

ASSERTIVE LEXICON IN THE PUBLIC SIGNAGE OF DEMAK REGENCY: A LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE EMPOWERMENT WITH EDUCATIONAL VALUE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Effective public communication is a pillar of community empowerment and regional development. This community service research analyzes the assertive lexicon on public signage in Demak Regency, focusing on translational acceptability and its potential as a public education medium. The study reveals that while directive speech acts dominate the linguistic landscape, their English translations suffer from systemic acceptability issues, with an average score of only 2.0 (Less Acceptable). This deficiency hinders communicative functions and risks the normalization of linguistic errors. Based on these findings, a community empowerment program was designed and implemented in the form of a Workshop on Effective and Educative Public Sign Writing for local government agencies and business owners. The initiative bridges the gap between linguistic analysis and practical application, providing stakeholders with the tools to create a more inclusive and safe linguistic landscape, thereby supporting community empowerment and regional identity.

Keywords: *Assertive Lexicon, Educational Value, Linguistic Landscape Empowerment, Public Signage, Translation Acceptability*

INTRODUCTION

Regional spatial planning and the development of public infrastructure are not merely technical endeavours; they are foundational to creating a structured, safe, and educational environment for the community (Han, 2017). Within this complex ecosystem, language plays a central and indispensable role as the primary medium of communication (Zeng & Luo, 2019). To be effective, a sign must convey its message with clarity to a diverse audience under minimal cognitive load, a quality achieved through careful linguistic choices Landry & Bourhis (1997).

A crucial component of these choices is the use of an assertive lexicon: a

vocabulary that is firm, clear, and unambiguous, designed to direct behaviour, warn of hazards, or prohibit actions. The quality of this lexicon, particularly in bilingual contexts, determines not only the functional success of the sign but also its educational impact. This impact, in Indonesia has provided valuable insights, often focusing on the symbolic power struggles between global English and local languages in major metropolitan areas (Zaman et al., 2025). While important, a main limitation of these studies is their predominantly descriptive or theoretical nature (Wogalter, 2017). There remains a significant gap in applied, action-oriented research that moves beyond analysis to address identified linguistic problems through direct community intervention.

Previous research on the linguistic landscape in Indonesia has provided valuable insights, often focusing on the symbolic power struggles between global English and local languages in major metropolitan areas (Aghnia et al., 2024; Faizi & Wahyuni, 2024; Hidayanti & Sutopo, 2017, Yuliana & Nugroho, 2021). While important, a main limitation of these studies is their predominantly descriptive or theoretical nature. There remains a significant gap in applied, action-oriented research that moves beyond analysis to address identified linguistic problems through direct community intervention. This paper aims to solve this limitation by presenting a community-based action research project in Demak Regency, a region undergoing significant development. Preliminary analysis in this area revealed a systemic problem: the prevalence of poorly translated bilingual signs (e.g., *Dilarang Menarik Kendaraan* translated as *Prohibited to Pull Vehicle*). These errors represent not just a communicative failure but a squandered educational opportunity, creating a "public classroom" that disseminates incorrect language patterns (Abbass & Shibliyev, 2024).

The objectives of this article are twofold. First, to systematically analyze the qualitative state and translational acceptability of assertive structures on public information signs within the scope of strategic public areas in Demak Regency. Second, to detail how the empirical findings of this analysis were systematically transformed into a concrete community empowerment program designed to optimize message prescriptivity and maximize the educational value

of signage. This study integrates a CBar model to bridge between linguistic landscape analysis and practical community empowerment. Rather than simply documenting linguistic errors, this initiative uses the analysis as a diagnostic tool to design and implement a targeted educational intervention for local stakeholders. In doing so, it consciously utilizes public infrastructure as an accessible and powerful medium for informal language and literacy learning, offering a replicable framework for transforming public communication into a tool for social development.

LITERATUREREVIEW

Linguistic Landscapes and Public Space

In the broader field of urban studies and sociolinguistics, the role of language in public spaces is a critical area of inquiry. The visible manifestation of language in a given territory, known as the Linguistic Landscape (LL), encompasses all textual and symbolic displays, ranging from road signs to official notices². According to Backhaus (2016), the analysis of these landscapes provides essential insights into the discourse of public space. Within this complex ecosystem, language plays a central and indispensable role as the primary medium of communication. As defined in the seminal work by Landry & Bourhis (1997), the linguistic landscape serves two primary functions: an informational function that guides inhabitants, and a symbolic function reflecting the status and identity of different language communities.

