



## VISUAL MEANING-MAKING IN SIGNAGE TRANSLATION: A MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF INDONESIAN–ENGLISH PUBLIC SIGNS

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### ABSTRACT

Public signage constitutes a multimodal text in which images and verbal language jointly construct meaning for a linguistically diverse audience. This study investigates how visual meaning-making operates in the Indonesian-to-English translation of public signage, focusing on how pictorial elements support, reinforce, or independently convey meaning across languages. Using multimodal discourse analysis grounded in Kress and van Leeuwen's Social Semiotic framework, three bilingual public signs from restroom and building environments in Indonesia were examined, comprising instructional signs pairing pictograms with bilingual text and a directional-cautionary sign combining an evacuation icon with a belongings-security icon. The analysis focuses on the intersemiotic relationship between image and text and how this relationship is maintained or renegotiated in translation. Findings indicate that images often bear communicative weight equal to, or greater than, the verbal text, allowing translators to prioritize brevity while relying on the image to sustain comprehension. Strategies such as omission, condensation, and functional equivalence emerge as made possible by the semiotic support of images. This study contributes to translation studies by foregrounding visual meaning-making in signage translation and offers implications for translators and signage designers in bilingual public spaces.

**Keywords:** *visual meaning-making; multimodal translation; public signage; image-text relation; translation strategy*

### INTRODUCTION

Public signage is one of the most pervasive forms of written communication in urban and institutional spaces, guiding, instructing, and regulating the behavior of the public. In multilingual societies such as Indonesia, signage is frequently presented bilingually, combining Indonesian and English to accommodate both local and international audiences. However, public signage rarely relies on verbal text alone; it is typically accompanied by pictograms, icons, symbols, or other visual elements that work together with the written message to construct meaning. This combination of visual and verbal modes positions

signage as a multimodal text, one in which meaning is distributed across, rather than confined to, a single semiotic mode (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Within translation studies, signage has traditionally been analyzed primarily through its verbal dimension, focusing on lexical accuracy, grammatical correctness, and pragmatic appropriateness in the target language (Newmark, 1988). Yet such an approach risks overlooking the communicative function of the image, which in many cases carries equal or even greater semiotic weight than the accompanying text. Research in linguistic landscape studies has shown that public signs are shaped not only by linguistic choices but also by visual design, spatial placement, and iconography, all of which contribute to how meaning is constructed and interpreted by the public (Backhaus, 2007; Gorter, 2006). This suggests that translating signage cannot be adequately understood as a purely linguistic transfer from a source language to a target language; it must instead be approached as an act of multimodal meaning-making, in which the translator negotiates the relationship between image and text.

The functionalist perspective in translation studies further supports this view. According to Skopos theory, the purpose (*skopos*) of a translation determines the strategies employed by the translator, including decisions about what information is retained, omitted, or condensed in the target text (Reiss & Vermeer, 2014). In the context of public signage, where space is limited and the primary goal is immediate comprehension, translators often produce shorter or simplified English texts compared to their Indonesian counterparts. This study argues that such condensation is frequently made possible precisely because the accompanying image already conveys part of the intended meaning, allowing the verbal text to function as a supplementary rather than the sole carrier of information. This relationship between image and text has been theorized within social semiotics through concepts such as anchorage, relay, and elaboration, which describe how visual and verbal elements can reinforce, extend, or independently contribute to a text's overall meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Barthes, 1977).

Despite the growing body of research on linguistic landscapes and multimodal discourse, studies that specifically examine the interaction between image and text in the translation of Indonesian–English public signage remain limited. Most existing studies on signage translation in Indonesia tend to focus on translation errors or lexical equivalence (Machali, 2012), while studies on multimodality in Indonesia have largely been applied to advertising or educational materials rather than to public signage (Anstey & Bull, 2010). Consequently, there is a need for research that bridges translation studies and multimodal discourse analysis to better understand how visual elements shape, support, and sometimes substitute for verbal translation choices in public spaces.

