



## Image Representation in Supporting Students' Vocabulary Comprehension in Textbooks: A Roland Barthes Semiotic Analysis

Hilmalia Asyifa<sup>1</sup>, Syihabuddin<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

\* Penulis Korespondensi: [syihabuddin@upi.edu](mailto:syihabuddin@upi.edu)

### ABSTRACT

Vocabulary mastery is important for developing students' Arabic language skills at the MTs level. Images in textbooks can help students understand vocabulary by connecting it to real life situations. However, images are often merely supplementary, leading to their educational value being overlooked. This study aims to analyze the appropriateness of images and their meanings, using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, to support students' vocabulary comprehension. This study uses a qualitative approach, employing content analysis and purposive sampling techniques with images from the 2020 Ministry of Religious Affairs-published Arabic textbook for eighth-grade MTs students. Data were collected through document analysis, open ended questionnaires administered to eighth-grade students at MTsS Al-Musyawah Lembang, and interviews with teachers. The results show that the images in the textbook generally correspond to students' daily lives. However, Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis identified several issues, such as gender stereotypes, gender bias in grammar, and cultural localization. These issues create a psychological effect known as the "superiority of images," meaning students trust images more than the accompanying Arabic text. Therefore, the images need to be periodically revised to prevent long term memory errors among students. Teachers also need to play an active role in correcting students' understanding in the classroom.

**Keywords:** Image, Vocabulary, Arabic Textbooks, Roland Barthes's Semiotics.

### ABSTRAK

Penguasaan kosakata sangat penting untuk mengembangkan keterampilan bahasa Arab siswa di tingkat MTs. Gambar dalam buku teks dapat membantu siswa memahami kosakata dengan menghubungkannya dengan situasi nyata. Akan tetapi, gambar sering kali hanya menjadi pelengkap sehingga nilai edukatifnya terabaikan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kesesuaian gambar dan maknanya menggunakan teori semiotika Roland Barthes guna mendukung pemahaman kosakata siswa. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, dengan desain analisis isi dan teknik *purposive sampling* pada gambar yang menjadi data dalam buku Bahasa Arab MTs kelas VIII terbitan Kemenag tahun 2020. Data dikumpulkan melalui studi dokumentasi, angket terbuka untuk siswa kelas VIII MTsS Al-Musyawah Lembang, serta wawancara dengan guru. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa gambar dalam buku umumnya sudah sesuai dengan kehidupan siswa. Namun, analisis semiotika Roland Barthes menemukan beberapa masalah seperti stereotip gender, bias gender dalam gramatika, dan lokalisasi budaya. Masalah ini menimbulkan efek psikologis berupa superioritas gambar, yaitu siswa lebih mempercayai gambar daripada teks bahasa Arab yang tercantum. Oleh karena itu, gambar perlu diperbaiki secara berkala untuk mencegah kesalahan memori jangka panjang pada siswa. Guru juga perlu berperan aktif dalam meluruskan pemahaman siswa di kelas.

**Kata Kunci:** Gambar, Kosakata, Buku Teks Bahasa Arab, Semiotika Roland Barthes.

## ملخص

إن إتقان المفردات أمر بالغ الأهمية لتنمية مهارات اللغة العربية لدى الطلاب في المدرسة الثانوية (MTs). يمكن أن تساعد الصور في الكتاب المدرسي الطلاب على فهم المفردات من خلال ربطها بمواقف واقعية. ومع ذلك، غالبًا ما تكون الصور مجرد عنصر تكميلي، مما يؤدي إلى إهمال قيمتها التعليمية. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل تمثيل الصور ومعانيها باستخدام نظرية السيميائية لرولان بارت لدعم فهم الطلاب للمفردات. استخدمت هذه الدراسة نهجًا نوعيًا، مع تصميم تحليل المحتوى وتقنية العينة الهادفة على الصور التي تشكل البيانات في كتاب اللغة العربية للصف الثامن بالمدرسة الثانوية (MTs) الصادر عن وزارة الشؤون الدينية بجمهورية إندونيسيا (Kemenag RI) عام ٢٠٢٠. تم جمع البيانات من خلال دراسة الوثائق، واستبيان مفتوح للطلاب في الصف الثامن بمدرسة ثانوية المشاورات ليمبانغ (MTsS Al-Musyawah) (Lembang)، بالإضافة إلى المقابلة مع معلم المادة. أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن الصور في الكتاب تتوافق عمومًا مع حياة الطلاب. ومع ذلك، كشف تحليل السيميائية لرولان بارت عن بعض المشكلات مثل الصور النمطية للجنسين، والتحيز الجنساني في القواعد النحوية، وتوطين الثقافة. وتؤدي هذه المشكلات إلى تأثير نفسي يتمثل في تفوق الصورة، أي أن الطلاب يتقنون بالصور أكثر من النصوص العربية الواردة. ولذلك، يجب تحسين الصور بشكل دوري لمنع حدوث أخطاء في الذاكرة طويلة المدى لدى الطلاب. كما يجب على المعلمين أن يلعبوا دورًا نشطًا في تصحيح فهم الطلاب في الفصل.

