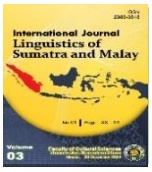
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The Function of Language at Medan Train Station: Linguistic Landscape Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the language functions of the linguistic landscape at the Medan train station, focusing on its symbolic and informational roles. Using a qualitative descriptive approach through observation, interviews, and documentation techniques, the research highlights the distinct characteristics of the linguistic landscape in this location. The findings reveal a dominance of monolingual Indonesian, which facilitates easy comprehension of billboards and signage for the majority of the population. Informational functions are well-developed, effectively serving to guide and assist users in navigating the station. Additionally, the inclusion of logos, such as the PT KAI logo, emphasizes the credibility and official nature of the messages conveyed. However, the research also identifies a significant underutilization of the symbolic function in the linguistic landscape, with limited representation of local cultural or linguistic elements. This gap is influenced by the public's mindset and a lack of attention to the potential of linguistic landscapes as tools for cultural preservation and identity expression. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of language usage patterns in public spaces and underscores the need for greater integration of symbolic elements, such as traditional scripts and multilingual signage, to enrich the cultural representation and literacy of the community. These findings hold implications for improving the design and functionality of billboards at the Medan train station, ensuring they serve both practical and cultural purposes for diverse users.

Keywords: The Function of Language, Linguistic Landscape, Medan Train Station

1. Introduction

The study of the Linguistic Landscape (LL) examines how languages manifest in public spaces, capturing the interaction between top-down and bottom-up signage. Top-down signage refers to official displays created by government institutions, such as street signs, traffic regulations, and public building plaques. These signs are crafted to reflect governmental language policies and national ideologies. On the other hand, bottom-up signage consists of private signs like shop advertisements, billboards, or other promotional materials created by individuals or businesses, which often reflect personal or commercial language preferences (Shang & Zhao, 2014). In an era of rapid urbanization and globalization, LL serves as a critical lens to explore multilingualism's dynamics and its role in shaping cultural identity. Particularly in urban areas, LL offers a unique perspective on how public language use reflects the linguistic diversity and cultural identities of a community (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Backhaus, 2007). This approach not only documents the coexistence of languages but also highlights their functions within a society. Language displayed in public spaces has been identified as serving two primary functions: informational and symbolic. Informationally, languages act as markers of territorial boundaries for linguistic communities, helping to define specific cultural or linguistic zones. Symbolically, the presence of certain languages on public signage serves to establish cultural identity, often incorporating unique scripts or symbols that reflect the heritage of a region (Landry & Bourhis, 1997).

While most LL research is concentrated in urban centers, some scholars have ventured into rural areas. Juffermans (2010) and Wang et al. (2013) have emphasized the intriguing interplay between local languages and dominant national or global languages in less urbanized settings. However, urban areas, as hubs of mobility, economic activity, and cultural convergence, remain the primary focus of LL research due to their ability to reflect broader social, economic, and linguistic shifts. Previous studies have largely examined LL in strategic urban locations such as airports or bustling city centers. For instance, Pasaribu & Salmiah (2024) explored linguistic signage at Kualanamu Airport, uncovering how its design balances aesthetic appeal with communicative functionality to cater to diverse social groups. Similarly, Benu et al. (2023) investigated LL in Kupang, highlighting the marginalization of local languages in favor of dominant majority languages, underscoring the need to preserve regional linguistic diversity.

However, train stations, which serve as unique public transit hubs, remain underexplored within LL research. Unlike airports or city centers, train stations offer distinct linguistic dynamics due to their role as nodes of regional connectivity. They encapsulate not only local linguistic practices but also transient phenomena influenced by the constant movement of people. These linguistic phenomena are shaped by the interactions between local commuters, tourists, and the diverse linguistic backgrounds of station users.