This study addresses this gap by examining three bilingual public signs collected from public restroom and bus-station building in Indonesia. Each sign combines a pictogram with bilingual Indonesian–English text, offering a suitable case for analyzing the intersemiotic relationship between image and translated text. Specifically, this study aims to (1) identify the semiotic function of images in relation to the verbal text in each sign, and (2) examine how this image-text relationship influences the translation strategies employed in rendering the Indonesian text into English. By foregrounding the role of visual meaning-making, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of signage translation as a multimodal, rather than purely linguistic, practice.



## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with multimodal discourse analysis as its primary analytical method. Qualitative research is considered appropriate for this study because it allows for an in-depth, interpretive examination of how meaning is constructed through the interaction of visual and verbal elements in a specific communicative context, rather than seeking to generalize findings across a large sample (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Multimodal discourse analysis, in particular, provides the analytical tools necessary to investigate texts in which meaning is distributed across more than one semiotic mode, such as image and language, as is characteristic of public signage (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

The data of this study consist of three bilingual public signs collected through direct photographic documentation in bus-station building and restroom environments in Indonesia. The three signs were purposively selected because each combines a pictogram or icon with bilingual Indonesian–English verbal text, thereby fulfilling the multimodal criterion required for this analysis. The signs comprise: (1) an instructional sign featuring a water-droplet icon accompanied by the text "Flush Before and After Use" and its Indonesian equivalent "Siramlah Sebelum dan Sesudah Pemakaian"; (2) an instructional sign featuring a foot-operated flush icon accompanied by the text "Foot Flush" and its Indonesian equivalent "Pompa Kaki untuk Menyiram"; and (3) a directional and cautionary sign combining an evacuation-route pictogram and a belongings-security icon with the bilingual texts "Jalur Evakuasi / Evacuation Route" and "Jaga barang bawaan Anda / Please keep your belongings at all times." These three signs were chosen to represent variation in sign function, ranging from procedural instruction to directional and cautionary information, thus enabling a richer analysis of how image-text relationships may differ according to communicative purpose.

Data collection was carried out through field observation and photographic documentation. Each sign was photographed in its original context to preserve information regarding its visual layout, color coding, iconography, and spatial arrangement of text, as these elements are integral to multimodal meaning-making (Jewitt, 2009). The verbal texts in both Indonesian and English were transcribed exactly as they appeared on each sign to maintain accuracy for subsequent linguistic analysis.

The collected data were analyzed using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework of visual and verbal intersemiotic relations, which distinguishes the ways images and text can relate to one another, including elaboration, extension, and reinforcement of meaning. The analytical procedure consisted of three stages. First, each sign was described in terms of its visual components (pictogram type, color, symbolic convention) and verbal components (Indonesian source text and English target text). Second, the relationship between the image and the verbal text in the source (Indonesian) version was identified, followed by the same identification in the target (English) version, in order to observe whether the intersemiotic relationship was maintained, strengthened, or altered in translation. Third, the translation strategies applied in rendering the Indonesian text into English—such as omission, condensation, addition, or functional equivalence (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995/2000)—were identified and interpreted in relation to the semiotic support provided by the accompanying image. This analytical procedure allows the study to demonstrate not merely what linguistic changes occur in translation, but why such changes are communicatively viable given the presence of supporting visual elements.

To enhance the credibility of the analysis, data triangulation was employed by cross-checking the researcher's interpretation of each image-text relationship against established multimodal and translation theories, as well as through peer debriefing with colleagues familiar with translation studies and visual semiotics (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process was intended to minimize subjective bias in interpreting the semiotic function of each visual element.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analysis of the three bilingual public signs in relation to the intersemiotic function of their images and the translation strategies employed in rendering the Indonesian source text into English. The discussion is organized according to each sign, followed by a synthesis of the overall findings.

