

Language Preservation Challenges in Tourism Information Signage at World Heritage Sites

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the challenges of language preservation in tourism information signage at heritage sites. Tourist signage serves as an essential medium of communication, connecting visitors with historical locations and conveying cultural, historical, and identity-related information about a destination. However, common issues include poorly maintained signage, missing or faded information, and outdated translations. Such shortcomings undermine the primary function of signage as a medium for preserving linguistic and heritage information. From a linguistic perspective, weaknesses in translation are evident in spelling errors, inaccurate word choices, rigid sentence structures, and inconsistent terminology between source and target languages. These challenges stem from literal translation practices, insufficient reference to specialized terminology, and the lack of systematic linguistic review. Furthermore, preservation efforts tend to emphasize the physical aspects of signage, such as structural restoration and materials, while linguistic aspects receive less attention. This situation highlights the need for a balance between structural preservation and language maintenance to ensure that signage effectively serves its role as an information conduit. The study proposes that local authorities and relevant agencies conduct regular maintenance of tourism signage, establish language review teams, and adopt communicative translation strategies that consider cultural contexts and tourists' needs. Overall, language preservation in tourist signage not only enhances the effectiveness of information delivery but also contributes to safeguarding heritage identity, strengthening destination image, and enriching the tourism experience.

Keywords: language preservation, tourism information signage, World Heritage Sites

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a vehicle for communication, it is equally a vital medium through which information is conveyed, cultural identity is shaped, and the historical values of a society are preserved. As Crystal (2000) asserts, language functions as an indispensable medium for sustaining the continuity of cultural heritage. Within the sphere of tourism, the use of language in information signage at World Heritage Sites extends beyond the delivery of practical information; it simultaneously signifies deliberate efforts to safeguard local languages that embody the distinctive identity of each destination.

Mansoor, Hamzah, and Shangeetha (2024) emphasize that language choice in signage has significant implications for the effectiveness of communication across diverse audiences, while simultaneously preserving the symbolic value of the national language. This argument aligns with the findings of Lei and Teng (2024), who examined the linguistic landscape of Guilin, China, and revealed that tourism signage extends beyond the delivery of information, serving as a means to construct a world-class destination image through the interplay of language, imagery, and symbols.

This significance is consistent with the development of tourism at World Heritage Sites in Malaysia, particularly Melaka and George Town, which are recognized by UNESCO as major tourist destinations. Both cities stand out in terms of cultural heritage as they reflect the interaction of multiple civilizations through their architecture, urban structure, and living traditions. In addition, these historic cities bear testimony to a long-standing history of maritime and trade networks that have flourished for centuries, thereby attracting both

domestic and international visitors. This underscores the need for effective communication strategies through tourism signage that is informative, user-friendly, and attuned to cultural diversity.

In 2024, Melaka recorded a cumulative total of 12.325 million tourist arrivals, comprising 9.43 million domestic tourists and 2.98 million international visitors (Tourism Malaysia, 2024). Meanwhile, Penang reported over 8.23 million tourist hotel stays, with approximately 5.2 million domestic tourists and more than 3 million international visitors (Buletin Mutiara, 2024). These figures clearly demonstrate that Melaka and George Town are not only significant as domestic tourism destinations but also hold strategic value at the international level. Consequently, the demand for tourism signage capable of meeting multilingual communication needs has become increasingly pressing.

The large influx of tourists poses significant challenges to language preservation at these heritage destinations. Mansoor et al. (2024) stress that the effectiveness of signage depends on message clarity, linguistic accuracy, and cultural sensitivity. When these aspects are neglected, there is a risk not only of communication breakdown with international audiences but also of the erosion of local linguistic identity. Therefore, language preservation within the context of tourism signage at World Heritage Sites requires serious attention, so that the function of language may be strengthened not merely in terms of communicative utility but also in sustaining the cultural heritage of the nation.

LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE IN TOURISM

The concept of Linguistic Landscape (LL) refers to the presence of language in public spaces, manifested through signage, billboards, street names, and various other visual materials that reflect the identity of a community. Contemporary studies emphasize that the Linguistic Landscape not only illustrates linguistic diversity but also reflects power relations between dominant and minority languages (Lei & Teng, 2024). In the context of tourism, the Linguistic Landscape assumes a more complex role as it functions both as a medium for information dissemination and as a representation of local cultural identity. According to Pérez-Sabater and Montero-Fleta (2023), tourism signage does more than guide visitors through physical spaces; it also contributes to their understanding of historical values and cultural heritage, thereby shaping a more meaningful tourism experience.

The preservation of language within the linguistic landscape continues to face significant challenges. For instance, George Town UNESCO World Heritage Site Special Area Plan (Replacement) 2030, which serves as a planning document for heritage conservation and development, does not provide detailed attention to language preservation in tourism information signage (George Town World Heritage Incorporated [GTWHI], 2020). This omission raises concerns that translation errors or lexical weaknesses in signage may persist without a clear corrective mechanism. Such a gap illustrates the imbalance between efforts to conserve physical heritage and those directed at safeguarding linguistic heritage.

Accordingly, studies on the linguistic landscape of World Heritage Sites deserve serious attention to ensure the sustainability of language within the tourism sector. Language preservation in the linguistic landscape is not merely about maintaining semantic authenticity but also about safeguarding the cultural values and identities of local communities from being eroded by the forces of globalization. This becomes particularly significant as World Heritage Sites are often international focal points, positioning language as a medium that conveys the nation's image on the global stage.

LANGUAGE PRESERVATION IN TOURISM SIGNAGE AT WORLD HERITAGE SITES

The preservation of language in tourism signage has increasingly gained scholarly attention, as it functions not only as a channel of information but also as a medium of cultural and heritage communication to international audiences. Uysal (2022) asserts that signage should not be viewed merely as a navigational tool, but rather as a semiotic text that conveys meanings about the identity and distinctiveness of a community. Accordingly, linguistic accuracy and translation quality are crucial in maintaining the authenticity of historical and cultural

information. Any shortcomings, particularly in lexical choices and terminology, risk leading to cultural misinterpretation and, ultimately, undermining the overall tourism experience.

Nevertheless, current studies reveal significant challenges in safeguarding language preservation at tourist destinations. Globalization and the demands of tourism commercialization have driven the dominance of international languages, particularly English, in signage. According to Çalışkan (2024), such dominance inadvertently diminishes the visibility of local languages, raising concerns over the sustainability of a community's linguistic heritage. This phenomenon is not only evident in international tourist destinations but is also relevant in Malaysia, where Malay, the national language, is not always prioritized in tourist information signage.

In the context of official planning, the gap in language preservation can be observed in the George Town UNESCO World Heritage Site Special Area Plan (Replacement) 2030, which emphasizes physical and economic development but does not provide detailed mechanisms for language preservation (George Town World Heritage Incorporated [GTWHI], 2020). The absence of specific guidelines leaves room for various issues, including the use of mixed languages, grammatical errors, and inaccurate translations. Such circumstances may undermine the image of the World Heritage Site, as language is a crucial component in maintaining the authenticity of a location's identity.

Marín-Gutiérrez et al. (2023) emphasize that language preservation in signage should be prioritized equally with the preservation of physical heritage. This is because signage not only conveys information but also shapes the way tourists perceive and appreciate local heritage. Moreover, the failure to ensure high language quality in signage may negatively affect tourists' perceptions of the professionalism and credibility of World Heritage Site management. Therefore, this literature review highlights that language preservation in tourism signage is a critical aspect that requires greater attention from policymakers, heritage site managers, and academics in safeguarding linguistic and cultural sustainability in the era of tourism globalization.