Train stations represent microcosms of multilingualism, where signage must meet the communicative needs of varied audiences. This includes addressing local residents, who may prefer regional languages, and transient visitors, who often rely on national or international languages. Moreover, as spaces of high mobility, train stations demand linguistic flexibility, making them ideal sites to observe language preference shifts and the transient use of language influenced by mobility patterns. This study focuses on train stations in Medan, Indonesia, a city known for its rich multicultural tapestry, where languages such as Indonesian, regional dialects, and foreign languages coexist in public spaces. Medan's train stations reflect a unique convergence of linguistic practices shaped by local cultural identity and the city's role as a transit hub. By investigating these dynamics, the research aims to fill a significant gap in LL literature, shedding light on how mobility and language interact in these specific public spaces.

The urgency of studying LL in train stations lies in understanding how language functions in spaces integral to urbanization and public mobility. Medan's train stations, as crucial transit points, provide an opportunity to analyze the interplay of languages in a context that balances local cultural preservation and the needs of a mobile, multicultural society. The primary objectives of this research are as follows: Identify the informational and symbolic functions of linguistic signage within train stations in Medan. This includes examining how signage communicates necessary information and represents cultural identity. Analyze how signage design reflects Medan's cultural identity while accommodating the linguistic needs of a diverse audience. Provide practical recommendations for train station management, focusing on optimizing language use in public spaces to improve user experience and support cultural preservation. These objectives underscore the relevance of LL studies in addressing broader concerns, such as urban cultural dynamics, public space management, and the role of language in fostering inclusive and functional environments

This research stands out by focusing on train stations, a site underrepresented in LL studies, compared to the more frequently examined airports and city centers. Unlike airports, where signage often reflects a globalized linguistic orientation, train stations embody a blend of local and transient linguistic practices. These spaces offer a more localized linguistic representation, influenced by both regional cultural identity and the demands of high mobility. The intersection of mobility and language use, highlighting how public spaces adapt to dynamic linguistic needs. The influence of local culture on signage design, demonstrating how cultural identity is preserved in transit hubs. The manifestation of transient linguistic practices, revealing how language choices shift to meet the immediate requirements of station users. Furthermore, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of Medan's unique linguistic landscape, characterized by a harmonious blend of Indonesian, regional dialects, and foreign languages. This multicultural context offers valuable perspectives on managing multilingualism in public spaces, especially in urban centers experiencing rapid growth and diverse population movements.

2. Method

This research adopts a descriptive qualitative methodology as described by Sugiyono (2021), focusing on understanding the natural use of language in public spaces. The study is conducted through systematic fieldwork at train stations in Medan, aiming to uncover the informational and symbolic functions of linguistic signage. A combination of observations, documentation, and interviews is employed to achieve these objectives, ensuring that the data collected is both comprehensive and contextually meaningful. The observation phase involves visiting strategic locations within the train stations, including ticket counters, waiting areas, platforms, and entrances. These observations are carried out over three weeks to capture a

representative sample of linguistic signs during various times, including peak and off-peak hours. The focus is on identifying languages used, the visual design of signs, their placement, and their intended purposes, whether to provide information or to represent cultural identity.

Documentation plays a central role in this research, with systematic photographs taken of all visible signage within the stations. This includes official signs, such as directional markers and government notices, as well as personalized signs, such as shop advertisements and other commercial displays. Each photograph is cataloged with contextual information about its location and linguistic characteristics, creating a rich dataset for analysis. The interview process involves three key groups: passengers, station staff, and station managers. Passengers provide insights into how signage is perceived and interpreted, focusing on its usability and cultural relevance. Station staff offer perspectives on the practical considerations involved in creating and placing signs, while station managers elaborate on the policies and decisions that guide the use of language in the station environment. Semi-structured interviews allow for both consistent data collection and the flexibility to explore unique insights from participants.

