
A Linguistic Landscape Study of Bilingual Public Signage in Heritage Tourism Areas of Kotagede Yogyakarta

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the linguistic landscape in the heritage tourism area of Kotagede, Yogyakarta. It aims to identify the varieties of language used on public signs and to evaluate their effectiveness in terms of their informative and symbolic functions in public spaces. Employing a purely qualitative approach through photographic documentation, 12 samples of public signage were purposively selected from the Kotagede Traditional Market area, the Gedhe Mosque Complex, and the courtyard of the Royal Cemetery of the Mataram Kings. The findings reveal a dynamic contestation among Indonesian as the national language, English as the language of global tourism, and the Javanese language and script as symbols of local culture. Functionally, the linguistic landscape of Kotagede is considered sufficiently effective in guiding tourists and highly effective in projecting the identity and authentic atmosphere of a heritage city amid the forces of modernization.

Key Words: *Linguistic Landscape, Public Signage, Heritage Tourism, Kotagede, Functional Effectiveness.*

INTRODUCTION

In today's world public areas in tourist spots have become vibrant spaces where people from different cultures and languages come together. You can see this mix of languages not in conversations but also in written signs on buildings and streets. Researchers call the study of language on these signs the Linguistic Landscape.

It involves looking at language use on signs, street signs and billboards in a specific area. These signs aren't just random; they carry messages that shape the community's social space. The

Kotagede area in Yogyakarta is a cultural heritage tourism spot that faces unique challenges.

As the birthplace of the Islamic Mataram Sultanate it needs to balance tourism demands, which require English with preserving identity through the Javanese language or script. Signs in areas of cultural heritage sites do two important things. They serve as guides and rules for tourists. They represent the regions cultural identity. These signs can be created by the government or by communities and businesses.

Either way it's crucial to examine the messages they convey. Previous research on landscapes in Indonesia has been extensive. However most studies focus on numbers in urban areas. There is still a lack of in-depth analysis on the meaning and effectiveness of signs in cultural heritage areas.

To address this question rigorously, the study draws on the theoretical framework developed by Landry and Bourhis (1997), who defined linguistic landscape as the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region. Within this framework, signs perform two interconnected functions: an *informational function*, through which they guide the movement and behavior of readers within a space, and a *symbolic function*, through which they communicate the relative power and status of language communities in that space. This dual-function model is particularly useful for analyzing heritage tourism areas, where the informational demands of international visitors must be reconciled with the symbolic stakes of local cultural identity.

Kotagede presents a compelling case for this kind of analysis. Founded in the sixteenth century as the capital of the Islamic Mataram Sultanate, the area retains considerable historical and spiritual significance for Javanese communities. Its narrow streets, royal tombs, and traditional silver-crafting workshops have made it one of the most distinctive cultural heritage sites in Yogyakarta — and in Indonesia more broadly. The designation of Kotagede as a heritage tourism zone has brought with it increased foot traffic from both domestic and international visitors, generating pressure on local signage to communicate across multiple languages and audiences simultaneously. The result is a linguistic environment of considerable complexity, in which Indonesian as the national language, English as the language of international tourism, and Javanese — including its classical script, Aksara Jawa — coexist in varying degrees of visibility and prominence.

Previous scholarship on linguistic landscapes in Indonesia has grown substantially since the early 2000s. Researchers such as Reh

(2004) have proposed typologies for multilingual signs, distinguishing between complete, overlapping, complementary, and duplicating forms of multilingual display. Others, including Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), have explored the semiotic principles that govern how languages are positioned relative to one another on signage, arguing that placement, font size, and sequencing all carry meaning beyond the referential content of the text itself. In the Indonesian context, studies conducted in urban centers such as Jakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya have tended to focus on the quantitative distribution of languages across sign types, mapping the proportion of English, Indonesian, and regional languages in commercial and governmental signage. While these studies offer valuable descriptive data, they leave largely unaddressed the question of how signs function — whether they successfully serve the communities that encounter them, and whether they reflect or undermine the cultural identities of the places in which they appear.

