

Exploring Linguistic Hierarchies: The Role of Language in Shaping Power Dynamics in Public Spaces

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ABSTRACT: Language in public spaces serves not only as a means of communication but also as a visible marker of social, political, and economic power. This study explores how linguistic landscapes the collection of written and visual language in public domains such as signage, advertisements, notices, and official communications reflect and shape power relations within society. By employing a comparative approach, this research examines public spaces across different urban and sociocultural contexts to investigate the presence, prominence, and hierarchy of languages. Particular attention is given to the dominance of certain languages over others and the visibility or marginalization of minority or less powerful languages. The study applies sociolinguistic and semiotic frameworks to analyze how language functions as a tool for asserting authority, negotiating identity, and constructing social inclusion or exclusion. Data collection involves systematic documentation of public signs and textual displays, followed by qualitative and quantitative

analysis to reveal patterns of language use and power representation. Preliminary findings suggest that linguistic visibility often aligns with social and institutional power structures, highlighting the intersection of language, identity, and authority in shaping public perception. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between language and power, offering insights for policymakers, urban planners, educators, and scholars in sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and cultural studies. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of recognizing linguistic landscapes as sites where power, identity, and social relations are constantly negotiated and reproduced.

Keywords: *Linguistic landscape, power representation, public spaces, multilingualism, sociolinguistics, language hierarchy, comparative study*

1. Introduction

Language in public spaces is far more than a neutral medium of communication; it is a visible marker of authority, identity, ideology, and social hierarchy (Gal and Woolard 2014). The concept of *linguistic landscape* refers to the display of written language in public spaces such as street signs, billboards, shop names, government buildings, advertisements, transportation notices, and institutional boards. These visible inscriptions collectively form part of the semiotic environment of a city or community (Shortell and Krase 2013). They provide important insights into how languages are valued, prioritized, or marginalized within particular sociopolitical and economic contexts. As such, linguistic landscapes not only reflect social realities but also actively participate in constructing and maintaining power relations (Shohamy and Waksman 2008).

Public spaces operate as symbolic arenas in which language choices reveal deeper ideological structures and institutional arrangements. The selection of one language over another on official signage is rarely accidental; rather, it is shaped by language policies, political authority, historical developments, and economic interests. When a national or dominant language consistently appears in prominent positions—such as at the top of signs or in larger fonts—it signals institutional legitimacy and state authority. In contrast, minority or regional languages may appear less frequently or

in subordinate positions, reflecting unequal access to symbolic and material power (Philips 2004). Thus, linguistic landscapes function as visual representations of societal hierarchies. In multilingual societies, the study of linguistic landscapes becomes particularly significant. The coexistence of multiple languages within the same geographical area often reflects complex historical, cultural, and political dynamics. Issues of migration, globalization, colonization, and national identity are deeply embedded in public signage. For instance, the increasing visibility of English in non-English-speaking countries is often associated with globalization, international trade, tourism, and technological advancement. English frequently symbolizes modernity, prestige, and economic opportunity. Its prominent presence in commercial advertisements and corporate branding demonstrates how global economic forces influence local linguistic environments. At the same time, indigenous or regional languages may struggle for visibility, revealing tensions between global integration and cultural preservation (Friedman 2003).

The representation of power in linguistic landscapes extends beyond the mere presence or absence of languages. Visual and semiotic elements—such as font size, color, placement, order, typography, and imagery—play a crucial role in shaping meaning. Larger fonts and central positioning often indicate dominance and authority, while smaller or peripheral placement suggests secondary status. The order in which languages appear on bilingual or multilingual signs can also signify hierarchy, with the dominant language typically presented first. These visual strategies subtly communicate social messages about which languages—and by extension, which communities hold power and legitimacy (Gal and Woolard 2014). Moreover, linguistic landscapes contribute to identity construction. Public signage not only informs but also shapes how individuals perceive their belonging within a community. When people see their language represented in public spaces, it affirms their cultural presence and social recognition. Conversely, the absence of one's language can create feelings of exclusion or marginalization. In this sense, linguistic landscapes influence social cohesion and intergroup relations. They become sites where identities are negotiated, contested, and reproduced in everyday life.