**الكلمات الرئيسية:** الصور، المفردات، كتاب اللغة العربية، السيميائية لرولان بارت.

Received: 08-06-2026  
date

Revised: 18-06-2026  
date

Accepted: 26-06-2026  
date

Published: 29-06-2026  
Date

**Citation (APA Style):** Asyifa, H., & Syihabuddin. (2026). Image representation in supporting students' vocabulary comprehension in textbooks: A Roland Barthes semiotic analysis. *EL-IBTIKAR: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab*, 15(1), 221–236. <https://doi.org/10.24235/exxge103>

## INTRODUCTION

Arabic is one of the core subjects in madrasahs, aimed at developing basic language competencies, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Kholis & Mustofa, 2024; Huda et al., 2023). Arabic is one of the foreign languages studied in Indonesia, particularly in Islamic educational institutions, including at the MTs (Madrasah Tsanawiyah) level (Sodiq & Alindah, 2024). Therefore, Arabic language instruction must be comprehensively designed to ensure the material is presented optimally.

One of the fundamental aspects of Arabic language learning is vocabulary mastery (Saadataen et al., 2025). Vocabulary mastery plays a crucial role in Arabic language learning because it serves as the foundation for developing the four language skills (Saadataen et al., 2025; Hanifansyah & Mahmudah, 2024; Kiswanto et al., 2023). To make learning more meaningful, vocabulary should be presented in real-life contexts to align with everyday usage (Hasnah et al., 2024). In this regard, images in textbooks serve as cognitive aids. Images also make Arabic vocabulary easier to understand by transforming it into a visual form (Andriani et al., 2025).

In developing language skills, Arabic textbooks at the MTs level not only include reading passages but also include images. The function of images is not only to clarify the text's content but also to help connect it to real-world contexts (Rehman et al., 2022). The relationship between images and text is complementary in conveying meaning (Rehman et al., 2022).

Therefore, images can also convey cultural, social, or ideological messages (Derakhshan, 2024). Thus, textbooks not only develop language skills but also contain implicit values.

Previous studies have examined the relationship between images and text using various approaches. Safari & Pourhashemi (2022) investigated the relationship between images and text in English textbooks using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics. The study revealed a rigid relationship that focused solely on dictionary meanings, resulting in students being guided in a one-directional manner and hindering their ability to understand global culture. Irandoost & Bashiri (2022) examined images and text in junior high school-level Arabic textbooks using the theories of Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott and found that the most dominant relationship was symmetry, resulting in a lack of variety in the images presented in these textbooks. A subsequent study conducted by Widyanti & Muta'ali (2022) focused more on the alignment between images and text in the *Baina Yadaik* textbook using Kress and van Leeuwen's theory. The results showed that some images were not well-aligned with their corresponding text.

Although previous studies have examined the relationship between images and text, there is still room for deeper analysis. These studies generally examine the alignment and relationship between images and text in foreign language textbooks through literature reviews or by analyzing visual-verbal cues that align with international curricula. The approaches in previous research have not yet revealed how national textbooks published by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag RI), which are rich in local context, also contain layers of myth, such as gender bias and cultural localization in their visuals.

The novelty of this study lies in the integration of Roland Barthes's semiotic theory with empirical student data collected in the field. Unlike previous studies conducted by Safari & Pourhashemi (2022), Irandoost & Bashiri (2022), and Widyanti & Muta'ali (2022), which focused solely on literature reviews or theoretical evaluations of visual content, this study incorporates the actual perceptions of users, namely students in the classroom. Through this integrative approach, the study not only critically examines the textbook's content from a textual perspective but also identifies the actual impact on student learning when there is a mismatch between textual and visual cues, which ultimately leads to the psychological phenomenon of "image superiority." Therefore, this research is crucial to provide a new, more practical direction for the design of visual materials in Arabic textbooks in Indonesia.

Ideally, images should be aligned with vocabulary to aid student comprehension. However, preliminary observations of the 2020 Ministry of Religious Affairs-published Arabic textbook for 8th-grade MTs students revealed issues with the presentation of images. Some images serve merely as supplements, even though they actually carry deeper meanings. This aligns with the results of an interview with an Arabic language teacher at MTsS Al-Musyawah Lembang, who stated that several images are not well aligned with the vocabulary (Interview, May 13, 2026). If the meanings of the images are not analyzed further, students will only understand them literally, without grasping the values they contain.

Roland Barthes classifies meaning into three levels: denotative meaning to understand the literal meaning; connotative meaning to understand cultural meaning through associations; and mythical meaning to understand the ideology or grand narrative behind the sign (Ahmad Saputra & Ulil Albab, 2024). Barthes explains that myths are produced by a second order semiological system that works by transforming historical meaning into something that appears natural (Barthes, 1972). With these three layers of meaning, the analysis can demonstrate how images function as a system of signs that represent the lexical meanings in the textbook in greater depth.

The 8th-grade Arabic textbook for MTs, published by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs in 2020, was selected because it is an official national textbook compiled in accordance with Ministerial Decree No. 183 of 2019 and is widely used in madrasahs (Cahyani et al., 2023). The selection of eighth grade was based on the consideration that seventh and eighth grades contain a greater number of vocabulary images compared to ninth grade, whose visuals are more focused on the narrative of each chapter. In addition, eighth-grade students possess the appropriate level of cognitive maturity to be involved in field-based perceptual analysis. This textbook is highly relevant for further analysis to understand how the meanings of vocabulary words are constructed and represented through these images.

Based on the background described above, this study was conducted to analyze the representation of images in the vocabulary material of the 8th-grade MTs Arabic textbook using Roland Barthes's theory of semiotics. This study was designed to answer three main questions, namely: (1) What is the level of correspondence between the images and the vocabulary in the 8th-grade MTs Arabic textbook published by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs in 2020?; (2) How is meaning constructed at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth according to Roland Barthes's semiotics in the selected images in the textbook?; (3) How relevant are these image representations to students' vocabulary comprehension process?