This gap becomes especially significant in heritage tourism contexts, where signs do not merely inform but actively constitute what a place means to those who move through it. A heritage site whose signage prioritizes English at the expense of Javanese script may inadvertently signal that the site's primary purpose is consumption by outsiders rather than the living continuity of local culture. Conversely, signs that foreground Aksara Jawa without providing accessible translations may exclude the very visitors they are meant to serve. Navigating this tension requires more than a count of languages on display; it demands an interpretive analysis of how the choices embedded in signage — language selection, script choice, spatial arrangement, and institutional authorship — shape the experience of a place and the messages it sends about cultural belonging.

It is within this gap that the present study situates itself. By examining public signage across the commercial, religious, and sacral-historical zones of Kotagede, this research seeks to move beyond descriptive enumeration toward a deeper understanding of how the linguistic landscape of the area functions in practice — for whom, toward what ends, and with what consequences for the preservation and communication of Javanese cultural heritage. The findings are intended to contribute not only to the growing literature on linguistic landscapes in Southeast Asia but also to inform more deliberate and culturally responsive signage practices in Indonesia's heritage tourism sector

This study aims to fill that gap. The main question of this study is: How effective is the linguistic landscape, in the Kotagede cultural heritage tourist area?

METHOD

This study employs a purely qualitative descriptive approach (Gorter, 2006). The primary focus of this study is not to make statistical generalizations, but rather to conduct an in-depth analysis of the contextual meaning, layout, and functional effectiveness of public signage in the field. The research was conducted in the Kotagede Cultural Heritage Area, Yogyakarta, which is divided into three zones: the Commercial Zone (Legi Traditional Market), the Religious Zone (Masjid Gedhe Mataram), and the Sacred/Historical Zone (Tombs of the Mataram Kings).

Data for this study were collected through photographic documentation (field photography) using a walking tour method. Through purposive sampling, 12 primary public signage boards were selected—those deemed most representative and possessing visual uniqueness—for analysis. Data analysis was conducted by adapting Backhaus's (2007) sociolinguistic and geosemiotic classification methods, in which the 12 signs were analyzed based on the language varieties used, the type of producer (top-down vs. bottom-up), and examined contextually to evaluate the effectiveness of their informative and symbolic functions for the tourist area.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research examines twelve public signs located in three different areas of the Kotagede Cultural Heritage Area: the commercial zones around Kotagede Traditional Market, the religious zone surrounding Masjid Gedhe Mataram, and the sacred historical zone around the Tombs of the Mataram Kings. The analysis focused on the effectiveness of the linguistic landscape by considering the languages displayed, the producers of the signs, their visual arrangements, and their informative and symbolic functions.

Language Representation and Spatial Distribution

The findings show that the language situation in Kotagede is made up of Indonesian, English and Javanese. These languages are used in ways and are written in both the Latin alphabet and the old Javanese script. You can see that the languages are not used in the way in all parts of the area. Instead the way they are used depends on the economic, historical and religious characteristics of each part.

Indonesian is the language that is used the most because it is the language that local people and tourists from inside Indonesia use to communicate. You can see Indonesian on signs that tell people what to do on notices that are posted in public on community boards on banners for businesses and on signs that show people where to go. Indonesian is important because it is the language and most people can understand it. This is what Ayyub and Rohmah found in 2024. They said that Indonesian is used a lot on signs because it can reach people from all over Indonesia.

English is used for tourism and business. You can see it on maps for tourists on signs that show people where to go, on signs that tell people about sites and on signs for businesses like silver shops and stores that sell souvenirs. English is used a lot in the part of town where business owners want to attract tourists from outside Indonesia. This is similar to what Setyawan and others found in 2024. They said that English is used in tourist areas to show that a place is open to visitors and is easy to do business with

However English does not replace Indonesian or Javanese. On signs for tourists English is used to translate what is written in Indonesian. Indonesian is the language and English is just used to help international visitors. This shows that English is used because it is practical for tourism. It is not the most important language in the area.

The Javanese language and script are used in a way. You can see them on signs for streets on markers for sites on signs at entrances and on signs near sacred sites. Unlike English, which is used for communication and business the Javanese script shows the cultural character of Kotagede. When it is used on signs it reminds people of the history of the Islamic Mataram Kingdom.

The way these languages are used in parts of town shows that the language situation changes depending on what each part of town is used for. English is used more in the part of town while the Javanese language and script are used more in areas that are important for religion and history. Indonesian is important in all parts of town because it connects people, national communication and information for tourists.