The Pedagogical Function and Cognitive Load

Recent scholarship extends the foundational understanding of LL by emphasizing a pedagogical function, where public signage acts not merely as a passive reflection of society but as an active agent in its formation. Zaman et al. (2025) argue that the LL functions as an informal educational instrument that implicitly teaches linguistic norms and civic values to the community. However, when signs contain errors, they create a "public classroom" those risks disseminating incorrect language patterns, as noted by Abbass and Shibliyev (2024). To be effective and safe, particularly regarding warnings and directives,

a sign must convey its message with clarity under minimal cognitive load. Wogalter (2017) emphasizes that achieving this requires careful linguistic choices to ensure the message is understood by a diverse audience.

Linguistic Landscape Research in Indonesia

Linguistic landscape in Indonesia has yielded significant insights, primarily concentrating on the symbolic tension between global English and local languages. Within this scope, Aghnia et al. (2024) and Faizi and Wahyuni (2024) have examined these dynamics specifically within commercial environments. Beyond symbolic analysis, practical linguistic issues have also been highlighted; for instance, Yuliana and Nugroho (2021) identified prevalent translation errors on public signage in tourist destinations. Complementing these empirical studies, Hidayanti and Sutopo (2017) offer relevant analysis on the translation quality of imperative sentences, while Pym (2017) establishes the essential theoretical framework regarding translation and text transfer for understanding bilingual signs.

Community-Based Action Research

To move beyond descriptive analysis toward practical intervention, this study draws upon the Community-Based Action Research (CBAR) model. Creswell (2018) posits that research should not only generate knowledge but also serve as a direct catalyst for social change and problem-solving within a specific community. This approach aligns with the cyclical nature of diagnosis, action, and reflection described by Huang (2015) in the context of pragmatics. Furthermore, Kelly-Holmes (2015) supports the use of analysis to diagnose community problems, while Kusumaningrum and Rekha (2019) validate the use of semi-structured interviews to gain deeper qualitative insights into how the public interacts with the linguistic landscape.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a Community-Based Action research (CBAR) model as its core methodological framework. CBAR is theoretically grounded in the principle that research should not only generate knowledge but also serve as a

direct catalyst for social change and problem-solving within a specific community (Creswell, 2018). This approach was specifically chosen because the project's aim was not merely to produce an academic analysis of linguistic errors but to use that analysis (Kelly-Holmes, 2015) to diagnose a community problem and empower local stakeholders to address it (Backhaus, 2016). The methodology was structured into three distinct, sequential stages, reflecting the cyclical nature of diagnosis, action, and reflection inherent in CBAR (Huang, 2015).

This initial phase involved a qualitative descriptive-analytical method to systematically investigate the linguistic landscape of Demak Regency. The goal was to build a robust, evidence-based understanding of the existing state of public signage, which would later inform the empowerment program. For photographic data, the data corpus consisted of 15 bilingual public signs. The locations for data collection were selected using a purposive sampling strategy based on three criteria: high public traffic, strategic importance to regional infrastructure, and representation of diverse public functions. The chosen locations were: the Semarang-Demak Toll Road (representing new infrastructure), the Bintoro Type A Terminal (a central transportation hub), and various commercial and civic areas within Demak city (representing daily urban life). For interview data, a total of 15 public space users were selected as participants for semi-structured interviews. This sample was purposively chosen based on their direct and frequent interaction with the signage in the targeted locations and was comprised of 5 private vehicle drivers on the toll road, 5 public transport commuters at the Bintoro Terminal, and 5 local residents/shoppers in the city center. To obtain comprehensive and in-depth data, the researchers conducted gathering tools and procedures as follows: Digital camera was used to capture the 15 signs. Each photograph was framed to include not just the text but also its immediate physical context (e.g., location on a wall, proximity to a door, surrounding environment). This specific procedure was vital for enabling a subsequent situational and pragmatic analysis of each sign's function. Interviews were conducted on-site, lasting approximately 10-15

minutes each. A semi-structured interview guide, rather than a rigid questionnaire, was used as the primary tool (Kusumaningrum & Rekha, 2019). This specific instrument was chosen to allow for emergent themes and deeper qualitative insights. The analysis focused on two specific types of materials: (1) academic literature to establish the theoretical framework, specifically landmark works on LL by (Pym, 2017) and the translation quality model by Nababan et al. (2012), and (2) local government publications on urban planning to understand the official context and regulations governing public signage in Demak.

