

## More Than Words: Connecting Diverse Communities Through Public Signage Translation in Demak Regency

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### Abstract

In heritage destinations like Demak Regency, public signage is a critical interface for connecting with diverse, international communities. Proper translation can transform these signs into linguistic bridges, fostering inclusivity and a welcoming atmosphere. This study investigates how current translation practices on public signage in Demak support or undermines this goal. The research employs a qualitative case study methodology, analyzing 50 bilingual signs through a dual framework: assessing accuracy using the model by Nababan et al. (2012) and evaluating the effectiveness of intercultural community bridging using a framework adapted from Byram (1997). The findings reveal that an over-reliance on the literal translation technique is systemic. This results in an average accuracy score of 2.22 (Less Accurate) and, more critically, an average community bridging score of 2.0 (Moderate). This demonstrates that even when translations are partially understandable, they frequently fail as acts of intercultural hospitality, creating linguistic and cultural barriers. This paper argues that a conscious shift from literalism towards functional, target-oriented techniques like established equivalence is essential. By doing so, Demak can transform its public signage from simple directives into powerful tools that are "more than words," enhancing intercultural understanding and solidifying its status as an accessible global heritage site.

**Keywords:** *demak regency, intercultural communication, public signage, translation accuracy, translation techniques.*

### INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia's linguistic landscape, multilingual signage is a defining feature of major metropolitan hubs, strategically employed to project an image of global accessibility [1]. However, a different dynamic unfolds in heritage towns like Demak Regency, which function as the nation's cultural and spiritual heartlands. As a historic center of Islam, Demak attracts a significant volume of domestic and international visitors, making its public spaces critical sites for intercultural communication [2]. This study is anchored in the premise that public-facing translation is not merely a linguistic transfer but a sociolinguistic act of hospitality that can either bridge communities or create barriers.

This research addresses a critical disjuncture observed in Demak: the prevalent use of translation practices on public signage that inadvertently erect linguistic and cultural obstacles. From a functionalist translation perspective, these are not simply grammatical mistakes but communicative failures. They represent an inability to mediate the source culture's intended message with the target audience's linguistic and cultural expectations, leading to misinterpretation and a diminished sense of welcome.

Preliminary observations reveal a consistent pattern of such failures. For instance, the

prohibitory sign *Dilarang Merokok* is often rendered as 'No Smoking Here,' a grammatically sound but less idiomatic alternative to the universally recognized 'No Smoking.' More significantly, a directional sign for the revered *Makam Sunan Kalijaga* (Tomb of Sunan Kalijaga) may be translated as 'Sunan Kalijaga Grave,' a choice that strips the term of its cultural and religious resonance. Informational signs also exhibit structural awkwardness; translating *Area Parkir Khusus Pengunjung* as 'Parking Area Visitor Special' is a word-for-word transfer that is incomprehensible. These examples highlight a translation approach that prioritizes literalism over communicative efficacy, which constitutes the central problem for this investigation.

The significance of this issue is amplified by Demak's status as a major religious tourism destination. During the 2024 Eid holiday period alone, its primary sites attracted nearly 200,000 visitors, with annual figures reaching into the millions [3]. This high traffic, comprising pilgrims and tourists from diverse linguistic backgrounds, transforms every public sign into a crucial point of intercultural interaction. Flawed translations thus have a widespread impact, undermining the region's capacity to project a welcoming and accessible identity.

This research builds upon, yet diverges from, existing scholarship, establishing its unique contribution. Studies in Indonesia have often focused on cataloging translation errors in urban spaces [4] or the sociolinguistics of specific communities [5]. Internationally, the field of linguistic landscapes, pioneered by Landry and Bourhis [1], has been expanded by scholars like Cenoz and Gorter [6] to analyze multilingualism, while Jaworski and Thurlow [7] have explored the semiotics of tourist spaces. Others, like Kelly-Holmes [8], have examined the branding function of language in tourism, and Spolsky [9] has provided foundational work on language policy. However, a significant gap persists in research that explicitly connects specific translation techniques to the broader social function of intercultural hospitality, particularly within non-metropolitan heritage sites. The novelty of this study lies in its synthesis: it applies a functionalist framework to investigate how linguistic choices on public signage directly contribute to or detract from community bridging. It moves beyond identifying errors to question how translation can be optimized as a conscious tool for fostering hospitality.

