



Cultural Identity in the Linguistic Landscape of the Bukit Gundaling Tourist Area in Karo Regency

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 April 2026

Revised 2 Juni 2026

Accepted 23 September 2026

Available online

<https://talenta.usu.ac.id/lingpoet/>

E-ISSN: 2745-8296

How to cite:

Tarigan, J. & Pujiono, S. (2026). Cultural Identity in the Linguistic Landscape of the Bukit Gundaling Tourist Area in Karo Regency. *LingPoet: Journal of Linguistics and Literary Research*, 7(3), 338-334.



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<http://doi.org/10.26594/register.v6i1.idarticle>

ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the patterns and characteristics of linguistic units, linguistic functions, and cultural identity within the linguistic landscape of the Bukit Gundaling Tourism Area. The research method is qualitative, employing a content analysis design. Data collection techniques employed triangulation: photographing all linguistic landscapes reflecting cultural identity (purposive sampling) to serve as documents for analysis, interviews, and literature review. Data analysis was conducted in 5 stages: (1) data preparation, (2) familiarization, (3) coding, (4) categorization, and (5) interpretation. The results indicate that the Indonesian-language linguistic landscape created by the management (top-down) is the most dominant. The linguistic functions observed are informative and symbolic. Karo cultural identity is found in the mejuah-juah script, the Taneh Karo Simalem script and characters, and the Pawang Ternalem script along with its counterpart, Puteri Gunung Beru Patimar. These findings indicate that Karo cultural identity is present within the linguistic landscape of the Bukit Gundaling Tourism Area.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Linguistic Landscape, Karo Culture, Bukit Gundaling Tourism

1. Introduction

In modern sociolinguistic studies, the languages found on street signs, advertisements, place names, and public buildings in a specific region or community are referred to as the linguistic landscape, or LL for short. This theory was first popularized by Landry & Bourhis in 1997 (Akindele, 2011). According to them, the linguistic landscape refers to the visibility and significance of language on public and commercial signs in a specific region or area.

The dynamics of the linguistic landscape are evolving rapidly today. Its scope is no longer limited to street names, place names, or building names. Advances in the study of the linguistic landscape have led Gorter to summarize and provide another brief definition of LL: the use of language in written form in public spaces. Linguistic landscape studies have now expanded to include places frequented by many people, such as tourist attractions and airports (Artawa et al., 2023). Pasaribu et al. (2024), for example, has conducted a linguistic landscape study at Kualanamu Airport. Susianti et al. (2025) have conducted a linguistic landscape study in the Sanur tourist area.

Bukit Gundaling, as one of the tourist attractions in Karo Regency, demonstrates the use of the linguistic landscape. In this tourist area, there are numerous linguistic signs, such as signs indicating parking fees and horse-drawn carriage/sado rates, restrooms, places of worship, restaurants, souvenir shops, place names (toponyms), inspirational quotes from various agencies within the Karo Regional Government, and others. In addition, there are also linguistic signs that reflect Karo cultural identity, such as the “mejuah-juah” inscriptions on the gate and Karo script on the hill’s walls.

The linguistic markers mentioned in the previous paragraph serve specific functions. Landry and Bourhis state that the linguistic landscape has two functions: the informative function and the symbolic function. The informative function delineates the boundaries of linguistic groups. This indicates that a particular language is used for communication or the sale of products. On the other hand, the symbolic function refers to the value and status of a language as perceived by members of the language group in comparison to other languages (Akindele, 2011; Yendra & Artawa, 2020).

In this area, you'll also find huts resembling traditional Karo houses, traditional Karo ornaments mounted on the hillside walls, statues of Karo people in full traditional attire, and souvenirs featuring Karo cultural motifs. This indicates that the Bukit Gundaling tourist site, in addition to offering a suitable spot to relax while enjoying views of Mount Sinabung and Mount Sibayak, as well as the city of Berastagi, is also rich in linguistic landscapes worthy of study.

