. The first process is institutional repetition, where the name *Jalan Tuanku Tambusai* begins to be installed on direction signs, city maps, and official administrative documents. This helps the name to become an integral part of the city's identity. Media coverage also plays a

significant role in reinforcing this myth by highlighting stories of Tuanku Tambusai's resistance and his importance in the independence struggle. Over time, the name is increasingly used in everyday conversation: *Let's meet at Tuanku Tambusai*. This informal usage helps solidify the name as part of daily life and strengthens the myth-making process.

Naturalization

Over time, the name *Jalan Tuanku Tambusai* successfully undergoes the naturalization process. This name is now accepted as is in society conversations, and young generations who do not know the historical context of its selection use it without question. This naturalization process shows that the built myth has been accepted as part of unquestioned social reality. Although there are groups that initially felt this change erased old cultural aspects, that resistance increasingly disappears over time, and the new name is now widely accepted by society.

5) Resistance and Meaning Contestation

However, not all parties accept this name change without question. A small portion of society still feels comfortable with the old name, *Jalan Nangka*, which

is considered more neutral and not tied to specific historical figures. These groups still prefer to call it by the old name, indicating disagreement with the occurring naturalization process. This shows broader meaning contestation, related to how society accepts or rejects the historical narrative implanted through street name changes.

6) Ideological Implications

This name change carries several significant ideological implications. One key impact is the shift in historical narrative. It symbolically redirects the focus from Dutch colonization to narratives of independence and local resistance, reinforcing nationalism and strengthening local identity. Another important effect is the consolidation of local identity. By honoring Tuanku Tambusai, the new name becomes a symbol of resistance and pride for the people of Pekanbaru and Riau, enhancing their cultural identity within the broader framework of Indonesian nationalism. This emphasizes the importance of local history in shaping the national identity. However, this change also obscures historical conflicts. Like many other instances of street renaming, it downplays broader societal debates about

how national and local histories should be interpreted. While the name promotes positive values of heroism, it simultaneously oversimplifies historical complexities that remain relevant for some communities.

7) Methodological Reflection

The above analysis example shows how the Barthesian framework is able to deconstruct layers of meaning by tracing from literal to ideological meanings. In addition, the Barthesian framework is also able to reveal power processes, namely by showing how power works through marking practices. The Barthesian framework is also able to analyze the success/failure of naturalization (mapping resistance and acceptance in society).

This application proves that Barthesian semiotics is not only a powerful analytical tool, but also an operational framework for researching representation politics in urban naming landscapes. With this example, the superiority of the Barthesian approach becomes evident: it is able to capture the complexity of street renaming as a living, dynamic, and interest-laden meaning production process, not merely administrative policy (Barthes, 1972).

CONCLUSIONS

Existing frameworks explain why street renaming occurs. However, they remain limited in explaining how new names become naturalized in everyday life. Approaches such as political semiotics, conflict theory, and governmentality reveal actors, motivations, and socio-political contexts. Yet, they overlook the micro-semiotic processes that make names appear self-evident.

This study introduces a **Barthesian Semiotic Framework**. Using denotation, connotation, myth, and naturalization, it traces how street names transform

historical and political narratives into “myths” that seem natural and unquestioned. The framework complements existing approaches. It provides a nuanced lens for analyzing the politics of urban signs.

Future research can apply this framework to empirical case studies. It can also guide comparative urban analyses or discourse analyses of street names. Such studies can examine how ideological meanings are produced, internalized, and normalized across contexts..

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