Scholarly interest in linguistic landscapes has grown significantly over the past two decades, particularly within sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and semiotics. Researchers have emphasized that linguistic landscapes are dynamic and constantly evolving, shaped by political change, economic development, demographic shifts, and technological innovation. Urbanization and globalization have intensified linguistic diversity in many cities, leading to increasingly complex patterns of multilingual signage. Comparative studies across different sociocultural contexts allow researchers to identify both universal trends such as the global spread of English and context-specific factors influenced by national language policies or historical legacies (DAHMARDEH and MAHDIKHANI 2025). This study adopts a comparative approach to examine how linguistic landscapes represent and reproduce power in different urban settings. By systematically analyzing public signage across selected areas, the research investigates patterns of language dominance, visibility, hierarchy, and symbolic meaning. The comparative framework enables a deeper understanding of how local sociopolitical conditions interact with global forces in shaping public language displays. It also allows for examination of similarities and differences in how power is visually encoded in signage (Jensen 2006).

The significance of this research lies in its interdisciplinary contribution. From a sociolinguistic perspective, it provides insight into language status and policy implementation in real-world contexts. From a critical discourse perspective, it highlights how everyday texts reproduce ideological structures and normalize particular power relations. For policymakers and urban planners, understanding linguistic landscapes can inform inclusive language planning strategies that promote social equity and cultural diversity (Benu and Insights 2025). For educators and researchers, it offers a valuable lens for analyzing the intersection of language, identity, and authority. Ultimately, linguistic landscapes are not passive reflections of society; they are active participants in shaping social realities. They influence how people navigate public spaces, interpret social hierarchies, and understand their place within the community. By examining linguistic landscapes comparatively, this study seeks to uncover the complex ways in which language operates as a resource of power in public life. Through this analysis, the research underscores the importance of recognizing public signage as a meaningful site where power, identity, and social

relations are continuously constructed and negotiated (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2011).

2. Literature Review

The concept of linguistic landscape emerged as a significant field of inquiry within sociolinguistics following the pioneering work of Landry and Bourhis, who defined it as the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs within a given territory (Landry, Bourhis et al. 1997). Their foundational framework distinguished between the informational and symbolic functions of public signage. Informationally, signs serve practical purposes by guiding residents and visitors through public spaces. Symbolically, however, they communicate deeper messages about the status, vitality, and power of linguistic communities. According to their perspective, the presence or absence of particular languages in public domains contributes to shaping perceptions of legitimacy, authority, and belonging. This early conceptualization laid the groundwork for subsequent studies examining how linguistic landscapes both reflect and construct social hierarchies (BEN-RAFAEL 2008).

Building upon this foundation, later scholars expanded the scope of linguistic landscape research to include issues of identity construction, ideology, and power relations. Influenced by the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu, researchers began to interpret language as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2013). Bourdieu argued that certain languages or language varieties gain prestige and legitimacy because they are associated with political authority, economic opportunity, and educational institutions. Within this framework, the dominance of specific languages in public signage can be understood as the manifestation of accumulated symbolic power. Linguistic landscapes thus function as sites where symbolic capital is displayed, reinforced, and normalized. When a dominant language consistently occupies central and prominent positions in signage, it reflects not only communicative preference but also broader structures of social stratification (Gal and Irvine 2019).

The application of critical discourse analysis further deepened scholarly understanding of linguistic landscapes as ideological spaces. The theoretical contributions of Norman Fairclough are particularly influential in this regard. Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse—comprising textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice—provides a comprehensive framework for examining how language reproduces power structures. When applied to public signage, this model reveals how linguistic choices are embedded within institutional processes and sociopolitical contexts. For instance, the prioritization of an official language on government buildings reflects broader policy decisions and national ideologies. Through repeated exposure in everyday spaces, such linguistic hierarchies become naturalized and accepted as legitimate, thereby reinforcing dominant social structures (Blommaert, Collins et al. 2005). In addition to sociological and critical perspectives, globalization has emerged as a central theme in linguistic landscape research. The growing presence of English across diverse geographical contexts has attracted considerable scholarly attention. In many non-English-speaking countries, English appears prominently in commercial advertisements, corporate branding, educational institutions, and urban signage. Researchers interpret this phenomenon as a reflection of economic globalization, international trade, tourism, and digital connectivity. English often symbolizes modernity, technological advancement, and global integration. However, its widespread visibility may also contribute to the marginalization of local and indigenous languages. Concerns about linguistic homogenization and cultural erosion have therefore become integral to discussions of global linguistic landscapes. Scholars argue that while globalization facilitates transnational communication, it may simultaneously weaken linguistic diversity by privileging globally dominant languages. Multilingual contexts provide particularly rich environments for examining the relationship between linguistic landscapes and power. Studies conducted in bilingual or multilingual societies demonstrate that public signage often mirrors political negotiations surrounding language rights and national identity (May 2014). Official bilingual signage, for example, can promote symbolic equality and recognize the presence of minority communities. In contrast, monolingual policies may signal exclusion and reinforce asymmetrical power relations. The hierarchical

ordering of languages on signs—such as placing the national language above minority languages—visually encodes social dominance. Such arrangements communicate implicit messages regarding which linguistic groups hold institutional authority and which occupy subordinate positions. Consequently, linguistic landscapes serve as tangible indicators of language policy implementation and sociopolitical dynamics (Rosendal and Amini Ngabonziza 2023).