The linguistic landscape found at Bukit Gundaling has highlighted several aspects of Karo cultural identity. This is considered normal because, as a culturally rich community—especially at tourist attractions—cultural elements will always be emphasized alongside the main attractions of the site. Elvonny et al. (2025) states that the linguistic landscape is not merely a commercial tool but also a medium for preserving and promoting cultural identity.

However, initial observations suggest that Karo cultural identity is less prominent in the linguistic landscape than in ornamental forms. This is underscored by a statement from the local Tourism Office, which noted that there are no specific regulations regarding the linguistic landscape in tourist areas within Karo Regency. This is what makes this study all the more intriguing.

Since this study focuses on linguistic analysis, non-linguistic markers will not be examined. However, if the linguistic landscape is found to be associated with other aspects of Karo cultural identity, the connection will be explained. Thus, in addition to linguistic landscape analysis, ethnolinguistic analysis will also be employed. This study can be said to employ a multidisciplinary approach. Linguistic landscape analysis will be used as a method for visual data mapping. Furthermore, an ethnolinguistic perspective will be employed to understand the extent of the relationship between the use of linguistic units and the preservation of the Karo community's cultural identity in the tourist area.

Therefore, the objectives of this study are (1) to describe the patterns and characteristics of linguistic units that appear in the linguistic landscape of the Gundaling tourist area, whether top-down (management policies) or bottom-up (business initiatives); (2) to describe the functions of the linguistic landscape under study; (3) to analyze the relationship between linguistic units and the visual context (linguistic landscape) through an ethnolinguistic perspective to examine how Karo identity is represented in public spaces.

To conduct this study, the LL theory proposed by Landry & Bourhis (1997) will serve as the foundation for determining the patterns and characteristics of linguistic units in LL, as well as the function of LL itself. These patterns and characteristics are useful for establishing whether the LL under study is linked to cultural identity, thereby sharpening the focus of the research. The characteristics of linguistic units are also necessary to determine who creates the LL—whether it is the government (top-down) or business actors (bottom-up). This is important for identifying the reasons for the existence of the LL.

From a functional perspective, LLs need to be studied to determine whether their presence is purely informational or serves a symbolic purpose. By “informational,” we mean that LLs serve as signs at tourist sites, such as parking fee signs and restroom directions. As for their symbolic function, LLs represent Karo identity, thereby fostering a sense of pride in Karo culture.

From the perspective of cultural identity, Spolsky's (2004) theory of language policy is relevant. The absence or marginalization of cultural identity is linked to language policies enacted by local governments. Furthermore, the multimodal semiotics theory by Kress & Leeuwen (2001) is necessary because the language learning (LL) under study is partly intertwined with cultural elements, so this theory will serve as the analytical framework.

2. Method

Creswell (2019) defines qualitative research as an approach to exploring and understanding the meanings that individuals or groups of people ascribe to social or human issues. Based on the above definition, this study is a qualitative study because it aims to describe the patterns and characteristics of linguistic units, linguistic functions, and cultural identity within the linguistic landscape of the Bukit Gundaling Tourist Area. The research design for this study is content analysis. Content analysis is a research method used to draw valid and replicable inferences from texts or other communication materials by taking into account the context in which they are used.

The data collection method employed triangulation. First, photographs were taken of all linguistic landscapes reflecting cultural identity (purposive sampling) in the Bukit Gundaling tourist area to serve as documentation for analysis. Second, interviews were conducted with tourism site managers—in this case, the local Tourism Office—to gather data on regulations governing the placement of linguistic landscapes at tourist sites. Additionally, interviews were conducted with business operators to understand the reasons behind the language choices they made for the linguistic landscapes they created. Third, a literature review was conducted on language policies and Karo cultural identity in general.

Data analysis was conducted in five stages: (1) data preparation, (2) familiarization, (3) coding, (4) categorization, and (5) interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

The use of Indonesian was found to be the most dominant language in the linguistic landscape of Bukit Gundaling. As for bilingual usage, Indonesian-English was the most prevalent. Additionally, the linguistic landscape created by administrators (top-down) was found to be more dominant than that created by business operators (bottom-up).