This shows that signs are not just put up randomly. As Landry and Bourhis said in 1997 the language situation in a place reflects the importance and vitality of the languages that are used there. In Kotagede the way Indonesian, English and Javanese are used shows that there is a balance, between communication, global tourism and preserving local culture.

Effectiveness of the Informative Function

The signs in Kotagede are really good at helping people find their way and understand what is going on. They tell people where to go what things are called and what rules to follow. Based on the signs that I looked at I think Kotagede is doing a good job with this.

There is a difference between the signs that the government puts up and the signs that regular people put up. The government signs are usually easier to understand and look nicer. They have a layout and use both Indonesian and English which is helpful for visitors from other countries. For example the signs near the Tombs of the Mataram Kings are in both Indonesian and English so people can find them easily.

The signs that tell people what to do and what not to do are especially important near the mosque and the royal cemetery. People need to know how to behave and what to wear so they do not offend anyone. When these rules are written in both Indonesian and English it helps everyone understand what is expected of them. This way people are less likely to do something and it helps keep the local culture and traditions safe.

The maps and signs that show people where things are how to get around are also very helpful. They use a combination of words, pictures and maps to help people navigate the roads and old sites of Kotagede. This is what Landry and Bourhis talked about in 1997, when they discussed how signs can help people find their way around.

The signs that regular people put up are not always as good. Sometimes they are hard to read or understand. They may not look very nice. The people who make these signs are often more concerned with saving money and getting the message across quickly than making sure everything is correct and looks good. This can make it harder for visitors from countries to understand what the signs are saying.

This is similar to what Sutthinaraphan said in 2016 when he talked about how signs need to be easy to read and understand and how they need to be placed in a location. Just because a sign has the words on it does not mean it is effective if it is hard to read or if it is in a bad spot.

The difference between the government signs and the signs that regular people put up is also what Backhaus talked about in 2007, when he discussed the difference between down and bottom-up signs. The government signs usually follow the rules. Look formal while the signs that regular people put up are more informal and reflect the way people talk and communicate in their daily lives. In

Kotagede the government signs are usually better for helping people navigate while the signs that regular people put up are more helpful for getting information but they need to be improved.

So overall the signs in Kotagede are doing a job of helping people understand what is going on and how to get around but they are not perfect. Visitors can find their way and understand the basics but some of the signs still need to be corrected and made to look nicer. The signs, in Kotagede are good. They could be better.

Effectiveness of the Symbolic Function

In addition to giving out information public signs also tell us something about a place and what it stands for. From this point of view the way signs are laid out in Kotagede is really effective because it shows that this area is a place with a Javanese cultural heritage. The clearest sign of this is the use of Javanese script on street signs and signs about sites. Even if visitors can't read the script just seeing it makes Kotagede stand out from commercial or urban areas.

The Javanese script works like a symbol that connects the public space we use today with the areas past. It helps create an atmosphere that feels like a heritage site and makes the local culture more noticeable.

The importance of Javanese script is also shown by where it's placed on certain signs. When it is put prominently above or next to Indonesian and English it suggests that the local heritage is still culturally important even though we need to communicate with visitors from the country and abroad.

The position of the language the size of the font and how prominent it is all help to show the relationships between cultures and who has authority. This finding supports what Khazanah et al. Said in 2021 that the choice of language and where it is placed on signs can show power, who you are and what you value as a society.

In Kotagede English is valuable for business and talking to people from countries especially in commercial areas but the Javanese language and script have symbolic importance in historical and sacred places.

As you move through the area the language on the signs changes, which makes the landscape more effective at conveying its message. In the market and commercial streets you see English because it helps with tourism and talking to international customers. As you move towards the mosque and royal cemetery local cultural and religious expressions become more prominent.

This change shows a boundary between regular commercial areas and sacred-historical areas. This boundary is not always

marked by barriers. Instead it is shown through changes in language, font, terminology. What the signs say. Signs in the area remind visitors that they are entering a place with its own traditions and values.

The way signs are laid out in the area helps control peoples behaviour while keeping the character of the heritage environment. The fact that Indonesian, English and Javanese're all used shows that globalisation does not have to mean the end of local identity.

English is useful for tourism Indonesian helps people from the country visit. Javanese keeps the cultural heritage alive. The three languages work together. Do different jobs. This use of languages supports what Bellés-Calvera said in 2019 that signs, with multiple languages can show how communities balance their local identity with the need to communicate with a wider audience. In Kotagede using languages lets the area welcome visitors without losing the linguistic signs of its historical identity.