GLOBALIZATION AND THE MARGINALIZATION OF LOCAL LANGUAGES IN TOURISM SIGNAGE

The concept of Linguistic Landscape (LL) has emerged as a critical dimension in understanding the role of language within tourism spaces. Beyond functioning as a communicative medium, LL operates as a symbolic marker of cultural and social identity within a community. Lei and Teng (2024) argue that LL reflects the dynamics of power between dominant and minority languages, thereby revealing underlying sociolinguistic hierarchies. However, within tourism contexts, its role becomes more complex. Furthermore, signage functions not only as a channel of practical information but also as a representational medium of cultural identity that shapes tourists' perceptions of authenticity (Pérez-Sabater & Montero-Fleta, 2023). In this regard, language preservation in tourism signage extends beyond the informative dimension, serving as a vital mechanism in safeguarding and reinforcing local cultural heritage.

Although its significance is widely acknowledged, several studies highlight a persistent gap between the theoretical emphasis on language preservation and its actual implementation in practice. Uysal (2022) underscores that tourism signage should be understood as semiotic texts that serve to educate tourists about local culture. However, the forces of globalization and the pressures of commercialization have accelerated the dominance of international languages, particularly English, thereby marginalizing the visibility of local languages (Çalışkan, 2024). This phenomenon presents significant challenges to the preservation of national and local languages within the context of World Heritage Tourism.

In George Town, Khoo (2023) reports that signage along Armenian Street contains inaccurate English translations while simultaneously overlooking the use of Malay, the national language. For example, the term "*Clan Jetty*" is presented solely in English without an equivalent in the national language, despite its deep connection to the identity of the local community. A similar issue is observed in Melaka, where Mohd Yusof and Ibrahim (2022) identify lexical mistranslations in signage around A Famosa and the Stadthuys, which pose the risk of misleading international visitors. Collectively, these examples underscore systemic shortcomings in

the linguistic quality assurance of heritage signage, revealing an urgent need for more rigorous monitoring mechanisms to safeguard both communicative accuracy and cultural authenticity.

INSTITUTIONAL ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN LANGUAGE PRESERVATION

The involvement of relevant authorities is a key determinant in ensuring the effectiveness of language preservation. The Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) holds responsibility for formulating policies and guidelines on language use within the tourism sector, including signage at World Heritage Sites. At the same time, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) plays a pivotal role in reviewing and standardizing terminology, while also ensuring that the national language adheres to official standards (Ismail & Hassan, 2023).

In addition, state governments and local authorities share the responsibility of enforcing compliance with these guidelines through continuous monitoring of tourism signage on site. At the same time, the involvement of local communities and tourism operators is equally important, as they possess linguistic and cultural knowledge that can help ensure both semantic accuracy and linguistic authenticity in signage. A collaborative approach of this nature has proven effective in Seoul, South Korea, where cooperation between local government and national language institutions has successfully enhanced the quality of signage while simultaneously preserving linguistic identity (Kim & Lee, 2024).

Ismail and Hassan (2023) emphasize that the governance of language policy in tourism must be aligned with economic development strategies to prevent an imbalance between the accessibility of information for international tourists and the preservation of local linguistic identity. Evidence from Barcelona (García, 2022) indicates that signage that fails to comply with official language norms not only undermines cultural identity but also damages the professional image of tourism management. Therefore, in the Malaysian context, the active involvement of relevant authorities in monitoring and coordinating language use is crucial to ensure that linguistic heritage is preserved alongside the development of the tourism sector.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the challenges of language preservation in tourism signage at World Heritage Sites in Malaysia, particularly in Melaka and George Town. Language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a marker of cultural identity and linguistic heritage. Key issues include inaccurate translations, inconsistent language use, and neglect of the local language, which may undermine tourist experience and destination credibility. The active involvement of authorities, including MOTAC, DBP, state governments, and local councils, alongside community participation, is critical to effective preservation. A comprehensive approach integrating policy, implementation, and public awareness will strengthen Malaysia's position as a World Heritage tourism destination that is both linguistically and culturally authentic.

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