The data is analyzed inductively, with linguistic signs categorized into two main types based on the framework of Landry and Bourhis (1997): top-down signs, which are official and institutionally created, and bottom-up signs, which are created by individuals or private entities. This classification helps illuminate how language is used to communicate essential information and express cultural identity in a public transit context. Insights from interviews complement the analysis by providing context on the intent and impact of signage within the station. Through this methodology, the study systematically examines the linguistic landscape of Medan train stations, highlighting how language use in these spaces reflects both practical communication needs and the cultural identity of the region. This approach ensures that the research contributes meaningful insights to the broader understanding of linguistic landscapes in urban public spaces.

3. Result

Linguistic landscape (LL) is a term usually used in studying texts displayed in public spaces. Linguistic landscape studies (LL) is concerned with language in its written form, in the public space; language that is visible to everyone in a particular area (Gorter, 2006). Thongtong (2019) emphasized that this study developed from the analysis of commercial and governmental signs found in metropolitan areas, ethnic neighborhoods, and small towns. These signs refer to language marking street names, names of commercial products, fish boards, names of government institutions, information boards, street names, airports, shop names, names of institutions/agencies, and so on. The following presents several linguistic landscapes at the Medan train station.



Figure 1. Customer Service of Medan Station

The image strongly conveys its informational function through the prominent text "Stasiun Medan." This provides clear identification of the location as a train station in Medan City. The use of straightforward and direct Bahasa Indonesia reflects its target audience: local residents and public transport users. The dominant orange color surrounding the text is characteristic of PT. Kereta Api Indonesia (PT. KAI), reinforcing the institutional identity of the service provider. Additionally, the PT. KAI logo on the sign acts as a non-linguistic element that enhances the official and legitimate nature of the text, signaling that this is a government facility.

The symbolic function of this linguistic landscape can be further analyzed. The use of PT. KAI's logo and orange color conveys authority, trust, and stability to viewers, highlighting the government's role in providing organized public transportation. The formal and neat placement of the text, combined with professional visual design, emphasizes modernity and progress. The PT. KAI logo also carries symbolic meaning, indicating that this facility is part of the national transportation system, serving not only local needs but also integrating into Indonesia's wider transport network.

As part of the Top-Down linguistic landscape, the sign at Medan Station is designed and installed by a government agency, PT. Kereta Api Indonesia (PT. KAI). The station name follows official nomenclature, while visual elements such as the PT. KAI logo and the characteristic blue and orange colors reflect the corporate identity directly linked to the government institution. This sign explicitly demonstrates the government's role in providing organized public transportation services. Empirical support for this analysis could be strengthened by user interviews. One user remarked,

"The text and PT. KAI logo are very helpful for us as train passengers to easily locate the station. We instantly recognize the colors and design as part of the government's transportation service." This statement underscores the importance of the visual and textual elements in facilitating navigation for users.

In addition, the description of visual elements provides further clarity. The PT. KAI logo, composed of blue and orange lines, is paired with the "Stasiun Medan" text in bright blue. This combination creates a strong visual appeal while reinforcing the company's identity. These colors not only enhance recognition but also convey professionalism and modernity. From a theoretical perspective, this analysis aligns with Landry and Bourhis' (1997) distinction between the symbolic and informational functions of linguistic landscapes. According to their theory, signs like "Stasiun Medan" not only provide practical information to the public but also represent local identity and existing social structures. This is evident in how the sign reflects the government's role in offering transportation services while symbolizing order and authority. Visually, the image depicts a building with a signboard displaying "Stasiun Medan," predominantly in blue and orange. Additional text such as "layanan pelanggan | customer service" highlights the dual function of the sign as both a guide and a resource for train service users. This combination of linguistic and non-linguistic elements showcases the close connection between the sign, the official identity of PT. KAI, and its purpose as a medium of public communication.