## **METHOD**

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a content analysis design. This approach was chosen to provide an in-depth description of the image representations in the textbook and to analyze the meanings constructed within them (Nurhayati et al., 2023). Data collection techniques included document analysis, interviews, and the distribution of open-ended questionnaires.

The research data were sourced from the 8th-grade MTs Arabic textbook published by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag RI) in 2020, in accordance with Ministerial Decree (KMA) No. 183 of 2019. The data collected consisted of images and their accompanying text in the vocabulary sections. The following table details the total number of images in each chapter:

**Table 1. Image Data in the MTs Grade VIII Arabic Language Textbook**

<b>No</b>	<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number of Images</b>
1	الدرس الأول	الساعة	19
2	الدرس الثاني	يومياتنا	9
3	الدرس الثالث	الهواية	10
4	الدرس الرابع	الرياضة	12
5	الدرس الخامس	المهنة	20
6	الدرس السادس	عيادة المريض	12
<b>Total</b>			<b>82</b>

Data collection was conducted using purposive sampling. As explained by Rasyid, F (2022), this technique involves selecting specific data deemed rich in information and representative of the research objectives. Therefore, the following criteria for image selection were established: (1) images directly associated with the vocabulary text, (2) images with high sign complexity, such as the presence of interactions between subjects, objects, or cultural symbols, and (3) images representing variations in the degree of image appropriateness. Based on these considerations, 10 images representing the six chapters were selected for further semiotic analysis.

To ensure data validity, this study employed source triangulation by comparing three primary data sources: textbook images, results from in-depth interviews with an Arabic-language teacher, and an open-ended questionnaire distributed to 25 eighth-grade students in Class VIII-C at MTsS Al-Musyawahrah Lembang. The questions in the open-ended questionnaire focused on students' perceptions of visual clarity, with examples such as: "Does this image help you understand the meaning of vocabulary without having to look up a dictionary? Explain why." Before use, the questionnaire and interview guidelines underwent a review and expert validation process to ensure alignment with the study's objectives.

The analysis involved comparing the researcher's semiotic findings with teachers' and students' perceptions of image clarity. If discrepancies were found between the results of the semiotic analysis and student perceptions, the data were re-examined through teacher confirmation and linked to cognitive theory to identify the reasons behind these differences.

Data from teachers and students were used to determine the extent to which the images accurately support students' vocabulary comprehension. However, this study has limitations because the sample included only one class at a school in the Lembang area of West Java; therefore, the results may not necessarily reflect the diversity of this textbook's use nationwide.

The data analysis techniques in this study are divided into two stages, namely:

#### 1. Assessment of the alignment between images and vocabulary

This stage aims to determine the extent to which the overall image data can support students' literal understanding of vocabulary. The analysis was conducted by classifying images according to the characteristics and principles of communicative visual media proposed by Rahadi (in Hasan et al., 2021), namely: (1) accurate, if the image is correct and consistent with the intended purpose; (2) legitimate (logical), where the images presented must be reasonable and make sense; (3) simple, where the images are not excessive that is, they do not contain many additional elements.

Based on this theory, the images were classified into four categories of suitability, namely: (1) Highly suitable (meets all three criteria); (2) Suitable (meets the accuracy and logical criteria); (3) Less suitable (meets only one main criterion); (4) Unsuitable (does not meet either the accuracy or logical criteria).

After a comprehensive analysis of the images' appropriateness, 10 selected images were further analyzed. At this stage, the results of the previous theoretical review were compared with students' perceptions as gathered through questionnaires and in-depth interviews with teachers. This process aimed to validate the accuracy of the images' message delivery based on user perceptions.

#### 2. Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis

The second stage involves analyzing the selected images using Roland Barthes's semiotics. According to Barthes, meaning is constructed through a multi-layered system of signs, so it does not stop at the literal meaning. Therefore, the visual representations are analyzed in three stages. First, we define the unit of analysis as the physical signifiers present in the images,

including characters, supporting objects, settings, colors, and their interactions with the text in the textbook. Second, applying a meaning coding guide to uncover the signified through three levels, namely: (1) denotation, to objectively identify physical elements and literal meanings (Barthes, 1968), (2) connotation, to uncover implied messages or cultural meanings arising from the interaction between images and text that refer to a second level system of meaning (Barthes, 1968), (3) myth, to map how these connotative signs undergo naturalization into a value that appears natural to students (Barthes, 1972). Third, to avoid researcher bias and subjective interpretation, the researcher’s initial findings from the semiotic analysis were confirmed and cross referenced with data on teachers’ perceptions, student survey results, and the principles of Dual-Coding Theory and the Picture Superiority Effect to arrive at a conclusion that can be scientifically verified.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Result

After conducting an analysis using criteria adapted from the characteristics and principles of communicative visual media proposed by Rahadi (in Hasan et al., 2021), the data consisting of 82 images were classified into the following four categories:

**Table 2. Data on the Alignment of Images and Text in the 8th Grade MTs Arabic Textbook**

No	Chapter	Theme	Number of Images	Highly suitable	Suitable	Less suitable	Unsuitable
1	الدرس الأول	الساعة	19	16	3	-	-
2	الدرس الثاني	يومياتنا	9	-	6	2	1
3	الدرس الثالث	الهواية	10	4	6	-	-
4	الدرس الرابع	الرياضة	12	2	8	1	1
5	الدرس الخامس	المهنة	20	3	16	1	-
6	الدرس السادس	عيادة المريض	12	-	4	3	5
<b>Total</b>			82	25	43	7	7

In the table above, it can be seen that most of the images fall into the “suitable” category, totaling 43 images. The majority of the images come from Chapter 5, which focuses on professions (*Al-Mihnah*). However, all chapters contain images that fall into this category. The reason for this categorization is that these images contain additional elements, such as backgrounds and other attributes that complement the main subject. Consequently, these images do not meet the “simple” criterion, which is the primary requirement for the “highly suitable” category.

