

# Lost in Translation: A Descriptive Grammar Analysis in Public Signages

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## ABSTRACT

The languages we encounter in public spaces, such as posters, store names, and street names, are referred to as public signage. Public signages display the languages that are spoken in a particular place as well as how these languages are used in daily life. With this, erroneous constructions in public signages are unavoidable. To address this issue, this study investigates the grammatical errors that are present in public notices found in public places, with a focus on the descriptive grammar evaluation of such linguistic constructs. The researchers studied and found also the prevalent grammatical errors, including incorrect usage of possessive forms, incorrect punctuation, misuse of article, misspelling, and employing redundant words within a sentence. These mistakes bring about great problems in public communication through an impact on understanding and clarity. This study also emphasizes the role of social, cultural, and linguistic aspects in the creation of signage, drawing on William Labov's Sociolinguistics Theory and Howard Gilles' Communication Accommodation (CAT). The results highlight the need for public signage to be more linguistically sensitive and grammatically correct to enhance inclusive understanding in various city locations, public safety, and promote clearer communication.

**Keywords:** Public signage errors, Grammar, Punctuation errors

## INTRODUCTION

Public signage is the language we see in public space, such as signs, posters, store names, street names, etc. Public signages indicate the languages that occur in a locale and how those languages are used in day-to-day activities. Grammatical issues with signage cannot be avoided. Furthermore, Nenotek, Beeh & Benu (2024) in their study indicated that English language problems were detected in public signs in Kupag City, Indonesia. These were usually linked to the lack of differentiation, inadequate learning, and ignoring the limits of regulation. There are instances when a form or structure is used in one context before it is used in a field and it is a mismatch.

According to the study of Maxilom-Mangompit et al. (2020) reported that public signs in Cebu City were sometimes erroneous or problematic textually. This reality was described as ambiguous to local users and surprising to tourists who did not appreciate or observe the value of signages with confused and inadequate text. Inadequate or confused sign text will cause navigation delays but will reduce the relevance of the signage as an informative and directional source. Unnecessary, unintelligible, or erroneous text added visual noise and interfered with the user's ability to quickly find and view pertinent information. Poorly designed wayfinding systems may also communicate variety instead of sameness in public communication actions; there are even calls for a more systematic approach for urban signage that takes simplicity of language and clarity of design, visual hierarchy, or the engagement and accessibility of users into consideration.

Furthermore, Cantina (2021) explores the use of linguistic devices in business signs in Dipolog City Boulevard in the area of lexical blends and politeness strategies used to entice customers. They also identified grammatical errors such as punctuation errors is due to sign makers' unawareness of grammatical norms of English language. Thus, the points raised in their study indicate that sign concerns derive from not only design errors and language use, but also from sign makers' linguistic strategies and grammatical knowledge. Consequently, it is necessary for the purpose of this study to better articulate some of the unique language

related issues present in public signs, specifically the effect of grammatical choices on clarity and correctness. Understanding these issues are crucial for quality of communication and avoiding misunderstanding in public signage.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Possessive nouns are special noun forms. They are created by adding an apostrophe to the basic forms of nouns to indicate ownership or possession. The possessive noun denotes the owner or possession of something, and it is typically used before another noun that describes what they own (Cainta, 2021). On the other hand, the study of Mendoza and Bernardo (2024) examined the linguistic characteristics of public signs in San Juan, La Union, and Baguio City, and it was discovered that monolingual English signs with grammatical errors predominated, including the erroneous use of possessive apostrophes. The researchers attributed the inaccuracies to the prevalence of English and language ideologies in tourist areas. Additionally, the research by Hoque (2016) examined linguistic errors in English writing on commercial signs in Chittagong, specifically possessive formulations. The inaccuracies were attributed to shop owners' and sign writers' lack of English grammar proficiency.

Punctuation is used to make the message clearer to the reader. When people speak, stress, intonation, and pauses are like a punctuation. Moreover, the English language uses 14 punctuation marks, and one of them must be used in every sentence (Najmiddinova & Jalolova, 2021). Furthermore, according to the study of Mazur & Quingnard (2023), punctuation greatly enhances the text's coherence. Despite its importance in written activity, this linguistic paradigm is rarely encountered. Nareerak (2018) conducted an analysis of English signboards in Muang Kamphaengphet, Thailand, and discovered 327 errors in 17 categories, the most common of which was punctuation (14.68%). The study linked these errors to intralingual and development variables, such as overgeneralization and a lack of understanding of English grammar norms.