Figure 2. Rail Way Station Road

This image depicts the linguistic landscape of Medan Train Station, reflecting its critical role as a hub of transportation, economic activity, and the identity of Medan City. The name "MEDAN" displayed prominently on a large signboard, accompanied by the "+22M" notation (indicating elevation above sea level), serves a clear informational function. This sign helps passengers and the public quickly identify the station's location. Additionally, the presence of the PT KAI logo on the left side of the "KERETA API" text signifies that this signage is official and managed by a government institution. The informational function of this sign is highly relevant to its role in supporting transportation activities. The station serves not only as a place for boarding and alighting passengers but also as a vital node connecting rail transport with local economic activities. The text and symbols on the signboard clarify the station's position as part of the national transportation network. Symbolically, the PT KAI logo and station name represent the mission, values, and image PT KAI aims to convey. These symbols provide a sense of authority, stability, and order for the public. By displaying the company's identity, the sign communicates professionalism and reliability—core values of PT KAI.

As an example of a Top-Down linguistic landscape (LL), this sign was designed by PT KAI as part of official policy. Visual elements, such as the PT KAI logo and formal design, indicate that the sign is part of governmental management. The orderliness and professionalism displayed in the board's design reflect the involvement of official institutions in ensuring the quality of transportation services. To strengthen this linguistic landscape analysis of Medan Station, empirical data can serve as support. For instance, a station user's interview quote states,

"This sign helps us easily recognize the station. Moreover, the PT KAI logo provides assurance that the service is reliable and officially managed." This quote demonstrates how elements of the station's linguistic landscape, such as the logo and station name, play a crucial role in building trust and facilitating navigation for users.

Visually, the large "MEDAN" sign uses bold blue font against a white background. This combination creates a strong contrast, making it easy to read even from a distance. On the left side of the sign, the PT KAI logo, with its blue and orange stripes, visually reinforces the identity of the institution managing the station. This analysis aligns with Landry and Bourhis' (1997) theory on the symbolic and informational functions of linguistic landscapes. According to the theory, signs like "MEDAN" not only serve practical purposes, such as indicating the station's location, but also carry a strong symbolic dimension. This symbolic dimension is evident in the use of the logo and other visual elements that reflect PT KAI's mission, values, and professionalism as a national transportation provider. The sign also represents local identity and underscores the station's social role as a major transportation hub in the region. The analyzed image showcases the Medan station complex, featuring a large sign with the word "MEDAN" prominently displayed at the front. The sign predominantly uses white with striking blue lettering, while the PT KAI logo is positioned at the top left as an official marker. In the background, the station building is visible, with "STASIUN MEDAN" written atop a tower, providing additional identification of the location. A train is also seen halted on the tracks, illustrating the transportation activities occurring at the station. These elements highlight the synergy between informational and symbolic functions in shaping the linguistic landscape and identity of this area.



Figure 3. Check in Counter

The image above represents an informational function conveyed through a street sign-like display. This linguistic landscape (LL) is classified as Top-Down, referring to an official designation created by the local government. Additionally, the text on the LL board indicates that this is a place to order tickets.

"This check-in machine is very helpful, especially for new users like me. The instructions are clear, and the PT KAI logo immediately assures us that this is an official service," said one station user.

This statement illustrates how the visual and textual elements on the check-in machine not only provide information but also foster trust in the authenticity and credibility of the service. The check-in machine is painted predominantly in orange and white, consistent with PT KAI's corporate identity. The PT KAI logo, featuring dynamic blue and orange stripes, is placed at the top of the machine. The text "KERETA API" followed by the subtitle "Check-In Counter" is presented in a modern sans-serif font, exuding professionalism and readability. These visual elements reinforce the machine's function as an information and navigation tool for users.