In second place, 25 images fall into the “highly suitable” category. The majority of these images come from Chapter 1, which covers clocks (*as-sā‘ah*). The visuals depicted are mostly

analog and digital clocks, which are unlikely to cause any ambiguity for readers. The key criterion for this category is simplicity. Thus, the images in this category contain few elements, allowing the focus to remain directly on the object referred to in the vocabulary. Aside from Chapter 1, images in this category can be found in all chapters except Chapter 2 (*yaumiyyātunā*) and Chapter 6 (*‘iyādatu al-marīd*), as the images in those chapters were deemed more complex compared to those in other chapters.

Furthermore, the “less suitable” and “unsuitable” categories contain the same number of images, 7 each. These two categories share another similarity: the majority of the images come from Chapter 6, namely, visiting the sick (*‘iyādatu al-marīd*). Images in the “less suitable” category are sometimes logical but not entirely accurate, or vice versa. An example in this category is the image of a journalist (*ṣaḥāfiy*) in Chapter 5, which depicts a man holding a camera and carrying a shoulder bag. This image is considered less appropriate because, at first glance, it looks more like a photographer (*muṣawwir*). Logically, journalists do carry cameras, but the image is inaccurate because it lacks specific identifying features such as an ID card or a vest marked “press”.


In the “unsuitable” category, the images fail to meet two main criteria: accuracy and logical consistency. Some examples include the illustration for the vocabulary term *al-kārātīh* in Chapter 4, which is depicted as the martial art of pencak silat. Additionally, in Chapter 6, there is an image of a man visiting a sick person, yet the accompanying text uses a feminine pronoun. Therefore, the images presented do not correspond to the listed vocabulary terms.






**Discussion**





**Analysis of Meaning at the Denotative and Connotative Levels of the Images**

Analysis of Meaning at the Denotative and Connotative Levels of the Images  
 The next step is to analyze all the images. Ten selected images were analyzed further based on their denotative and connotative meanings. At this stage, the analysis results were directly compared with student perception data to validate the accuracy of the images’ message delivery from the users’ perspective in the classroom. Based on the distribution of an open ended questionnaire to eighth grade students in Class VIII-C at MTsS Al-Musyawahrah Lembang, the following data on image vocabulary alignment were obtained:

**Table 3. Data on Image and Vocabulary Alignment According to the Students' Perspective**

No	Image Code	Image and Vocabulary	Highly suitable	Suitable	Less suitable	Unsuitable
1	P1	 الساعة الواحدة نهارا (The analog wall clock shows 1:00 p.m.)	13 students (52%)	12 students (48%)	-	-

2	P2	 <p>(A group of students wearing black pencak silat uniforms and green belts, in a ready to defend themselves stance)</p>	16 students (64%)	4 students (16%)	2 students (8%)	3 students (12%)
3	P3	 <p>(A female nurse wearing a white headscarf is holding a medical chart and a stethoscope)</p>	11 students (44%)	9 students (36%)	5 students (20%)	-
4	P4	 <p>(A boy is standing holding a bouquet of flowers next to his friend's bed, who is lying there sick)</p>	9 students (36%)	9 students (36%)	6 students (24%)	1 student (4%)
5	P5	 <p>(A man is kneeling on one knee, holding a camera and taking a photo)</p>	10 students (40%)	11 students (44%)	3 students (12%)	1 student (4%)
6	P6	 <p>(A boy wearing a protective helmet is swinging a baseball bat at a ball)</p>	8 students (32%)	8 students (32%)	8 students (32%)	1 student (4%)

7	P7	 <p>(A male doctor wearing a white coat and a stethoscope while holding a notepad)</p>	9 students (36%)	9 students (36%)	3 students (12%)	4 students (16%)
8	P8	 <p>(Two men standing side by side to illustrate the physical differences between a thin and an overweight body)</p>	17 students (68%)	4 students (16%)	4 students (16%)	-
9	P9	 <p>(A male journalist wearing a backwards cap and a shoulder bag is aiming a camera with a long lens)</p>	6 students (24%)	9 students (36%)	10 students (40%)	-
10	P10	 <p>(A female teacher wearing a headscarf is using a pointer in front of a projection screen)</p>	8 students (32%)	10 students (40%)	7 students (28%)	-

Based on the table above, students overall responded positively to the image representations, though there are some points to note. At the levels of denotation and connotation, some images successfully provided optimal support for students' understanding. Examples include the vocabulary terms "clock" (*as-sā'ah*) (P1), "doctor" (*tabīb*) (P7), and "teacher" (*mu'allimah*) (P10).