This study adapted the influential model by Nababan et al. (2012) but made a specific methodological choice to focus exclusively on the acceptability parameter. This focus was theoretically justified because, for public directives, naturalness and conformity to target-language norms (acceptability) are arguably more critical to communicative success than literal accuracy. To ensure reliability, the three authors of this paper independently rated each of the 15 translations using the 3-point scale. Any discrepancies in scores were then resolved through a deliberation process to reach a consensus, thereby ensuring inter-rater reliability. The final consensus score for each sign was recorded, and these scores were then aggregated to calculate the average for the entire corpus.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Assertive Structures and Their Acceptability

The comprehensive analysis of Demak's linguistic landscape confirmed the initial hypothesis: the public space is dominated by top-down, directive speech acts intended to regulate public behavior. However, a systemic and critical disjuncture exists between the intended illocutionary force of the Indonesian source texts (ST) and the communicative efficacy of their English target texts (TT). The translation of these assertive structures demonstrates widespread and recurring issues in acceptability, severely undermining their function for non-Indonesian speakers and reflecting poorly on the issuing institutions. The average acceptability score across all analyzed bilingual signs was calculated at 2.0, falling squarely within the "Less Acceptable" category. This aggregate score, however,

masks a landscape of extremes, where instances of professional competence are unfortunately balanced by an equal, if not greater, number of complete communicative failures. Below is a more detailed breakdown of representative data points that exemplify this trend.

These following signs represent best practices and demonstrate that high-quality translation is achievable. They typically involve the use of standardized, institutionalized phrases. The first category represents translations characterized by high acceptability; Acceptable (Score 3). In these instances, the target texts are idiomatic, natural, and adhere to global standards. Data 001, located at a toll gate (*Gunakan Kartu Tol Anda* translated as *Tap Your Toll Card Here*), serves as a prime example. The translator selected the highly idiomatic verb *Tap*, which reflects the global standard for contactless payment systems far superior to a literal translation of *Use*, and included the deictic adverb *Here* for crucial spatial guidance. Similarly, Data 004 at a bus terminal (*Area Merokok* translated as *Designated Smoking Area*) achieves excellence by employing a globally recognized phrase. The translator correctly identified that the sign denotes an officially sanctioned zone, moving beyond literalism to achieve pragmatic equivalence. Furthermore, Data 007 in a shopping mall (*Pintu Keluar Darurat* translated as *Emergency Exit*) demonstrates that translation success is often a matter of retrieving a fixed, non-negotiable universal standard rather than engaging in creative composition.

In contrast to the above, the second category includes translations that convey the core message but are marred by errors making them feel unnatural and unprofessional; Less Acceptable (Score 2). Data 002 on a toll road (*Jaga Jarak Aman* translated as *Keep Safe Distance*) exhibits a direct structural transfer from Indonesian. The primary error is the omission of the indefinite article *a* (standard: *Keep a Safe Distance*), a common error type that signals a flawed translation to proficient speakers. In the bus terminal, Data 005 (*Mohon Periksa Kembali Barang Bawaan Anda* translated as *Please Check Your Belongings*) is grammatically correct but lacks the full pragmatic force of the source text. The Indonesian adverb *Kembali* implies a re-checking action upon departure; a more

astute translation would be "Please Recheck Your Belongings Before Leaving." Additionally, Data 008 at a bank ATM (*Sedang Ada Perbaikan* translated as *On Repair*) represents a classic calque. The use of *On* is jarringly incorrect; standard English prepositions would yield *Under Repair*, or more commonly for customer-facing signs, "Temporarily Out of Service."