This analysis aligns with Landry and Bourhis' (1997) theory on the symbolic and informational functions of linguistic landscapes. In this context, signs like "Check-In Counter" serve an informational purpose by providing operational guidance to users. However, their symbolic function is also significant. The use of the PT KAI logo and corporate orange color creates an association with trusted, official transportation services. The image showcases a row of check-in machines lined up in a section of the train station. Each machine has a uniform design with orange and white as dominant colors, featuring the PT KAI logo at the top. The words "KERETA API" and "Check-In Counter" clearly identify the machine's purpose. Around the machines, several

people can be seen using the check-in services, reflecting everyday activities at the station. In the background, ticket counters and blue information boards provide additional services for passengers.

This combination of elements creates an organized and efficient atmosphere, highlighting the station's role as a transportation hub serving numerous users. This analysis shows that the informational and symbolic functions of the linguistic landscape at this location complement each other, enhancing user experience while reinforcing PT KAI's identity as Indonesia's leading transportation service provider.



Figure 4. Departure of Station

Medan City Station plays a strategic role as a hub for transportation and economic activities, as reflected in its linguistic landscape. In the analyzed image, a large signboard displaying the word "Departure" in two languages, Indonesian and English, is prominently visible. The board is dominated by a yellow background with black text, creating a clear contrast that enhances readability. Additionally, an arrow accompanying the text provides clear directional guidance for passengers, emphasizing the essential informational function of the signage in facilitating navigation within the station. A train featuring PT KAI's signature design, consisting of orange and blue stripes, can be seen in the background, while PT KAI's logo is visible on various elements, such as pillars and the train's body. This logo serves not only as a visual identifier but also as a symbol of the professionalism and reliability of the services managed by the official authority. The orange and white color scheme prevalent in the visual elements reinforces a strong sense of corporate identity.

In the departure area, there is bustling activity, with passengers preparing to board the train. This reflects the station's role as a meeting point for people from diverse backgrounds who use it for work, business, or personal travel. An electronic time display in the area further enhances user convenience by providing real-time departure information. Referring to Landry and Bourhis's (1997) theory, the signs at this station fulfill both informational and symbolic functions. Informationally, the signs and directional markers offer efficient guidance to passengers in locating departure areas. The bilingual nature of the signage demonstrates sensitivity to the needs of both local and international users. Symbolically, PT KAI's logo and its distinctive design reinforce the company's image as a trusted transportation provider and an integral part of the national infrastructure.

4. Discussion

The research process was carried out for three days at the research location, starting with making observations, taking pictures of LL at the Medan city train station as the research location, and determining informants. After finding the informant, the researcher made an agreement with the informant regarding the time and place for the interview. Then, to make the research process easier, the author divides it into several zones, namely the LL board with street names, the LL board with agency names, and the LL board with warnings. From the results of data analysis, monolingual Indonesian and multilingual units were obtained which include Indonesian, English and Bugis. Based on observations and in-depth interviews, LL language at the Medan city train station is dominated by monolingual Indonesian, because PK people find it easier to understand information using Indonesian.

Based on the analysis stage carried out through observation, interviews and documentation, linguistic landscape data on Kambuno Island was obtained. The data obtained was classified into two categories based on Gorter and Cenoz, namely Top-Down and Bottom-Up. Top-Down is text data created by the government,

for example names of government agencies, street names, names of educational institutions, and the like. Meanwhile, Bottom-Up refers to LL text created by private institutions, local residents, individuals, for example, advertisements, notice boards, shop names, product names, and the like. As for the research results obtained regarding language functions, it was found that there were information functions with different zone categories, 1 was found on street signs, 1 was found on the name of the Medan city train station. Meanwhile, the symbolic function was found 1 in the name of the warning board, and 1 was found in the LL board which did not exist. In this case, there is inequality based on the theory used. Based on data analysis regarding the lack of symbolic functions found, this is due to the mindset of the community and the government which has not yet reached the point of utilizing LL in public spaces which can become a means of literacy and cultural preservation through local script writing in the community. What's more, the current digital era has had a big impact on generations, making culture in Indonesia disappear over time.