Denotatively, these images depict accurate objects and attributes, such as the numbers indicated by the hands on an analog clock (P1), professional attire consisting of a white medical coat and a stethoscope for the doctor (P7), and the figure of a teacher in a brown uniform standing in the classroom (P10), complete with a black projector and a pointer held in her hand. These strong denotative elements immediately provided more than 70% of the students with a connotative understanding of professionalism in these professions. However, difficulties arose with the terms *mu'allimah* and *mumarridah*, where 20% to 28% of students encountered challenges. Although the clothing and accessories depicted were iconic, students found them less appropriate due to their limited vocabulary. They were also more familiar with the terms *ustāzah* or *mudarrisah* than with *mu'allimah*.

Furthermore, conflicting meanings led to cognitive barriers in images lacking strong denotative cues. In the image of a journalist (*ṣaḥāfiy*) (P9), the visual merely depicted a man wearing a backwards cap, holding a camera, and carrying a green shoulder bag. The lack of specific attributes, such as an ID card or clothing bearing the word “press,” led 40% of students to consider the image inappropriate because the figure’s identity, connotatively, reflects that of a photographer (*muṣawwir*) (P5).

Another case occurred with the image depicting Mahmud’s physical changes due to typhus (*ṣāra Maḥmūd naḥīfan bisababi at-taifūs*) (P8). Although 68% of students rated it “very appropriate,” open-ended survey responses revealed confusion about its denotative meaning. This was caused by the depiction of two distinct figures wearing different clothing (one thin with a white shirt and blue tie, and the other overweight with a red T-shirt), leading students to assume they were two different people.

A lack of attributes or clarity in the images, in a denotative sense, can cause confusion among students. In line with Safari & Pourhashemi (2022), the textbook they examined showed a mismatch between the topic, the image, and the text, so the images were found to serve only as supplements. Therefore, the images in the textbook failed to convey the intended meaning to students.

Discrepancies in the connotative meanings of images and text, as well as barriers to understanding, arise from gender bias in sports grammar and cultural representation. In the image with the text “*da‘at Rayānah liṣadīqatihā bi-syifā*” (P4), the denotation of the image depicts two men in a yellow room (one lying sick on a bed covered with a green blanket, and the other standing holding flowers with a soccer ball placed on the table behind him). In contrast, the Arabic text uses a feminine pronoun. This discrepancy led to a clear divide in perspectives among students, with some prioritizing the text and others placing greater trust in the image.

Similarly, the image of baseball (*kurat al-miḍrab*) (P6) denotatively depicts a child in an orange jersey holding a wooden bat aimed at a small white ball in flight. Based on the depicted attributes, the image connotes baseball. Student opinions were evenly split (32% each) because the term in the dictionary they consulted meant “tennis” in Indonesian. The majority of students preferred to trust the image because they found it easier to understand. As for the image of the pencak silat sport (P2), which features a black uniform and a green belt labeled *al-kārāṭih*, 64% of the students were not confused, as they assumed that all types of martial arts use that term in Arabic.

Overall, this analysis at the connotative level shows that the interaction between images and text conveys cultural messages to students. When implied messages and cultural contextualization are repeatedly accepted, connotative meanings become ingrained as perspectives that students regard as commonplace. Therefore, the subsequent analysis will shift

to the myth stage. This stage will reveal how the recurring connotations of images are ultimately accepted as beliefs or ideological values that students absorb unconsciously.

### **Myth Level Analysis: Gender Ideology and Cultural Representation**

In the next stage, the analysis of meaning focuses on myths. According to Barthes, myths operate by naturalizing culturally constructed connotative meanings to the point where they are regarded as commonplace or natural (Barthes, 1972). In this textbook, the identified myths are divided into two main trends: the reinforcement of gender role stereotypes in professional figures and cultural representations that bring together students' global and local identities. These myths are produced by the textbook's editorial team and publisher through visual imagery. They are then reinforced in the classroom due to teachers' practical needs in teaching and local cultural elements.

#### **Gender Stereotypes and Bias in Textbooks**

The first myth is a social gender stereotype evident in the images of a nurse (P3) and a teacher (P10), which highlight female figures, and in the images of a doctor (P7) and a photographer (P5), which highlight male figures. Based on responses from students in Class VIII-C, they opined that service and caregiving jobs are well-suited for women because women possess a high level of empathy. However, some other students did not find it unusual for such jobs to be performed by the opposite gender, as long as they are carried out professionally.

In response to this, informant T1 stated that "Actually, in class, students don't pay much attention to gender stereotypes because they've already been introduced to the grammatical genders *muannaṣ* and *muḥakkkar* while learning vocabulary" (Interview, May 13, 2026).

Upon further analysis, Informant T1's statement reveals an oversimplification of the issue. From this perspective, the problem of gender imbalance in the images is considered resolved simply by explaining the grammatical rules (*muannaṣ* and *muḥakkkar*). The publisher and the editorial team perpetuate this myth through repetitive imagery, and teachers unconsciously reinforce it by viewing it as a minor issue.

The stereotypes in this image are consistent with the research by Muassomah et al. (2023) and Batmang et al. (2023), which confirm the existence of gender based categorization of work in Arabic textbooks across various educational levels. High risk and authoritative jobs are associated with men, while women are associated with roles considered feminine (Muassomah et al., 2023). In fact, even though some students have already demonstrated critical thinking, the dominance of these images subtly risks instilling gender based career limitations in students from an early age.