To address this gap, this study is guided by the following research question: How do the translation techniques employed on public signage in Demak's heritage sites affect translational accuracy and the performance of intercultural hospitality? Accordingly, this research aims to identify the dominant translation techniques used, analyze their impact on message accuracy and cultural appropriateness; and propose a culturally-aware framework for public signage translation in similar heritage contexts. This investigation is not merely an academic exercise; it is a necessary step toward improving the visitor experience and aligning Demak's public presentation with its status as a world-class heritage destination.

## METHOD

This research employed a qualitative case study design, a methodology chosen for its strength in providing a deep and holistic understanding of a specific phenomenon within its real-world context [10]. The data for this study comprise linguistic units (words, phrases, and clauses) sourced from bilingual (Indonesian-English) public signage across Demak Regency.

Data collection was conducted through documentation, which involved systematically photographing signs at key public and tourist locations. Using purposive sampling, signs were selected to ensure a representative and varied corpus, covering different functions (e.g.,

prohibitory, informational, directional) and locations (e.g., Bus Terminal, Tourist & Heritage Sites, Commercial Areas). This sampling strategy was designed to capture the full spectrum of translation practices in the area, rather than to achieve statistical generalizability [11]. The data analysis was performed qualitatively in two sequential stages. In the first stage, each translation was systematically analyzed to identify the translation techniques employed, using the comprehensive model proposed by Molina and Albir [12]. Following this, the translational accuracy of each sign was evaluated using the three-tier assessment model developed by Nababan et al. [13], which classifies translations as accurate, less accurate, or inaccurate, detailed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Accuracy Parameters of Translation**

Level	Score	Description
Accurate	3	The meaning of words, technical terms, phrases, clauses, or sentences from the source language is fully and precisely conveyed into the target language without any distortion
Less Accurate	2	The majority of the meaning from the source language is conveyed correctly. However, there are still some distortions, additions, or omissions of meaning that interfere with the integrity of the message.
Inaccurate	1	The meaning of words, technical terms, phrases, clauses, or sentences from the source language is not accurately conveyed into the target language or is completely omitted

(Source: Nababan, et al (2012))

Beyond technical accuracy, the analysis proceeded to a second, more interpretive stage to assess each translation's contribution to intercultural community bridging. This was evaluated using a qualitative framework adapted from Michael Byram's model of Intercultural Communicative Competence [14], which provides robust parameters for how language can foster openness and understanding between cultures (Table 2). This stage examined whether a translation felt welcoming and culturally sensitive or if it created barriers for visitors.

**Table 2. Intercultural Community Bridging Assessment Parameters**

Level	Score	Description
High	3	The translation actively fosters connection. It is culturally sensitive, idiomatic, and uses a welcoming tone. It successfully bridges cultural gaps by adapting concepts appropriately, making visitors feel acknowledged and included.
Moderate	2	The translation is understandable but lacks cultural nuance or a welcoming tone. It may be technically correct but feels sterile or slightly awkward. It does not hinder communication but does little to actively build a bridge between communities.
Low	1	The translation creates barriers. It is confusing, culturally inappropriate,

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or alienating. It may cause misunderstanding or reinforce a sense of "otherness," negatively impacting the visitor's experience and failing to connect with the target audience.

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(Source Michael Byram (1997))

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, data verification was achieved through investigator triangulation [15]. This process involved having a fellow researcher in Translation Studies independently analyze a subset of the data using the same analytical framework. The findings were then compared and discussed to confirm analytical consistency, thereby enhancing the credibility and reliability of the research outcomes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the analysis of bilingual signs from Demak Regency, addressing the research question of how translation techniques affect accuracy (Bahasa Source Text – ST and English Target Text – TT) and intercultural community bridging. The findings reveal two dominant, opposing trends: a widespread reliance on literal translation, which frequently results in communicative failure, and the successful but less common use of established equivalence. This discussion is structured thematically around these two patterns to demonstrate how specific technical choices produce vastly different outcomes in fostering intercultural hospitality.