The dominance of the Indonesian language in the linguistic landscape (LL) at Medan Train Station can be analyzed from a sociolinguistic perspective. As the capital city of North Sumatra Province, Medan is known for its ethnic and linguistic diversity, including Malay, Batak, Minangkabau, Bugis, and others. Despite the multilingual nature of the community, the Indonesian language remains the most effective lingua franca for interethnic communication. Indonesia's national language policy, which designates Indonesian as the official language and the medium of communication in public spaces, further reinforces this dominance. This reflects the government's effort to establish linguistic unity amid cultural diversity, particularly in strategic public spaces like train stations that serve various segments of society.

The dominant use of Indonesian on informational signage at Medan Train Station aims to ensure readability and accessibility for all groups, including local residents and visitors from other regions. This highlights the informational function of the LL as a primary communication tool for effectively guiding the public. However, the lack of symbolic roles found in the signage at Medan Train Station reveals an interesting pattern. Based on analysis, this phenomenon may be linked to the limited attention from the government and local community toward developing the LL as a medium of cultural expression and identity. For instance, despite Medan Train Station being a critical transportation hub in North Sumatra, local cultural representations, such as traditional scripts like Batak or Jawi Malay, are rarely incorporated into informational signage or public markers.

This condition can be compared to other locations with more complex and multilingual linguistic landscapes, such as Seoul, South Korea. In commercial areas of Seoul, the LL is not only used for informational purposes but also for symbolic functions, where shop signs and advertisements often feature the local language (Hangul) combined with English to create a global identity while preserving local cultural heritage. This difference highlights a gap in awareness regarding the importance of LL as a tool for cultural literacy in Indonesia.

The rapid advancement of the digital era also significantly impacts the linguistic landscape. The use of digital signage and online-based promotions has shifted public focus from physical signage to digital media. This phenomenon has further contributed to the lack of development of LL as an educational medium and a means of cultural preservation in public spaces. Therefore, further efforts are needed to encourage the utilization of LL as a medium to promote local culture, such as incorporating traditional scripts or multilingual content that reflects the unique identity of a region.

Thus, this discussion demonstrates that the dominance of the Indonesian language at Medan Train Station is well-grounded in sociolinguistic contexts and national policies. However, the lack of symbolic roles in the LL highlights untapped potential to utilize public spaces as tools for cultural literacy and local identity expression.

5. Conclusion

The linguistic landscape at Medan Railway Station is characterized by its emphasis on informational functions, particularly through the dominance of monolingual Indonesian. This choice of language ensures ease of understanding for the diverse users of the station and aligns with its primary purpose as a medium of communication. The inclusion of logos on billboards also plays a crucial role in enhancing the clarity and credibility of the messages conveyed. However, the symbolic aspect of the linguistic landscape at the station is notably underdeveloped. This limitation can be attributed to a lack of focus on integrating cultural or aesthetic elements into public signage, as well as the community's limited awareness of the potential of linguistic landscapes to serve as cultural and symbolic tools. Despite the strong informational presence, the absence of regional identity markers, such as traditional scripts or multilingual elements, limits the billboards' ability to reflect and celebrate local culture. To address these gaps, several steps can be taken. First, the integration of traditional scripts or motifs, such as Batak or Jawi characters, can enrich the symbolic value of the signage. Second, visual enhancements, such as modern designs, improved color schemes, and digital

billboards, can attract greater public attention. Third, introducing multilingual signs that incorporate English and regional languages would not only accommodate international visitors but also reflect the multicultural nature of Medan. Finally, efforts to raise public awareness about the cultural significance of linguistic landscapes could encourage a greater appreciation for the role of signage in preserving local identity. In summary, while the linguistic landscape at Medan Railway Station effectively fulfills its informational purpose, there is significant potential to enhance its symbolic value. By incorporating cultural and multilingual elements, the station's signage could evolve into a medium that both informs and celebrates Medan's rich cultural diversity, creating a more engaging and inclusive public space for all.

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