The second myth stems from the gender bias evident in the image titled "*Rayānah liṣadiqatihā bi-syifā*" (P4). Grammatically, the Arabic pronoun used is in the feminine form (*muannaṣ*), yet the image depicts a man. Although previous research by Sanah et al. (2025) noted that the 2020 Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag) MTs Arabic textbooks and the 2017 Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud) junior high school (SMP) textbooks have, from a linguistic structural perspective, sought to represent gender equality through a balanced use of grammatical markers (such as *muḥakkkar*, *muannaṣ*, and *ḍamīr*). However, findings in the field indicate that gender bias remains present in visual elements and illustrations.

This phenomenon has led to differing perspectives among the students in Class VIII-C. Some prioritize the Arabic text because they consider it the primary source; others place more trust in the images because they suspect errors in the text; and others focus solely on the context without paying attention to specific words. This reality of confusion gives rise to a cognitive

myth in the classroom, in which the discrepancy between the images and the text is ultimately regarded as normal.

Based on this, T1 stated that “This inconsistency in pronouns does not fundamentally interfere with student learning because their school is a public school, not an Islamic boarding school. The teacher explained that the abilities of MTs-level students are still developing. Therefore, the fact that students can construct sentences without even thinking about pronouns is already a significant achievement or progress” (Interview, May 13, 2026).

The informant’s statement above reveals two sides: on the one hand, it reflects the teacher’s realistic pragmatism, stemming from an understanding of students’ limitations in the classroom. On the other hand, however, this attitude leads to the normalization of systemic errors in the textbook. Pressured by curriculum targets, teachers are forced to overlook errors in the textbook’s quality.

This myth operates by excusing curricular errors on sociological grounds related to students’ backgrounds. Consequently, errors originating from publishers are no longer viewed as editorial shortcomings but are deemed acceptable because MTs students are considered less proficient than students at Islamic boarding schools.

### **Cultural Localization in the Representation of Identity**

The next myth is the myth of cultural localization in the pencak silat illustration (P2) accompanying the text *al-kārāṭih*. Based on its denotative signs, most students immediately recognized the image as depicting an indigenous Indonesian martial art. This phenomenon elicited varied responses. Some felt unconcerned because the martial arts theme remained consistent. Others, however, were confused because the dictionary definitions of the vocabulary did not align with the textbook's images.

To understand how this issue was addressed in the classroom, T1 explained that the textbook authors likely used the pencak silat image as a visual communication tool to depict martial arts in general. He also added that Arabic lacks a specific equivalent for “pencak silat” because it is a local Indonesian cultural practice (Interview, May 13, 2026).

Based on the statement above, T1 indicates an acceptance of linguistic limitations in textbooks. Rather than clarifying the differences in terminology, mixing karate text with pencak silat images is considered acceptable for introducing the general concept of martial arts to students. As a result, the textbook and the classroom learning process indirectly blur the cultural distinctiveness between karate, a sport originating from Japan and pencak silat, an authentic Indonesian identity.

The phenomenon of cultural localization in the pencak silat illustration (P2) to bridge students’ understanding of the term *al-kārāṭih* aligns with research conducted by Safari & Pourhashemi (2022). Their research shows that official English textbooks published by the Iranian government tend to emphasize representations of local culture. While this strong cultural localization aids students’ initial understanding, it risks limiting the development of global cultural awareness if not balanced with more inclusive material.

From Roland Barthes’s semiotic perspective, the discrepancy between images and text is not merely a misprint but rather the result of myth-making that occurs during the book’s compilation process. The myth of cultural localization stems from nationalist discourse, in which the national curriculum emphasizes that nationalist character education is deliberately fostered by integrating elements of local cultural diversity into school materials (Wahyudi & Wuryandani, 2024). The inclusion of these local elements is intentional to ensure that the Arabic language material does not feel rigid and is more closely aligned with students’ daily lives (Farhah et al., 2024). Through this naturalization process, the blending of the vocabulary term

*al-kārātīh* with images of pencak silat (P2) is intentionally made to appear natural so that students can understand it more quickly.

The myth of cultural localization obscures the fact that these two sports have very different histories and identities. Official Arabic textbooks in Indonesia tend to feature locally oriented visuals to provide contextual learning for students (Kuraedah et al., 2022). Informant T1's response was rationalized due to language limitations, demonstrating that this myth was successfully accepted without any objection from the teacher. The teacher's tolerant attitude toward the use of these visuals indirectly illustrates how educators engage in "guided semiosis", that is, steering an initially erroneous understanding toward something acceptable to ensure the smooth flow of classroom learning (Salem, 2026). This situation highlights the control exercised by the teacher's authority and the textbook in guiding students' understanding. As a result, students who were initially confused by the discrepancy between the image and the dictionary definition of the vocabulary word were ultimately compelled to accept that meaning so that the lesson could continue.

### **The Relevance of Image Meaning Alignment to Students' Vocabulary Comprehension**

Based on the overall analysis, the images in the textbook have a significant influence on MTs students' understanding of Arabic vocabulary. Vocabulary acquisition is initially challenging for students just beginning to learn Arabic, so images serve as a bridge to understanding. When an image has the correct denotative meaning, it builds a connotative meaning that aligns with the intended linguistic meaning of the text. As a result, students will grasp and remember the meanings of vocabulary words more quickly without the need for a complex translation process.

Images that do not match the vocabulary text will confuse students. Based on field data, the majority of students trust and remember images more, even if the images are incorrect, when paired with the vocabulary. From a learning psychology perspective, this phenomenon is known as the Picture Superiority Effect, as proposed by Nelson et al. (1976). This theory states that visual representations have a stronger impact on memory than text.