In terms of LLs with cultural identity elements, only 7 LLs were identified as incorporating cultural elements. Three of these LLs followed a monolingual model, three followed a bilingual model, and one followed a toponymic model. Six of these LLs were created by administrators (top-down), and only one was created by business operators (bottom-up).

Of the 7 linguistic landscapes identified as containing elements of cultural identity, 4 feature the text “mejuah-juah.” This text was found on a gate, the entrance to a restaurant, the entrance to an information center, and in the park surrounding the hill. One linguistic landscape featuring the Taneh Karo Simalem script was identified. Finally, there are 2 linguistic landscapes featuring the text “Pawang Ternalem” and its counterpart, “Puteri Gunung Beru Patimar.”

According to kamuskaro.net, “mejuah-juah” means “good health” and “safety.” In practice, this word is often used as a greeting, a farewell, or a prayer that everyone remains well. Therefore, within the linguistic landscape of Bukit Gundaling, the word “mejuah-juah” serves as both a welcome and a prayer for visitors, wishing them continued well-being.

The linguistic landscape featuring the word “mejuah-juah” serves a symbolic function. This linguistic sign conveys hospitality to visitors. Based on the findings, linguistic landscapes featuring “mejuah-juah” include both monolingual patterns created by tourism managers (top-down) and those created by business operators (bottom-up). There are also signs in a bilingual format combining the Karo language and Indonesian, as well as those combining English and the Karo language. This can be interpreted to mean that, in terms of welcoming visitors, Bukit Gundaling uses linguistic signs in public spaces to welcome every visitor from all linguistic backgrounds—whether they are native Karo speakers, the general Indonesian public, or international visitors.



Figure 1. LL Monolingual with the Inscription “Mejuah-Juah”

Part of this linguistic landscape is intertwined with other aspects of Karo cultural identity. The LL inscribed with the word “mejuah-juah” on the gate of a traditional Karo house, along with its ornamentation resembling a gecko—known as “pengeret-ret”—constitutes Karo cultural identity. This form of LL is analyzed

based on the principles of multimodal discourse (Kress & Leeuwen, 2001), such that LL conveys Karo cultural identity both verbally and visually.

Similarly, the bilingual signage in Karo and English at the visitor information center serves as a gesture of hospitality toward international visitors. Additionally, the Raja Sulaiman's Footprint ornament—a geometric motif forming a square with knots on each side—serves as a symbol imbued with teachings and possessing semi-sacred significance (Erdansyah, 2011).

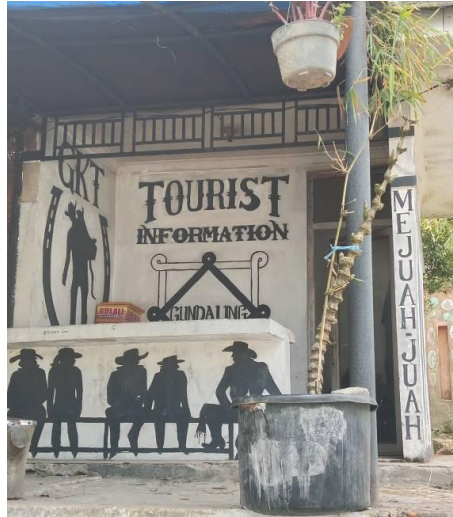


Figure 2. A bilingual sign reading “Tourist Information” and “Mejuah-Juah”

Another linguistic landscape imbued with cultural identity is the Taneh Karo Simalem script. This linguistic landscape is monolingual in nature, as it uses only one language: Karo. It is found on hillside walls inscribed with the Karo script. This linguistic landscape serves an informative and educational purpose, as it teaches visitors how to write the script using the Taneh Karo Simalem system. In addition to its informative function, this linguistic landscape also serves a symbolic purpose regarding the system of knowledge within Karo society, which has been familiar with writing for a long time; thus, the presence of this linguistic landscape in the form of script represents a source of pride for the Karo people.