The final category encompasses signs representing critical communicative failures, where the message is confusing, ambiguous, or nonsensical due to severe linguistic errors; Unacceptable (Score 1). Data 003 on the toll road (*Dilarang Menarik Kendaraan* translated as *Prohibited To Pull Vehicle*) is plagued by multiple errors. The structure *Prohibited to [verb]* is unidiomatic for public prohibitions (standard: *No Towing*), and "Pull" is a poor lexical choice for "Tow." Interviews confirmed that this ambiguity left drivers confused about whether they were allowed to push a broken-down car. Data 006 in the bus terminal (*Buanglah Sampah Sesuai Jenisnya* translated as *Throw Trash According to the Type*) is a stark example of slavish literalism, utilizing the aggressive verb *Throw* and unnatural phrasing rather than standard equivalents like "Sort Your Waste Here." Finally, Data 009 in a health clinic (*Selalu Gunakan Masker* translated as *Always Use Mask*) suffers from compounding errors: a missing article and the suboptimal choice of *Use* rather than *Wear*, which collectively undermine the seriousness of the health directive.

The comprehensive analysis of Demak's linguistic landscape confirmed that while public space is dominated by top-down, directive speech acts, a systemic and critical disjuncture exists between the intended illocutionary force of the Indonesian source texts and the communicative efficacy of their English translations. The average acceptability score of 2.0 across all analyzed signs places the overall quality squarely within the *Less Acceptable* category. However, this aggregate score masks a landscape of extremes, where instances of professional competence are unfortunately balanced by an equal number of communicative failures.

On one end of the spectrum, examples of acceptable (Score 3) demonstrate that excellence is achievable, typically when translators correctly employ

standardized, institutionalized phrases such as Tap Your Toll Card Here, Designated Smoking Area, and Emergency Exit. These successes rely on retrieving universally recognized equivalents rather than on creative composition. In the middle ground, the Less Acceptable category (Score 2) is characterized by translations that, while conveying the core message, are marred by unnatural phrasing and errors stemming from direct structural transfers from Indonesian. Common issues include missing articles, as seen in Keep Safe Distance, or classic calques like On Repair, which immediately signal a flawed and unprofessional translation to proficient speakers. At the other extreme, the Unacceptable category (Score 1) represents critical communicative failures where slavish literalism results in confusing or nonsensical messages. Signs like Prohibited To Pull Vehicle and Throw Trash According to the Type are plagued by multiple compounding errors, un-idiomatic structures, poor lexical choices, and grammatical mistakes, that represent a complete breakdown in communication, a fact confirmed by public confusion during interviews. Ultimately, these findings confirm a significant quality control issue where predictable patterns of error point to a lack of professional translation standards, directly impacting both communication effectiveness and the region's public image.

Workshop on Effective and Educative Public Sign Writing

The diagnostic findings were not treated as an academic endpoint but as the crucial foundation for direct community intervention. The core of this empowerment program initiative was the Workshop on Effective and Educative Public Sign Writing a program designed to bridge the gap between problem identification and practical solution. To equip local government agencies and business actors, the primary creators of the linguistic landscape, with the knowledge and practical skills to produce public signage that is clear, communicatively effective, and possesses inherent educational value. The workshop was strategically structured into three interactive modules, each designed to systematically address the specific problems identified in the diagnostic analysis.

Module 1 demonstrates Why Our Signs Fail by presenting the local case study. The workshop began by presenting the photographic evidence and linguistic analysis from the research. Showing concrete, familiar examples like Prohibited to Pull Vehicle and Throw Trash According to the Type proved highly effective in capturing the participants' attention and fostering a collective awareness of the existing problem. Many participants from the government agencies expressed surprise, stating they had not previously considered the quality of the English translations to be a significant issue. This session successfully established the relevance and urgency of the training.



Figure 1. Cover Module 1 as Why Our Signs Fail

Module 1 served as a foundational catalyst, fundamentally shifting participant awareness regarding linguistic quality. By utilizing tangible local case studies, such as the erroneous Prohibited to Pull Vehicle, the session contextualized the issue within participants' professional realities. Crucially, this evidence elicited surprise among government stakeholders who had previously overlooked translation standards. This realization dismantled perceived triviality, successfully establishing the urgency required for sustained engagement in subsequent modules.