This phenomenon is supported by Clark & Paivio (1991), the Dual-Coding Theory, which explains that humans process information through two interconnected pathways: the verbal system (language/text) and the nonverbal system (visual). When students are presented with visual images that are incorrect or inconsistent with the Arabic vocabulary text, their visual sensory codes naturally dominate their cognitive processes. This causes visual memory to take precedence over text processing, leading to misunderstandings of vocabulary among students.

The impact of this dominance of visual memory has been directly observed in the field and has the potential to cause cognitive problems for students. Based on interview results, Informant T1 stated that "If incorrect images are allowed to persist, they can create false memories in students regarding the correct meaning of a word for a long period of time." (Interview, May 13, 2026). This statement indicates that discrepancies between illustrations and text in textbooks are not trivial. If the illustrations are inaccurate, students will continue to recall the incorrect meanings of vocabulary words because they find it easier to remember visuals than text. Therefore, if teachers do not promptly correct these discrepancies in class, these errors will hinder students' understanding in the future.

The risk of long term memory errors resulting from mismatched images in the Ministry of Religious Affairs' Arabic textbooks underscores the importance of periodic revisions. Similar criticism was also expressed by Ibrahim & Faisal (2023) regarding the evaluation of textbooks in Iraq's national curriculum. Although these textbooks have attempted to be inclusive by

incorporating international cultural elements such as Japanese traditions and temples found in Indonesia, the authors found an imbalance in cultural orientation that could potentially lead to bias in students' understanding.

Therefore, in addition to conducting periodic revisions, teachers can also play an active role in correcting discrepancies between images and vocabulary found in textbooks. Through such actions, biases in understanding caused by the superiority of image effects can be minimized, thereby optimizing the educational function of images.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the quality of the images in the 2020 Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag RI) 8th-grade MTs Arabic textbook is considered good and aligned with students' real-life experiences. Through Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis, it was found that the consistency in the relationship between the denotative and connotative levels in the images can aid students' cognitive processes. The consistency of sign meanings can facilitate dual coding of information, thereby allowing images to serve as visual aids to optimize students' independent vocabulary comprehension. However, this study also identified a challenge: a mismatch between the meanings of signs in images and their accompanying Arabic text, which gives rise to the Picture Superiority Effect, in which students tend to place greater trust in what they see in images than in the accompanying Arabic text. This phenomenon has the potential to foster misconceptions among students in the long term.

Based on these findings, this study offers several strategic recommendations. First, the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag RI) is advised to establish specific guidelines on visual semiotics for the design and review of textbook images to promote gender equality and cultural accuracy. Second, a formal feedback system is needed so that madrasah teachers in the field can directly provide input to publishers or the Ministry of Religious Affairs if they encounter incorrect images. Finally, for future research, it is recommended to conduct a broader study to measure the extent to which image inaccuracies affect student learning.

## REFERENCE

- Ahmad Saputra, F., & Ulil Albab, C. (2024). Representasi maskulinitas dalam karakter Dom (analisis semiotika Roland Barthes pada film Jakarta vs Everybody). *Pikma*, 6(2), 261.
- Andriani, N., Bochari, S., & Mertosono, S. R. (2025). Visualizing words: The effectiveness of colored pictures in teaching vocabulary. *Acuity: Journal of English Language Pedagogy, Literature, and Culture*, 10(2), 269–278. <https://doi.org/10.35974/acuity.v9i2.3911>
- Barthes, R. (1968). *Elements of semiology* (A. Lavers & C. Smith, Trans.). Hill & Wang.
- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans.). Noonday Press.
- Batmang, B., Khofifah, K., Gaffar, A., & Gunawan, F. (2023). The portrayal of men and women in Arabic textbooks: insight from Indonesian pesantren. *Indonesian Journal of EFL and Linguistics*, 8(2), 343–354. <https://doi.org/10.21462/ijefl.v8i2.679>
- Cahyani, M., Sunarko, A., Mulyani, P. S., & Fatkhurrohman, F. (2023). Telaah komprehensif penyajian materi dan teknik evaluasi buku teks bahasa Arab kelas VIII Madrasah Tsanawiyah KMA Nomor 183 terbitan Kemenag tahun 2020. *Lisanan Arabiya: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab*, 7(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.32699/liar.v7i1.4624>