The most prevalent technique observed in the data was literal translation. This approach, as defined by Molina and Albir, involves a word-for-word rendering from the source to the target language, often neglecting contextual and idiomatic conventions. While sometimes functional, this method was the primary source of inaccuracies and cultural barriers in Demak's public signage.

Analysis of Signage at Public Facilities (Prayer Area, Terminal, Toilets)

Data 001 (Public Prayer Area)

ST: *Wajib Lepas Alas Kaki*

TT: Release Your Footwear

The analysis of this sign reveals a critical failure in both accuracy and cultural bridging. The verb "Release" is a highly inaccurate lexical choice for the context of removing shoes, where "Remove" or "Take Off" are the standard terms. This literal translation of *lepas* likely stems from a dictionary-first approach without considering context, rendering the message awkward and unclear (Accuracy Score: 1 - Inaccurate). Consequently, this creates a significant cultural barrier. Instead of a clear, respectful instruction, the visitor is met with a confusing command that feels alien and unprofessional. It fails to connect with the visitor and may cause hesitation or misunderstanding at the entrance to a sacred space, directly undermining the goal of creating a welcoming environment (Bridging Score: 1 - Low).

Data 002 (Bus Terminal)

ST: *Jalur Keberangkatan Bus Antar Kota*

TT: Intercity Bus Departure Line

This translation is largely successful but illustrates a subtle shortcoming in achieving full idiomatic equivalence. The translation is accurate in conveying the core components of the message, it is for intercity buses that are departing (Accuracy Score: 3 - Accurate). However, the use of "Line" instead of the more standard "Lane" or "Bay" for a bus terminal context makes the translation moderately less effective at bridging. An international visitor would understand the

meaning, but the slightly unnatural word choice marks the sign as a translation and lacks the full professionalism of a native-equivalent text. It is functional but does not achieve the highest level of seamless communication (Bridging Score: 2 - Moderate).

Data 003 (Public Toilet)

ST: *Toilet Gratis*

TT: Free Toilet

In this case, the translation is understandable but misses the mark on standard terminology. While "Toilet" is used in English, "Restroom," "Washroom," or "WC" are often more common in public signage, and "Free" is less idiomatic than "No Charge." The message is mostly conveyed, but the direct word-for-word translation feels slightly unnatural (Accuracy Score: 2 - Less Accurate). This minor awkwardness results in a moderate bridging score. The sign does its basic job, but it lacks the polish that signals a truly visitor-aware environment. It is a missed opportunity to use standard, globally recognized terms that would create a smoother experience (Bridging Score: 2 - Moderate).

Analysis of Signage at Tourist & Heritage Sites

Data 004 (Heritage Site)

ST: *Dilarang Menyentuh Benda Pusaka*

TT: Do Not Touch the Heritage

This translation is a prime example of a grammatical and semantic error that renders the message nonsensical. "Heritage" is an abstract noun and cannot be "touched." The correct term would be "artifacts," "exhibits," or "relics." By translating *Benda Pusaka* to "Heritage," the sign becomes fundamentally inaccurate and confusing (Accuracy Score: 1 - Inaccurate). This error creates a major barrier to communication. A visitor would likely be baffled by the instruction, undermining the authority and seriousness of the prohibition. This failure to use appropriate terminology completely prevents the sign from fulfilling its protective function and alienates the reader through its linguistic strangeness (Bridging Score: 1 - Low).

Data 005 (Tourist Site Entrance)

ST: *Selamat Datang di Kota Wali*

TT: Welcome to the City of Guardian

The translation of Demak's famous epithet, *Kota Wali* (City of the Wali Songo/Saints), is a case of literal translation that loses its profound cultural meaning. While *wali* can mean guardian, in this specific context it refers to the revered saints who spread Islam in Java. Translating it to the singular "Guardian" is not only grammatically questionable but also strips the phrase of its historical and religious significance, making it less accurate (Accuracy Score: 2 - Less Accurate). For a visitor with some knowledge of Indonesian history, the translation is confusing. For others, it presents a vague and uninviting image. It fails to bridge the cultural gap because it does not convey the unique identity of the city, representing a missed opportunity to introduce visitors to a core aspect of Demak's heritage (Bridging Score: 2 - Moderate).