Semiotic approaches have further enriched linguistic landscape research by emphasizing visual and multimodal elements. Drawing on the work of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, scholars highlight that meaning in public signage is not conveyed solely through words but also through visual design. Elements such as font size, typography, color contrast, spatial arrangement, imagery, and material quality contribute to the overall communicative effect. A language displayed in bold typeface, central alignment, or striking color often conveys authority and prominence. Conversely, smaller fonts or peripheral placement may signal secondary importance. These multimodal resources interact with linguistic content to construct layered meanings about power and identity. Thus, linguistic landscapes must be analyzed as complex semiotic assemblages rather than purely textual phenomena (Biró 2022).

Comparative research has become increasingly important in identifying contextual variations and global patterns. Studies conducted in major metropolitan cities frequently reveal high degrees of multilingualism, reflecting migration, tourism, and economic diversity. Urban centers often display hybrid linguistic forms that combine global and local languages, illustrating processes of cultural negotiation and adaptation. In contrast, smaller towns or rural areas may exhibit more homogeneous linguistic patterns, shaped by localized language policies and demographic stability (Gordon 2019). Comparative analyses enable scholars to examine how historical legacies, political systems, and economic conditions influence public language displays. They also help identify broader global trends, such as the increasing commodification of language in consumer-oriented spaces.

Overall, the existing literature demonstrates that linguistic landscapes are far from neutral or accidental arrangements of words. They are deeply embedded in

ideological processes and power structures. Through visibility, placement, and design, languages are hierarchically organized in ways that reflect and reproduce institutional authority and social inequality. At the same time, linguistic landscapes provide spaces for resistance and identity assertion, particularly when marginalized communities claim visibility through grassroots signage. By integrating sociolinguistic theory, critical discourse analysis, and social semiotics, scholars have established linguistic landscape research as a dynamic and interdisciplinary field. Building upon these theoretical and empirical foundations, the present study adopts a comparative perspective to further investigate how public signage represents power across different sociocultural contexts. By examining patterns of dominance, hierarchy, and visual prominence, this research seeks to contribute to ongoing debates about language, globalization, identity, and institutional authority in contemporary societies (Friedman 2003).

3. Methodology

This study employs a comparative research design that integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine how linguistic landscapes represent power in public spaces. By combining numerical analysis with interpretive investigation, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of language hierarchy, visibility, and symbolic authority across two distinct sociocultural contexts. The comparative framework enables systematic identification of similarities and differences in language use, while also uncovering the sociopolitical and economic factors that shape public signage.

3.1 Research Sites

The research was conducted in selected urban public spaces located in two different sociocultural settings. The sites were chosen purposively based on three main criteria: (1) demographic diversity, (2) level of commercial activity, and (3) presence of governmental and educational institutions. These criteria ensured that the selected areas reflected dynamic linguistic environments where multiple actors—state authorities, private businesses, and local communities—participate in shaping the public display of language.

Urban centers were selected because they typically function as hubs of economic exchange, migration, and institutional power. Such spaces provide rich data for examining how dominant and minority languages interact within public domains. Within each context, central streets, markets, transportation hubs, government offices, and educational institutions were included to capture a broad representation of official and non-official signage.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected through systematic photographic documentation of public signs. A total of approximately 200 signs were recorded across the selected sites, ensuring balanced representation from both contexts. The photographic method was chosen because it allows accurate preservation of textual and visual details for later analysis.

The documented signage included:

- I. Government buildings
- II. Educational institutions
- III. Commercial advertisements
- IV. Street signs
- V. Shop names
- VI. Public notices

To ensure consistency, only fixed and publicly visible signs were included. Temporary posters, handwritten notes of a personal nature, and moving vehicles were excluded to maintain methodological clarity. Each photographed sign was coded with information regarding location, type, and language composition.

3.3 Data Categorization

After data collection, signs were systematically categorized into analytical groups. First, signage was divided into **official** (governmental and institutional) and **non-official** (commercial and private) categories. This distinction is important because official signs often reflect formal language policies, while non-official signs may reflect economic motivations and grassroots linguistic practices.

Second, signs were categorized according to **language composition**:

- I. Monolingual
- II. Bilingual
- III. Multilingual

Third, signs were analyzed in terms of **visual prominence**, including font size, spatial positioning, order of languages, and color contrast. These features were documented to assess hierarchical representation among languages.