The phrase “Taneh Karo Simalem” actually consists of three words. When translated word for word using kamuskar.net, “taneh” means “land,” “Karo” refers to the Karo ethnic group or region, and “simalem” means “cool, comfortable, or healing.” Therefore, “Taneh Karo Simalem” can be interpreted as the cool and comfortable region of Karo Regency. Unfortunately, while there are so many LLs visible on Gundaling Hill, this is the only one found written in the Karo script.



Figure 3. Monolingual LL with Karo Script and Characters

Finally, the LLs that embody cultural identity are Pawang Ternalem and Puteri Gunung Beru Patimar. These LLs are located at the summit of Gundaling Hill. Both LLs are flanked by their respective statues. Pawang Ternalem is paired with a statue of a man wearing traditional Karo attire, set against the panoramic backdrop of Mount Sinabung. Puteri Gunung Beru Patimar is paired with a statue of a woman wearing traditional Karo attire, set against the panoramic backdrop of Mount Sibayak.

These are two related linguistic landscapes because they feature two characters from Karo folklore. The linguistic landscape labeled “Pawang Ternalem” is classified as toponymy, as it involves the names of characters or places that have been elevated to linguistic landscapes (Darheni in Lubis et al., 2023). The linguistic landscape inscribed with “Puteri Gunung Beru Patimar” is bilingual in Indonesian and Karo. “Puteri gunung” is Indonesian and ‘beru’ is Karo. Both of these linguistic landscapes serve an informative function because they aim to convey a Karo folktale titled “Pawang Ternalem.”

Pawang Ternalem and Princess Gunung Beru Patimar are characters from the Karo folktale titled “Pawang Ternalem”. The story tells of Princess Gunung Beru Patimar, a beautiful young woman from Jenggi Kemawar. However, she suffered from an illness for which no cure could be found. The only cure was honey from the Tualang Simande Angin tree. The Princess’s father then held a contest. Whoever could retrieve the honey from that tree would become his son-in-law. Many young men tried to climb the tree, but all perished because the tree was haunted. Until finally, a disfigured young man named Pawang Ternalem arrived. Thanks to his supernatural powers, Pawang Ternalem succeeded in climbing the tree. After successfully obtaining the honey, he blew a flute to signal his presence to the villagers. The Mountain Princess was finally cured after drinking the honey given to her by Pawang Ternalem (Ginting et al., 2020; Nababan & Ginting, 2023).



Figure 4. LL Toponymy of Pawang Ternalem



Figure 5. Bilingual LL Putri Gunung Beru Patimar

3.2 Discussion

The research findings indicate that Indonesian is the most widely used language in the linguistic landscape of Bukit Gundaling. This finding indicates that the Bukit Gundaling area complies with Law No. 24 of 2009 on the National Flag, Language, and Emblem, as well as the National Anthem, and North Sumatra Provincial Regulation No. 8 of 2017 on the Prioritization of the Indonesian Language and the Protection of Regional Languages and Literature. However, these research findings do not align with the study by Sahril et al. (2019), which examined the linguistic landscape of Medan City. Their research indicates that foreign languages dominate the linguistic landscape of Medan City. Furthermore, they note that Indonesian can no longer be the sole dominant language in that region.

Further research findings indicating the presence of a bilingual linguistic landscape in Bukit Gundaling suggest the existence of linguistic contestation in public spaces. This aligns with the findings of Dewi's (2022) study on language use in public spaces in Berastagi, which demonstrates that Berastagi serves as a battleground for language among creators of personal signage seeking to attract visitors. Similarly, research by Susianti et al. (2025) states that English dominates as a symbol of global economic power and the primary means of communication in the tourism sector, while the Balinese language is used more symbolically as a marker of local cultural identity.

From the perspective of cultural identity, the linguistic landscape studied in Bukit Gundaling already reflects the existence of Karo cultural identity, albeit to a limited extent, and this is considered to reflect the implementation of North Sumatra Provincial Regulation No. 8 of 2017 regarding the protection of regional languages and literature, particularly in shaping ethnic identity and reinforcing regional identity.