As mentioned by Sigar and Saeed (2022), repetition can be described as the act of repeating the same word or phrase. It is a phenomenon in which a lexical unit is repeated either in the same form or with some inflectional or derivational change. Furthermore, a study conducted by Robielos and Lin (2022) revealed that several traffic signs in the Philippines, particularly those containing repetitive, were poorly comprehended by motorists, potentially leading to misunderstanding, non-compliance, and an increase in traffic infractions and accidents. Meanwhile, Maxilom-Mangompit (2019) claimed that repetitive and redundant text in billboard advertisements added to visual clutter, which could overwhelm viewers and reduces message efficacy.

According to Al-Sulaiman & Alsinjari (2018), as cited by Faeqabdulla (2024) English articles can be finite or definite. While some languages lack an article system, articles are subclasses of determiners that distinguish the uses of nouns. When selecting how to employ a noun, articles are necessary. This decision is often made based on the noun's meaning, shared knowledge, context, and whether it is singular, plural, countable, or uncountable. Understanding these terms is necessary for effective article usage. Moreover, articles play a significant role in the English language. They fulfill various syntactic and semantic functions, making them crucial functional words (Faeqabdulla, 2024). In addition, the presence or absence of the article can be taught in relation to specific grammatical structures or lexical categories, such as superlatives, demonstrative pronouns, possessive nouns, amounts, dates, and other forms of proper names. It is recommended that when these teaching points come up, article usage is explored, and the given structures be taught and performed alongside the article (Viszket, 2021)

As stated by Ryan (2017), English spelling, despite its intricacies, is systematic. Apart from that, it cannot be read or written. Creativity is only conceivable because the system has many layers of representation, including segmental and suprasegmental phonology, morphology, and etymology. On the other hand, learning how to correctly spell words is regarded as a vital exercise for a variety of reasons. One advantage of accurate spelling is that it helps the reader grasp what is written, resulting in a clear message, especially when it is a second language (Da Costa & Arias, 2021). Lastly, Adoniou (2019) states that good spelling is the outcome of effective teaching and good instruction. It demands a thorough comprehension of what spelling is and not just the rote learning of strings of letters is a sociolinguistic construction, which means that every word is a beautiful tapestry of meaning and history.

## Theoretical Basis

A theory proposed by William Labov entitled “Sociolinguistic theory” delves into a depth understanding of relationship between a person’s social and cultural background, wherein it emphasizes sociocultural factors including individual’s socioeconomic class, gender, and geography which shows a simultaneous effect on language use. According to this theory, language compromises more than its established regulations. It becomes a social practice containing various dynamical way based in how humans interact with others. Evidently it can be observed that public signage is regard as a product of linguistics which was made to attain a successful interaction on various audiences. In addition, this theory emphasizes the relevance of linguistic interaction across different cultures, while ensuring the wide scope of language influences that are involved in it. Through focusing on the practical and cultural relevance of linguistic encounters, this theory aims to attain clarity in communication without losing cultural depth. It ensures to make language accessible to the general public and foster an appreciation for cultural diversity though applying a clear, meaningful linguistic exchange.

On the contrary, the theory proposed by Howard Giles (1971), titled Communication Accommodation theory. It was created to primarily focused on ways individuals changed their abilities to communicate with the objective of societal recognition and acceptability ensures to reduce social inequality. According to Chambers (2017), this theory served as a guideline of individuals to streamlining language in catering various audience requirements. This theory delves into the text clarity and utilizing widely recognized symbols or several languages to attain proper communication despite diverse contexts. It provides a concrete theoretical structure in analyzing different communication issues, particularly those under multicultural environments. This ensures to make messages clearly delivered and foster inclusivity to a wide audience.