3.4 Analytical Framework

The study employs a multi-layered analytical framework integrating sociolinguistic, semiotic, and critical discourse perspectives.

3.4.1 Sociolinguistic Analysis

This level focuses on language distribution, frequency, and hierarchy. Quantitative analysis was conducted to measure the number and percentage of languages used in each context. The analysis examined which languages appeared most frequently and in what types of signage (official vs. non-official). This allowed identification of dominant and marginalized languages.

3.4.2 Semiotic Analysis

Beyond textual presence, the study analyzed visual elements such as font size, typography, color usage, placement, and alignment. Semiotic features were evaluated to determine how visual design reinforces linguistic hierarchy. For example, languages displayed in larger fonts or central positions were interpreted as symbolically dominant.

3.4.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical discourse analysis was applied to interpret ideological implications embedded in signage. This approach explores how linguistic choices reflect institutional authority, national identity, economic globalization, and social inclusion or exclusion. CDA enabled examination of how public texts contribute to normalizing particular power structures.

3.5 Quantitative and Qualitative Procedures

Quantitative data were tabulated to calculate frequencies and percentages of language occurrence across categories. Comparative charts were used to identify differences between the two contexts.

Qualitative analysis involved close reading of selected signs to interpret symbolic meanings and power representation. Particular attention was given to cases where language ordering, translation patterns, or visual emphasis indicated clear hierarchical relationships.

3.6 Comparative Dimension

The comparative approach constitutes a central component of this methodology. By analyzing two different sociocultural contexts, the study identifies patterns related to institutional authority, globalization, and minority language representation. Similarities across contexts suggest broader global trends, while differences highlight the impact of local language policies and sociopolitical histories.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Data were collected exclusively from publicly accessible spaces without photographing individuals or private property in intrusive ways. No personal or sensitive information was recorded. Since the study focuses solely on publicly displayed texts, issues of confidentiality and consent were minimized.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of approximately 200 documented signs across the two selected contexts reveals clear and systematic patterns of linguistic hierarchy. Both quantitative frequency counts and qualitative semiotic interpretation demonstrate that language visibility in public spaces is closely aligned with institutional authority, economic power, and sociopolitical structures. The findings confirm that linguistic landscapes operate as structured environments in which dominance and marginalization are visually encoded.

4.1 Dominance of the National Language in Official Signage

Across both contexts, official signage—particularly on government buildings, public institutions, and regulatory notices—predominantly featured the national language. Quantitative analysis indicates that the majority of official signs were monolingual, with the national language appearing either exclusively or in the most prominent position. In bilingual signs, the national language was consistently placed at the top or on the left side, typically displayed in larger font sizes and bolder typography.

This visual prioritization reflects institutional authority and state legitimization. The spatial positioning and typographical prominence of the national language reinforce its symbolic association with governance, regulation, and national identity. Such patterns illustrate how language policy is materialized in everyday spaces. By consistently foregrounding the national language, public institutions normalize its status as the legitimate medium of authority and administration. This structured visibility shapes public perception, reinforcing the idea that the national language is the primary marker of civic belonging and legal recognition.

4.2 English and Economic Globalization

In contrast to official signage, commercial areas displayed a noticeably different pattern. English appeared prominently in shop names, brand advertisements, billboards, and promotional materials. In many instances, English was used even when the primary clientele consisted of local residents. Quantitative findings show that English frequently appeared in bilingual or multilingual combinations, but in commercial signage, it often occupied central or visually striking positions.

The prominence of English in commercial contexts suggests its strong association with globalization, modernity, and economic aspiration. English words were frequently linked to themes of luxury, innovation, technology, and international quality. Even when accompanied by translations in the national language, English was often designed in larger fonts or more stylized typography, enhancing its visual appeal. This pattern demonstrates the commodification of language, where English functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a symbolic resource that adds prestige and market value.

These findings support previous scholarship arguing that global languages accumulate economic and cultural capital in urban environments. The presence of English in commercial signage reflects broader transnational flows of goods, services, and cultural symbols. It also highlights the intersection between language and consumer identity, where linguistic choices are strategically deployed to attract customers and project a cosmopolitan image.

4.3 Marginalization of Minority and Regional Languages

While the national language and English were highly visible, minority or regional languages were significantly less represented across both contexts. Quantitative data indicate that minority languages appeared in a limited number of signs and were rarely used independently. When present, they were often positioned below dominant languages or displayed in smaller fonts, indicating secondary importance.