Top-Down and Bottom-Up Signage

The comparison between down signs and bottom-up signs shows two different but connected ways of doing things. Top-down signs are mainly about following rules taking care of things and helping tourists find their way. These signs usually use Indonesian and English in a way and may include Javanese writing as a way to show local culture.

Bottom-up signs are more about talk and business. Indonesian is commonly used because local people and visitors from parts of the country can understand it. English is used when businesses want to reach tourists from countries. These signs show how tourism affects the way people use language in the area.

Just because English is used on bottom-up signs does not mean it is always effective. Some signs use English just because it looks modern or fancy. In these cases English is used more for show than for communication even if the words are not grammatically correct.

The difference between down and bottom-up signs shows that they contribute to the areas language scene in different ways. Official signs are more consistent and reliable for navigation while signs made by the community show flexibility and adapt to local business needs. Both types of signs are important because the areas tourism is shaped by both government policies and everyday things that local people and businesses do.

Overall Effectiveness of the Language Scene

The language scene in Kotagede is effective overall because it provides information and has meaning. It is informative because there are English signs in major tourist spots historical sites are identified and rules are communicated in sacred areas. However this effectiveness is not even because some community-made signs have English or are hard to read.

The symbolic function is more successful. The use of Javanese writing the importance of language in historical areas and the changing language hierarchy between commercial and sacred spaces all help create a strong sense of heritage. These features allow Kotagede to deal with tourism from over the world without letting English take over the whole visual environment.

The findings show that the effectiveness of a heritage language scene cannot be measured by whether tourists understand the signs. It must also be evaluated by whether the signs preserve the identity, values and atmosphere of the place. Kotagedes language scene does both: it helps visitors. Shows that the area is a historically and culturally significant Javanese space.

However some things need to be improved. English translations on commercial signs should be checked for grammatical accuracy. There should also be standards for letter size, color contrast and information hierarchy. These improvements would make the informative function stronger without reducing the importance of Indonesian and Javanese.

In conclusion Kotagede has a language scene where local, national and global languages exist together for spatial and social purposes. Indonesian makes things accessible, to people English supports international tourism and Javanese language and writing preserve local historical identity. Their interaction shows an attempt to balance tourism development with the protection of heritage..

CONCLUSION

This study looked at how well the signs in the Kotagede Cultural Heritage Tourism Area work. It checked twelve signs in different areas like the commercial zone around Kotagede Traditional Market, the religious zone of Masjid Gedhe Mataram and the sacred-historical zone with the Tombs of the Mataram Kings. The analysis looked at what language was used, where the signs were placed, who made them how they were arranged and what they were trying to say or show.

The findings show that Kotagede uses Indonesian, English and Javanese languages on its signs, including old Javanese writing. Each language has a important role. Indonesian is mainly used for people and tourists from Indonesia. English is used more for tourists and is often seen in shops and tourist areas. Javanese language and writing are used to show the identity, history and culture.

Overall the signs in Kotagede work well. Not equally well for all purposes. Official signs are good at giving information, directions and rules to visitors. Using Indonesian and English on the signs helps tourists understand important information. However some signs made by locals or businesses are not as effective because they have mistakes, small writing and messy layouts.

The signs are good at showing the culture of Kotagede. The old Javanese writing on street signs and heritage markers makes Kotagede look like a Javanese city. The way languages are used in areas shows what each area is about. English is used more in tourist areas while Javanese is used in religious and historical areas.

These findings mean that we cannot just look at how clear the signs are to judge how well they work. We also need to look at how they show the local identity keep cultural values, control visitor behaviour and make a real sense of place. Kotagede has done a job of balancing tourism with preserving its local culture.

Still improvements are needed to make the signs better. Government institutions, heritage managers and local businesses should work together to check translations make directional signs consistent improve the look of signs and place signs in good locations. These improvements should be done without making Javanese language and writing less important.

This study only looked at twelve signs so its findings do not represent all signs in Kotagede. Future studies could look at signs compare different times see how tourists react to signs or ask locals, business owners and government authorities what they think. Such research would help us understand better how signs contribute to communication, cultural preservation and sustainable tourism development, in heritage areas.

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