Module 2 illustrates From Prohibiting to Guiding by optimizing message prescriptivity. This module introduced a paradigm shift from simple proscription (forbidding an action) to active prescription (guiding behaviour). Participants were taught that the most effective signs often provide a rationale or an

alternative. For example, the group work involved transforming a weak sign like *Jangan Parkir* (Do Not Park) into a more prescriptive and effective version: *Dilarang Parkir di Depan Pintu. Area Bongkar Muat* (No Parking in Front of Door. Loading Zone Only). This exercise demonstrated how providing a reason enhances compliance by appealing to the public's logic and sense of social order.



Figure 2. Cover Module 2 as From Prohibiting to Guiding

Module 2 instigated a transformative shift from simple prohibition to strategic guidance, equipping participants with psychologically astute communication tools. Practical exercises, such as reformulating basic commands into reasoned directives, demonstrated that explaining the rationale behind restrictions fosters cooperation rather than confrontation. This experience redefined the professional mindset, teaching stakeholders to engineer compliance by appealing to logic and social order. Consequently, participants acquired tangible skills to reduce public conflict and enhance regulatory adherence through respectful engagement.

Module 3 displays Beyond Google Translate by considering principles of acceptable translation. This was the most practical, hands-on session. It provided simple, memorable rules for creating better English translations, focusing on avoiding literalism and using standardized, natural-sounding phrases. A key activity was a translation relay where groups competed to find the most acceptable English equivalent for common Indonesian directives. A comprehensive resource packet was distributed, including a checklist for quality control and a glossary of

over 20 standard public sign terms (e.g., Emergency Exit, Slippery When Wet, Maintain a Safe Distance, No Trespassing).

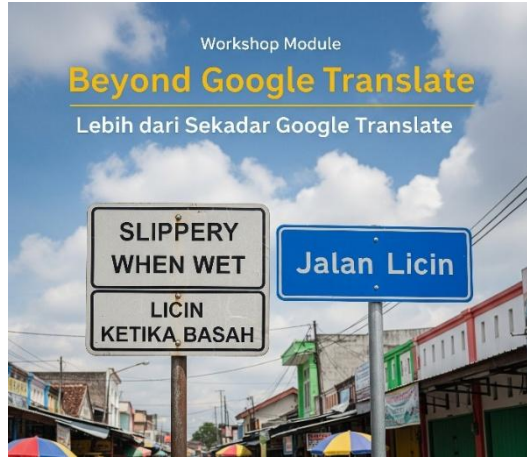


Figure 3. Cover Module 3 as Beyond Google Translate

Module 3 bridged the identified skills gap by transitioning from theory to applied competence. By supplying resources like quality control checklists and standardized glossaries, the session demystified translation for non-professionals. Interactive exercises reinforced these principles, while the provision of a physical toolkit ensured sustainability. This empowered stakeholders to transcend reliance on machine translation, equipping them to independently apply professional standards in daily operations. Consequently, the module facilitates tangible, long-term improvements in the quality of the region's public signage.

The workshop culminated in a collaborative session designed to synthesize the learning arc of Modules 1 through 3. Participants engaged in redesigning flawed signs from their specific professional contexts, effectively transforming abstract principles into tangible solutions. This application necessitated confronting the communication failures identified in Module 1 while employing Module 2's strategic shift from prohibition to logical guidance. Furthermore, participants utilized Module 3's technical resources to craft professional translations. This integrative process ensured the successful conversion of theoretical frameworks into practical, context-specific communicative assets.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the bilingual public signage in Demak Regency currently suffers from systemic low acceptability due to literalism and grammatical errors, creating a linguistic landscape that hinders communication and risks normalizing incorrect language use. To rectify this, it is strongly recommended that the Local Government of Demak Regency institutionalize the program's outcomes by adopting an official Style Guide for Public Signage. This guide should serve as a mandatory reference for all agencies and businesses, utilizing the workshop's quality control checklists and standardized glossaries to ensure that public text serves as a model of clarity and correct educational practice.

Furthermore, this initiative demonstrated that bridging academic analysis with practical community workshops is a successful, replicable model for empowering stakeholders to improve public safety and regional identity. Consequently, this workshop model should be expanded to include educators and community leaders, allowing them to utilize the linguistic landscape as a dynamic teaching resource. Future efforts should also include longitudinal research to empirically measure the long-term impact of these interventions on sign quality and to analyze how the public interprets these prescriptive messages over time.

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