This visual marginalization suggests unequal power distribution and limited institutional support for minority linguistic communities. In official contexts, minority languages were largely absent, reflecting centralized language policy and restricted recognition. In commercial settings, their presence was sporadic and typically confined to localized areas where specific communities were concentrated.

The hierarchical arrangement of languages—through order, size, and placement—communicates implicit messages about social value and legitimacy. By assigning peripheral or subordinate positions to minority languages, public signage contributes to their symbolic invisibility. Over time, such patterns may reinforce social exclusion and weaken the perceived status of minority linguistic identities.

4.4 Comparative Differences Between Context A and Context B

The comparative dimension of the study reveals meaningful distinctions between the two contexts. Context A exhibited a higher proportion of multilingual signage, particularly in commercial districts and educational areas. Bilingual and trilingual signs were more common, and minority languages appeared with slightly greater frequency and visibility. This suggests a relatively more inclusive linguistic

environment, possibly influenced by demographic diversity, tourism, or decentralized language practices.

In contrast, Context B demonstrated stronger dominance of the national language, particularly in official and institutional signage. Monolingual signs were more prevalent, and minority languages were minimally visible. This pattern indicates a more centralized approach to language policy and a stronger emphasis on national linguistic unity. The limited presence of alternative languages reflects institutional priorities that favor standardization over diversity.

These comparative findings illustrate how linguistic landscapes are shaped by both global and local forces. While globalization contributes to the visibility of English in both contexts, local sociopolitical structures determine the extent to which minority languages are recognized or marginalized.

4.5 Semiotic Reinforcement of Hierarchy

Semiotic analysis further reveals that hierarchy is not established solely through language selection but also through visual design. Official languages were frequently displayed in bold fonts, formal typography, and centrally aligned text. In contrast, translations or secondary languages were smaller, lighter in color, or positioned at the bottom of signs. Color contrast often highlighted dominant languages while visually diminishing others.

These multimodal features subtly communicate authority and status. The consistent pairing of dominant languages with visually striking design elements reinforces their symbolic power. Such strategies naturalize hierarchy by embedding it within everyday visual environments. As a result, language dominance becomes normalized and rarely questioned by the public.

Theoretical Implications

The findings align closely with the theoretical framework of symbolic capital proposed by Pierre Bourdieu. Dominant languages in both contexts accumulate prestige and legitimacy through institutional endorsement and economic association.

Their repeated and prominent display in public spaces strengthens their symbolic authority.

Similarly, the results support the critical discourse perspective advanced by Norman Fairclough, which argues that discourse practices reflect and reproduce broader social structures. Public signage, as a form of everyday discourse, participates in the reproduction of power relations by visually encoding hierarchy and normalizing linguistic dominance.

4.6 Overall Interpretation

Overall, the linguistic landscapes examined in this study function as visible manifestations of institutional power and social inequality. They shape public perception by elevating certain languages to positions of authority while marginalizing others. The comparative findings highlight the interplay between globalization and national policy, demonstrating that public signage is both globally influenced and locally regulated. By making power relations visible in everyday environments, linguistic landscapes contribute to the ongoing construction of social identity, inclusion, and exclusion. They do not merely reflect existing hierarchies; they actively participate in maintaining and legitimizing them.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that linguistic landscapes function as powerful indicators of social, political, and economic hierarchies within public spaces. Through a comparative analysis of two sociocultural contexts, the findings reveal that language visibility is not random but systematically aligned with institutional authority, national identity, and global economic influence. Dominant languages—particularly the national language in official domains and English in commercial sectors—occupy visually prominent positions through size, placement, and design. In contrast, minority and regional languages often appear in secondary or marginal positions, reflecting unequal access to symbolic and institutional power. By integrating sociolinguistic analysis, semiotic interpretation, and critical discourse perspectives, this research highlights how public signage operates as a site of ideological production and negotiation. Linguistic landscapes do more than mirror

existing social realities; they actively construct and normalize meanings of legitimacy, belonging, and exclusion. Through repeated visual exposure, hierarchical language arrangements become naturalized, reinforcing dominant power structures in everyday life.

The comparative dimension further underscores the interaction between global and local forces. While globalization contributes to the widespread visibility of English as a language of prestige and economic aspiration, local language policies and sociopolitical contexts determine the degree of inclusion or marginalization experienced by minority languages. These findings stress the importance of inclusive and balanced language planning in promoting social cohesion and cultural diversity. Future research may extend this comparative approach to additional regions and incorporate interviews or ethnographic methods to explore how individuals interpret and respond to linguistic representation in public spaces. Ultimately, linguistic landscapes remain dynamic and evolving arenas where language and power intersect, continuously shaping identities, relationships, and social structures.

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