As a result, these two theories offered linguistic perspective on the cultural and social dimensions of public signage formulation. Labov’s theory emphasized the influence of cultural and social elements on vocabulary utilization in public setting. This identifies the relevance of linguistic diversity and the necessity for awareness enforced in formulation of public signages, which adds to the major ones. The proponent Howard Giles stated that it could be beneficial in formulating linguistic artifacts making the communication accommodation theory indicates that public signage should enforce clearer language to improve understanding and engaging to different audiences. Thus, the sign makers are urged to enforce these two theories to guarantee effective accessibility and clarity. These two theories have shown a crucial impact on the language diversity, as it enables in nurturing public engagement and allow individuals a sense of connection with it, enabling an inclusive environment and active societal participation through a well-structured public signage.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs an in-depth textual analysis to investigating the public signages’ grammatical lapses within the community. It seeks to analyze real signboards, public announcements, shop names, and other notices which are posted or displayed in public areas. The objective is to examine the errors meticulously as well as explain what they portray in terms of sociolinguistic dynamics of the community.


For this purpose, the researchers tackled a systematic field observation which included travelling to several venues within local vicinity. Pictures of public signs were taken such as those displaying grammatical errors of possessive form misuse, punctuation, redundancy, article usage, and spelling. Upon collection, the samples were subjected to descriptive textual analysis to establish whether patterns existed and measure the scope and impact of these errors.

## DISCUSSION

### Possessive Form

Possessive forms of nouns show that something belong to someone or something. For singular nouns, an apostrophe followed by the letter “s” is typically added. However, many public signs misuse these rules, leading to frequent grammatical errors that can confuse readers and reflect poorly on professionalism. For plural nouns that already end in “s”, only an apostrophe is added.


While recent studies have demonstrated the substantial misuse of possessive forms on public signs and have signaled the importance of the issue, even the study by Mendoza & Bernardo (2024), which examined the linguistic features of public signs, demonstrated that there was a major prevalence of grammatical errors in the identified monolingual English signage including misuse of possessive apostrophes in San Juan, La Union, and Baguio City. In particular, the errors of possessive apostrophes show not only linguistic errors but also signify larger problems in how languages are taught, and the communicative standards in public signing. Below are the photos of signs that have been compiled that demonstrate and misuse of the possessive forms, such as such as PS1, PS2, and PS3, which highlights the reason to increasing grammar education and awareness in public communication, because continual use of a sign with errors can create misunderstandings and hurt a business's credibility.

<b>Possessive Form</b>	<b>Public Signages</b>	
	<b>PS1:</b> <i>PALOMATA ENTERPRISES</i>	
	<b>PS2:</b> <i>GOD GIFT</i>	
	<b>PS3:</b> <i>ERTAS STORE</i>	

## Punctuation Error

Punctuation error is a common form of error in public signs. Improper usage of punctuation can lead to confusion, misrepresentation of meaning, and can even offend some audiences. According to Erton (2020), by examining these types of mistakes, there are rules to follow that clearly define punctuation errors; so that the approach is systematic and consistent. This kind of mistake can be clearly classified, in terms of grammar, by employing a range of strategies. This gives a comprehensive comprehension of frequency of punctuation confusion in public signs.

Ariani (2021) takes this study a step further by examining how punctuation errors became use of terminology and useability by using ways found from this study in linguistic landscape and thorough comprehension of how it was conducted. The study revealed usage of punctuation was suggested a diminished use in public signage than normal usage, it stressed the way in which punctuation was used to create signs. The review showed that punctuation marks may be entitlement depending on usage of public signs. This confirmed the usage with public signing errors of punctuation normally misused and misapplied, including PS4, PS5, PS6, and PS7, which can cause confusion to the reader or lead to misinterpretation.

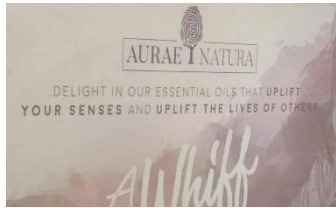
<b>Punctuation Error</b>	<b>Public Signages</b>	
	<b>PS4:</b> <i>DONT BLOCK DRIVE WAY</i>	
	<b>PS5:</b> <i>FOLLOW, LIKE AND SHARE OUR OFFICIAL FACEBOOK PAGE</i>	
	<b>PS6:</b> <i>Push Carts are allowed only at this point</i>	
	<b>PS7:</b> <i>MARKETING CORP</i>	



## Redundancy

Redundancy or repetitiveness refers to the usage of words or phrases that express the same notion more than once inside a communication. The use of repetitive language in public signage, such as traffic and commercial signs, can influence how message is perceived by the audience.