Data 006 (Slippery Area at a Tourist Site)

ST: *Awas, Lantai Licin*

TT: Warning, Slippery Floor

This translation is highly effective on all fronts. It accurately conveys the warning and the specific hazard, using standard and universally understood terminology (Accuracy Score: 3 - Accurate). By employing the standard international phrasing for this type of warning, the sign

successfully bridges the communication gap. It is clear, direct, and immediately recognizable, ensuring visitor safety without causing confusion. This use of conventional language fosters a sense of a well-managed and safe environment, thus achieving a high level of intercultural connection (Bridging Score: 3 - High).

Analysis of Signage in Commercial & Open-Access Areas

Data 007 (Cafe)

ST: *Pesan & Bayar di Sini*

TT: Order & Pay Here

This is a flawless translation that is both accurate and effective. The verbs "Order" and "Pay" are the precise equivalents, and the deictic "Here" provides clear instruction. The message is conveyed without any distortion or ambiguity (Accuracy Score: 3 - Accurate). This sign achieves a high bridging score because it uses simple, direct, and universally understood language for a common commercial transaction. It is efficient and welcoming, reducing any potential confusion for a visitor and facilitating a smooth customer experience. It is a perfect example of translation that works seamlessly to connect with its audience (Bridging Score: 3 - High).

Data 008 (Gas Station/SPBU)

ST: *Matikan Mesin*

TT: Turn Off Machine

The translation of *Mesin* to "Machine" in the context of a vehicle is a significant lexical error. The correct term is "Engine." While a driver might infer the intended meaning, the word choice is inaccurate and could cause a moment of confusion in a potentially hazardous environment (Accuracy Score: 2 - Less Accurate). This inaccuracy leads to a low bridging score. In a safety-critical context like a gas station, clarity and standard terminology are paramount. The use of an incorrect key term like "Machine" appears unprofessional and careless, eroding trust and creating a communicative barrier where none should exist (Bridging Score: 1 - Low).

Data 009 (Town Square)

ST: *Jaga Kebersihan Lingkungan*

TT: Keep The Environment Clean

This translation is accurate, clear, and grammatically correct. It effectively conveys the public service announcement to maintain cleanliness (Accuracy Score: 3 - Accurate). The phrase is a standard, polite directive used globally, making it highly effective at bridging communities. It appeals to a shared universal value, environmental cleanliness using language that is both natural and respectful. It successfully communicates a civic duty without feeling overly aggressive or strange, thereby fostering a sense of shared responsibility and connection (Bridging Score: 3 - High).

This findings pattern is starkly evident in signs where literalism leads to critical lexical and semantic errors. For instance, the instruction at a prayer area, *Wajib Lepas Alas Kaki*, was translated as 'Release Your Footwear' (Data 001). Choosing "Release" over the standard "Remove" is a classic error of decontextualized word selection, resulting in a message that is both confusing and unnatural (Accuracy: 1 - Inaccurate). This failure creates a significant cultural barrier, undermining the respect expected at a sacred site and negatively impacting the visitor experience (Bridging: 1 - Low). Similarly, the sign *Dilarang Menyentuh Benda Pusaka* at a heritage site was rendered as 'Do Not Touch the Heritage' (Data 004). This translation is nonsensical, as "heritage" is an abstract concept that cannot be touched. The literal choice

fundamentally misrepresents the source meaning ("artifacts" or "relics"), making the prohibition confusing and undermining its authority (Accuracy: 1 - Inaccurate; Bridging: 1 - Low). Literal translation also proved inadequate for culturally specific concepts. Demak's epithet, *Kota Wali*, was translated as 'Welcome to the City of Guardian' (Data 005). This singular, generic term strips the phrase of its rich historical meaning referring to the nine revered saints (*Wali Songo*). While partially understandable, the translation fails to convey Demak's unique cultural identity, representing a missed opportunity for intercultural introduction (Accuracy: 2 - Less Accurate; Bridging: 2 - Moderate). This demonstrates that a technically "correct" word can still fail communicatively when cultural context is ignored.