### Sign 1: "Flush Before and After Use" / "Siramlah Sebelum dan Sesudah Pemakaian"



Figure 1. Bilingual restroom instruction sign: "Flush Before and After Use / *Siramlah Sebelum dan Sesudah Pemakaian*." Source: Field Documentation in Public Restroom.

Figure 1 illustrates how the water-droplet pictogram reinforces the imperative verbal message without introducing additional semantic content. The visual and verbal modes therefore operate redundantly to maximize immediate comprehension.

This signage combines a red circular icon depicting a whitewater droplet with bilingual verbal text. In the Indonesian version, the verbal text "Siramlah Sebelum dan Sesudah Pemakaian" functions as an imperative instruction that is fully comprehensible even without the accompanying icon, since the verb *siramlah* (flush) already specifies the required action explicitly. The droplet icon, in this case, functions in a relationship of reinforcement (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), visually restating the action already conveyed verbally rather than adding new information.

In the English translation, "Flush Before and After Use," the verbal message closely mirrors the Indonesian source in terms of directness and completeness, applying a near literal translation strategy (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995/2000). This indicates that, for this particular sign, the translator did not rely heavily on the image to compensate for reduced verbal information; instead, the image and text operate in parallel, each independently capable of conveying the instruction. This finding suggests that not all signage translation depends

equally on visual support—in cases where the source text is already concise and unambiguous, the image primarily serves an attention-drawing and aesthetic function rather than a meaning-compensating one (Barthes, 1977).

## Sign 2: "Foot Flush" / "*Pompa Kaki untuk Menyiram*"



Figure 2. Foot-operated flush sign: "Foot Flush / *Pompa Kaki untuk Menyiram*." Source: Field Documentation in Public Restroom.

As shown in Figure 2, the pictogram visually demonstrates the flushing procedure, allowing the English translation to be considerably shorter while maintaining communicative effectiveness.

This sign presents a more complex intersemiotic relationship. The icon depicts a foot pressing down on a pump mechanism with a downward arrow, illustrating the physical action required to operate the flush. The Indonesian text, "*Pompa Kaki untuk Menyiram*" (Foot pump for flushing), explains both the tool (foot pump) and its function (for flushing) in a descriptive phrase.

In contrast, the English translation condenses this message into only two words: "Foot Flush." This is a clear example of condensation and omission as translation strategies (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995/2000), where the explicit purpose ("for flushing") and the procedural instruction implied in the Indonesian text are compressed into a compound noun label. Notably, this radical shortening remains functionally effective because the icon supplies the missing procedural information: the downward arrow and the foot-pressing posture visually demonstrate how the mechanism should be operated, a detail no longer explicit in the English verbal text. Here, the image functions in a relationship of elaboration (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), extending and completing the meaning that the condensed English text alone would not fully convey. This finding supports the notion that in space-constrained multimodal texts, translators may deliberately prioritize verbal economy when confident that the visual mode will bear the communicative load (Royce, 2007).

**Sign 3: "*Jalur Evakuasi/Evacuation Route*" and "*Jaga barang bawaan Anda/Please keep your belongings at all times*"**



Figure 3. Directional and cautionary public sign containing evacuation-route and belongings-security information. Source: Field Documentation in Public Transportation.

Figure 3 demonstrates how standardized pictograms communicate safety information independently of language while simultaneously extending the meaning of the accompanying verbal messages.

The third sign is composite, containing two separate messages. The first, a green directional sign with a running-figure pictogram and a leftward arrow, is paired with "Jalur Evakuasi" and its English equivalent "Evacuation Route." Here, the translation is a direct, near one-to-one lexical equivalence, and the pictogram functions in a relationship of reinforcement, as the running-figure icon is an internationally standardized symbol whose meaning is already conventionally understood independent of language (International Organization for Standardization [ISO], 2011).