In addition, Robielos and Lin (2022) indicated that come traffic signs in the Philippines, particularly those with repetitive terms, were poorly understood by drivers, potentially contributing to confusion, noncompliance, and an increase in traffic violations and accidents. In connection with this, repetitive words are also seen not just in traffic signs but also in commercial signs, such as *PS8*, *PS9*, and *PS10*. This implies that redundancy or repetition can regularly be found in a variety of public signs, and this may confuse or mislead a viewer. This means it is necessary to make purposeful change to reduce or eliminate unnecessary rollover, to make public signaling effective, meaningful, and clear.

<b>Redundancy</b>	<b>Public Signage</b>	
	<b>PS8:</b> <i>For lease</i>  <i>For Lease Commercial Space</i>  <i>For Lease Bodega Lot</i>	
	<b>PS9:</b> <i>Delight in our essential oils that uplift your senses and uplift the lives of others</i>	
	<b>PS10:</b> <i>XEROX PHOTOCOPY</i>	

## Article Usage

An article is a determiner that indicates whether a noun is specific or general. There are three articles in English: “a”, “an”, and “the”. The “a” and “an” are used for general or nonspecific nouns, while “the” is used for specific nouns. Moreover, according to the study of Al-Sulaiman and Alsinjari (2018), as cited by Fageabdulla (2024), English article can be either finite or indefinite. While some languages do not have an article system, articles are determiner subclasses that distinguish the uses of nouns. Furthermore, when selecting how to employ a noun, articles are necessary.

The study of Mansoor et al. (2022) examined signage in Semenyih, Malaysia, and discovered that English was extensively utilized despite national policy support for using Malay. They found that article errors were widespread on commercial and public signages, indicating a lack of language rules and awareness. Thus, grammatical errors in article usage such as *PS4*, *PS11*, and *PS12* can confuse readers, particularly tourist, and undermine the credibility of the organization behind the public signages.


	<b>Public Signages</b>	
	<b>PS4:</b> <i>DONT BLOCK DRIVE WAY</i>	
	<b>PS11:</b> <i>STOP ENGINE AVOID FIRE</i>	

Article Usage	PS12: <i>DO NOT BLOCK INTERSECTION</i>	
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## Spelling

Spelling is mainly the structure of words which determines combinations and meanings. Learning how to spell correctly is seen as an important skill for a variety of reasons. In addition to that, accurate spelling has the advantage of helping the reader comprehend what is written, resulting in a clear message, particularly when writing in a second language (Da Costa & Arias, 2021).

On top of that, Hoque (2016) conducted a study on linguistic errors text on commercial signage in Chittagong, with a focus on spelling concerns. The mistakes were attributed to the business owners' and sign writers' lack of English grammar skills. As a result, spelling errors such as *PS13*, *PS14*, and *PS4* may confuse and cause inconvenience to the reader. Hence, correct spelling is very important for context points and elaboration.

Spelling	Public Signages	
	PS13: <i>Home of Quality Breed</i>	
	PS14: <i>FOR SELL</i>	
	PS4: <i>DONT BLOCK DRIVE WAY</i>	

## CONCLUSION

The results of the study show that grammatical issues in public signs may cause confusion, miscommunication, and misinformation. Grammatical issues such as possessive forms where apostrophe can alter a meaning of a sign and imply unintended ownership, punctuation errors requiring the reader to guess it's meaning, redundancy where words are unnecessarily repeated once or more, article usage causing lack of clarity, and spelling errors that affect comprehensibility are commonly present and evident from above given examples. These errors may seem practical or minor but clearly have a lack of linguistic accuracy and grammar attention that affects the perception of the public. In communities where public signs are intended for safe instructions or announcements, clarity is vital. Therefore, business establishments may prioritize linguistic accuracy when making signages before posting in the public. By doing so, they promote a linguistically aware community that upholds the standards of clear and effective communication.

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