In contrast to the failures of literalism, a small subset of signs demonstrated high effectiveness by employing established equivalence. This technique involves using a term or expression recognized as the standard target-language equivalent in a specific context (e.g., a fixed phrase on a warning sign). A clear example is the sign *Awat, Lantai Licin*, translated as 'Warning, Slippery Floor' (Data 006). This phrasing is the universally accepted international standard for such a hazard. Its immediate recognizability ensures visitor safety without causing confusion, thereby fostering a sense of a well-managed and secure environment (Accuracy: 3 - Accurate; Bridging: 3 - High). Likewise, in a commercial setting, *Pesan & Bayar di Sini* was flawlessly rendered as 'Order & Pay Here' (Data 007). This use of simple, direct, and standard transactional language facilitates a smooth customer experience, perfectly connecting with a global audience (Accuracy: 3 - Accurate; Bridging: 3 - High). These successful cases underscore that effective public translation relies not on inventing new phrases but on adopting conventional, globally understood terminology.

To quantify these observed patterns, the average scores for both accuracy and intercultural bridging were calculated for nine representative data points, categorized by the primary translation technique identified.

**Table 3. Average scores for accuracy and intercultural bridging based on translation techniques**

Data	Translation Technique Used	Accuracy Score	Bridging Score
001	Literal translation	1	1
002	Literal translation	3	2
003	Literal translation	2	2
004	Literal translation	1	1
005	Literal translation	2	2
006	Established equivalence	3	3
007	Established equivalence	3	3
008	Literal translation	2	1
009	Established equivalence	3	3
Average		2.22	2.0

The data reveals a stark contrast. The six data of literal translation yielded an average bridging score of just 1.5, highlighting its tendency to create barriers. Conversely, the three examples of established equivalence all achieved perfect scores (3.0), demonstrating their

superior efficacy.

The overall average Bridging Score of 2.0 (Moderate) reveals the core finding of this study: Demak's public signage, while occasionally accurate, consistently fails to perform an act of welcome. The prevailing translation philosophy appears to be a technical exercise in word replacement rather than a social act of communication. This results in a linguistic landscape that often feels alienating and unprofessional, undermining the region's goal of becoming a truly accessible and hospitable international heritage destination.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the translation of public signage in Demak Regency is fundamentally undermined by an over-reliance on literal translation. This approach produces messages that are not only frequently inaccurate but, more critically, fail as acts of intercultural hospitality, achieving only a moderate score for community bridging. The findings affirm this study's central thesis: effective public signage requires a translation philosophy that moves beyond mere lexical equivalence toward nuanced cultural mediation. Without this shift, signage can inadvertently create linguistic and social barriers for the very communities it aims to serve.

Based on these findings, this research strongly recommends that Demak's Tourism Office (Dinas Pariwisata), municipal authorities, and heritage site managers move beyond ad-hoc translation practices. It is imperative to implement professional standards that prioritize functional techniques like established equivalence and to engage qualified language experts in the process. The implications are twofold: methodologically, this study offers a broadened framework for translation quality assessment by integrating intercultural competence. Socially, it provides a clear model for other heritage destinations on the vital role of quality translation in fostering a genuinely welcoming tourism environment.

The authors acknowledge several limitations that offer avenues for future inquiry. First, the analysis was confined to the Indonesian-English language pair, while other significant visitor languages, such as Arabic, were not examined. Second, the findings are based on a qualitative analysis of purposively selected signs and are therefore illustrative rather than statistically generalizable. Finally, this research focused on textual analysis and did not include reception studies to measure the direct impact of the signage on visitors' experiences.

These limitations directly inform clear pathways for future research. Subsequent studies could build upon this foundation by conducting reception studies to directly measure audience impact and comprehension, providing empirical data on actual visitor experiences. Furthermore, expanding the analysis to other relevant language pairs is a crucial next step; given Demak's status as a key Islamic heritage site, investigating Indonesian-Arabic signage would be particularly insightful. Finally, a longitudinal study designed to assess the real-world effects of implementing improved, professional translation standards over time would offer invaluable data on the long-term benefits of creating a more culturally-aware and hospitable linguistic landscape.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Politeknik Negeri Jakarta grant numbers 217/PL3.A.10/PT.00.06/2025.

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