The second message, however, shows a more interesting pattern. The Indonesian text, "Jaga barang bawaan Anda," a direct imperative ("Guard your belongings"), is translated into English as "Please keep your belongings at all times," which adds the politeness marker "please" and the temporal phrase "at all times"—information not present in the Indonesian source. This constitutes a strategy of addition and modulation (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995/2000), reflecting a shift in the pragmatic register from a direct command in Indonesian to a softened, more formal request in English, consistent with English-language conventions for public notices, which tend to favor indirectness and politeness over blunt imperatives (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The accompanying icon of a phone, laptop, and tablet functions in a relationship of extension rather than mere reinforcement, as it specifies the category of belongings referred to (electronic devices) that neither the Indonesian nor the English verbal text makes explicit. This demonstrates that the image does not always support translation by simplification; in some cases, it supplements the verbal text with additional semantic specificity that neither the source nor the target text overtly states.

## DISCUSSION

Across the three signs, the analysis reveals that the relationship between image and text in Indonesian–English signage translation is not uniform but varies according to communicative function. In Sign 1, the image reinforces an already complete verbal message; in Sign 2, the image elaborates and compensates for verbal condensation; and in Sign 3, the image extends the verbal message by supplying specific semantic content absent from both



source and target texts. These findings align with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) argument that image-text relations in multimodal texts cannot be reduced to a single fixed pattern, but must be understood contextually.

Furthermore, the study finds that translation strategies in public signage are frequently shaped by the presence of the image rather than by linguistic considerations alone. Translators appear to exploit the semiotic redundancy or complementarity between image and text to justify condensation (Sign 2) or shifts in pragmatic tone (Sign 3), while retaining fuller verbal equivalence when the image's role is primarily reinforcing rather than compensating (Sign 1). This supports the functionalist view that translation decisions in signage are guided by the communicative purpose of the sign as a whole—verbal and visual—rather than by the source text in isolation (Reiss & Vermeer, 2014). It also extends previous linguistic landscape research (Backhaus, 2007; Gorter, 2006), which has primarily focused on the sociolinguistic distribution of languages on signs, by demonstrating how the visual mode actively participates in, and sometimes drives, translation decision-making.

These findings carry practical implications for signage designers and translators: where a clear, universally recognized icon accompanies verbal text, translators may reasonably condense the target text without loss of communicative function; conversely, where the icon is ambiguous or highly context-specific, fuller verbal elaboration in translation may be necessary to avoid miscommunication

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined the role of images in the translation of Indonesian–English public signage, focusing on how visual elements interact with verbal text to construct and negotiate meaning. The analysis of three bilingual signs reveals that the relationship between image and text in signage translation is not fixed but varies according to the communicative function of each sign. Images may reinforce an already complete verbal message, elaborate and compensate for condensed verbal text, or extend the message by supplying semantic specificity absent from both the source and target texts. These variations demonstrate that signage translation cannot be adequately explained through linguistic analysis alone; it must be understood as a multimodal practice in which the translator's decisions are shaped by, and in dialogue with, the accompanying visual mode.

The findings further show that translators frequently rely on the semiotic support of images to justify strategies such as condensation, omission, and pragmatic modulation, particularly in contexts where space is limited and immediate comprehension is prioritized. This confirms that effective signage translation requires translators to consider not only equivalence at the linguistic level but also the communicative economy created by the interplay of text and image. In this sense, visual meaning-making functions as an active resource in translation decision-making rather than a mere decorative addition to the verbal text.

This study is limited by its small and purposively selected dataset of three signs, which, while sufficient for an in-depth qualitative exploration, does not allow for broader generalization across sign types or institutional contexts. Future research is encouraged to expand the dataset to include a wider range of public signage—such as traffic signs, commercial signage, and safety warnings—and to explore how different sign functions

(informative, directive, prohibitive) shape image-text relationships differently in translation. Comparative studies involving other language pairs, as well as reception studies examining how target-language readers actually interpret image-supported translated signage, would also offer valuable insights for both translation studies and multimodal discourse research. Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing recognition that translation in public spaces is a multimodal act, and that attending to visual meaning-making is essential for producing signage translations that are both linguistically appropriate and communicatively effective.

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