The research findings regarding the functions of the linguistic landscape (LL) in the Bukit Gundaling area reveal both informative and symbolic functions. The informative function is evident in the government's

efforts to provide visitors with information on how to write the Karo script and Karo folk tales. In fact, the informative function is also evident in the form of language signs such as restroom directions, fee schedule boards, food and beverage menus, souvenir shops, and others in the Bukit Gundaling area.

From a symbolic perspective, the presence of cultural identity in LLs can be interpreted as a sense of love for Karo culture. The word *mejuah-juah*, for example, appears in four LLs. This is interpreted as a form of hospitality toward visitors. This sign of hospitality is not merely a cultural identity but also part of the interpretation of meaning from one of the elements of the “*sapta pesona*.” In fact, Doering & Kishi (2022) state in their research findings that forms of hospitality within the linguistic landscape are closely linked to rural tourism in Japan.

However, these findings also reflect the lack of attention paid to culture in an ethnolinguistic context. In fact, Bukit Gundaling, as both a tourist destination and a public space, can be utilized as a venue for language negotiation that prioritizes Karo cultural identity alongside other languages. Furthermore, Iswanto et al. (2025) state in their research findings that integrating local culture into tourism marketing significantly enhances the appeal and experience for tourists.

Susianti et al. (2025) state that the presence of the Balinese language and script in Sanur’s public landscape serves as a symbol of local identity and a strategy of cultural resistance. Although its use is limited, the presence of the Balinese language and script in the public landscape can be understood as a form of cultural self-affirmation amid the tide of globalization. Pujaastawa (2023) states that poorly managed tourism can threaten local cultural identity. Therefore, although North Sumatra Provincial Regulation No. 8 of 2017 on the Primacy of the Indonesian Language and the Protection of Regional Languages and Literature already exists, the Karo Regency Government is considered to need to enforce these regulations in public spaces.

The presence of cultural identity within the linguistic landscape of Bukit Gundaling, which is intertwined with Karo architecture and other cultural ornaments, demonstrates that Gundaling is a tourist destination that offers not only the beauty of the location but also the beauty of Karo culture. For this reason, Kress & Leeuwen’s (2001) perspective on the multimodal discourse approach is particularly apt, as it can reveal meaning from both verbal and visual perspectives.

Finally, the findings regarding cultural identity within the linguistic landscape of Bukit Gundaling indicate that Karo cultural identity is somewhat marginalized in its own region, and the Karo language is considered to lack sufficient bargaining power in the practical economy of the Karo tourism sector. The dominance of English over the Karo language in the linguistic landscape of Bukit Gundaling indicates that the linguistic landscape is not merely a visual display; rather, the market value of English is perceived as better suited to market segmentation. Therefore, this finding serves as an important reflection for all parties. The use of language in the linguistic landscape, particularly at tourist attractions, requires serious attention so that it is not merely a visual display but also demonstrates proper language use and highlights cultural identity.

4. Conclusion

The patterns and characteristics of the linguistic landscape in Bukit Gundaling include both monolingual and bilingual patterns. The use of Indonesian is most prevalent in monolingual settings. In terms of origin, the linguistic landscape is more often shaped by tourism managers (top-down) than by business operators (bottom-up).

The linguistic landscape functions identified are informative and symbolic. The informative function involves conveying information about locations and educational information on how to write the Karo script. The symbolic function is more about showcasing the Karo cultural identity that the linguistic landscape aims to highlight.

Karo cultural identity is found in the linguistic landscape of Bukit Gundaling, although its presence is relatively limited. There are only 7 linguistic landscapes representing Karo cultural identity: the *mejuah-juah* script found in 4 linguistic landscapes, 1 text and the Karo Taneh Karo Simalem script, and 2 texts in the form of Pawang Ternalem and its counterpart, Puteri Gunung Beru Patimar.

These findings can serve as a basis for reflection aimed at strengthening cultural identity and tourism in Karo Regency. The presence of the Karo language and culture within the linguistic landscape functions as a symbol of local identity and a strategy of cultural resistance against the influence of globalization. Therefore, efforts to strengthen the use of the Karo language and cultural identity within the linguistic landscape deserve attention.

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