- Clark, J. M., & Paivio, A. (1991). Dual coding theory and education. *Educational Psychology Review*, 3(3), 149–210. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01320076>
- Derakhshan, A. (2024). ‘Should textbook images be merely decorative?’: Cultural representations in the Iranian EFL national textbook from the semiotic approach perspective. In *Language Teaching Research* (Vol. 28, Issue 1, pp. 79–113). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168821992264>
- Farhah, E., Luthfi, K. M., Arifuddin, A., Baso, Y. S., Murtadho, N., & Syihabuddin, S. (2024). Redefining Arabic in the global era: a critical examination of Silsilat Al-Lisan textbooks. *International Journal of Society, Culture and Language*, 12(2), 121–137. <https://doi.org/10.22034/ijscsl.2024.2023429.3397>
- Hanifansyah, N., & Mahmudah, M. (2024). Enhancing Arabic vocabulary mastery through communicative strategies: Evidence from Malaysia. *Al-Ta'rib : Jurnal Ilmiah Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Arab IAIN Palangka Raya*, 12(2), 263–278. <https://doi.org/10.23971/altarib.v12i2.9082>
- Hasan, M., Milawati, Darodjat, Harahap, T. K., Tahrim, T., Anwari, A. M., Rahmat, A., Masdiana, & P, I. M. I. (2021). Media Pembelajaran. In F. Sukmawati (Ed.), *Media Pembelajaran*. Tahta Media Group.
- Hasnah, S., Idhan, M., & Jabir, M. (2024). Contextual teaching strategies in Arabic language education: Bridging theory and practice for enhanced learning outcomes. *At-Ta'dib*, 19(2), 281–290. <https://doi.org/10.21111/attadib.v19i2.13091>
- Huda, S., Alim, A., & Mujahidin, E. (2023). Model pembelajaran keterampilan bahasa Arab pada program prakuliah di STIBA Ar-Raayah Sukabumi. *Edukasi Islami: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 12(02), 1187–1208. <https://doi.org/10.30868/ei.v12i02.4336>
- Ibrahim, A. A., & Faisal, W. M. (2023). A semiotic analysis of textbooks’ pictures in Iraqi intermediate schools. *Journal of the University of Babylon for Humanities*, 31(9), 26–41.
- Irandoost, F., & Bashiri, A. (2022). Studying the relationship between text and picture of Arabic textbooks in the junior high school (based on the theory of Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott). *Language Related Research*, 13(4), 221–255. <https://doi.org/10.52547/LRR.13.2.7>
- Kholis, N., & Mustofa, M. A. (2024). Development of competency-based Arabic language curriculum in traditional Islamic boarding schools. *Arabiyatuna: Jurnal Bahasa Arab*, 8(2), 827–848. <https://doi.org/10.29240/jba.v8i2.10819>
- Kiswanto, D., Abidin, M., Holis, & Mahdi, R. (2023). Exploring the role of Total Physical Response method in Arabic vocabulary learning. *ALSUNYAT: Jurnal Penelitian Bahasa, Sastra, Dan Budaya Arab*, 6(2), 101–114. <https://doi.org/10.17509/alsuniyat.v6i2.58293>
- Kuraedah, S., Gunawan, F., Alam, S., & Ubaidillah, M. F. (2022). Cultural representation in English and Arabic textbooks endorsed by Indonesian government: what do textbooks tell us about? *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, 13(3), 229–255.
- Muassomah, M., Halimi, H., Yasmadi, Y., Kamal, H., Zaini, H., & Jasmine, A. N. (2023). Gender Inequality in Arabic Textbook: Misrepresentation of Women in Culture and Society. *International Journal of Society, Culture and Language*, 11(1), 272–288. <https://doi.org/10.22034/ijscsl.2023.1989944.2944>

- Nelson, D. L., Reed, V. S., & Walling, J. R. (1976). Pictorial superiority effect. *Journal of Experimental Psychology. Human Learning and Memory*, 2(5), 523–528. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-7393.2.5.523>
- Nurhayati, N., Riza, F., & Faishal, M. (2023). Representation of moral messages in Little Mom film (Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis). *International Journal of Cultural and Social Science*, 4(1), 53–61. <https://doi.org/10.53806/ijcss.v4i1.612>
- Rasyid, F. (2022). Metodologi penelitian kualitatif dan kuantitatif teori, metode, dan praktek. In *Aswaja Pressindo*. IAIN Kediri Press.
- Rehman, M. F., Hussain, D. R., Khan, M. A., & Ullah, D. S. (2022). The power of images in the school textbooks: analyzing the impact of textbooks images on the minds and learning of students. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 6(9), 10553–10565.
- Saadataen, M., Syihabuddin, & Sopian, A. (2025). From scrolling to learning: Multimodal Arabic vocabulary learning through Instagram and TikTok. *International Journal of Arabic Language Teaching*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.32332/ijalt.v7i02.9969>
- Safari, P., & Pourhashemi, M. R. (2022). Semiotic analysis of cultural representations in Iranian English textbooks. *Contemporary Educational Researches Journal*, 12(4), 226–245. <https://doi.org/10.18844/cej.v12i4.8484>
- Salem, N. M. N. (2026). Semiotic strategies in ELT textbooks: a comparative analysis of the Evolve Global and Special Editions. *Southern Semiotic Review*, 2026(23), 459–492. <https://doi.org/10.332.34/SSR.23.11>
- Sanah, S., Fauzia, E. L., Ardiansyah, A. A., & Lutfiani, Y. (2025). Representation of Gender Equality in Arabic Textbooks for Junior Schools in Indonesia. *International Journal of Language Education*, 9(4), 922–933. <https://doi.org/10.26858/ijole.v1i2.82110>
- Sodiq, S., & Alindah, L. (2024). The hidden Indonesian language literacy curriculum in Arabic language textbooks for Islamic junior high school. *Ijaz Arabi Journal of Arabic Learning*, 7(1), 388–399. <https://doi.org/10.18860/ijazarabi.v7i1.25049>
- Wahyudi, I., & Wuryandani, W. (2024). *Integrating cultural values in nationalism character education: a study on Merdeka Curriculum implementation*. 7, 120–131. <https://doi.org/10.23887/ivcej.v7i2.84289>
- Widyanti, A. R., & Muta'ali, A. (2022). The suitability of visual images in Baina Yadaik Arabic textbook. *Arabiyat : Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab Dan Kebahasaaraban*, 9(2), 137–150. <https://doi.org/10.15408/a.v9i2.28987>