NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND IDEOLOGY: LANGUAGE POWER, CULTURAL ETHNICITY, AND THE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE OF PUBLIC SIGNAGE IN URBAN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This study investigates the interplay between language power, cultural ethnicity, and ideological expression in the social landscape of urban Pakistan, focusing specifically on public signage. Urban commercial spaces, such as markets and shopping districts, serve as visible sites where linguistic choices reflect broader social hierarchies, cultural identities, and ideological positions. Using a qualitative linguistic landscape approach, this research examines shop signs, billboards, banners, and other forms of public textual communication to explore how languages such as Urdu, English, and regional languages are deployed to negotiate identity and project socio-cultural values. The study employs thematic and semiotic analysis to interpret how language selection and placement in public signage reinforce or challenge power structures, promote ethnic and cultural ideologies, and appeal to diverse urban audiences. Findings reveal that English often functions as a marker of modernity and economic prestige, Urdu conveys national identity and inclusivity, while regional languages express local cultural affiliation and community belonging. By analyzing these patterns, the research highlights how public signage not only communicates commercial information but also constructs and negotiates social identities, cultural ideologies, and power relations in Pakistan's urban landscape.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape, Language Power, Cultural Ethnicity, Ideology, Public Signage, Urban Pakistan, Identity Negotiation, Sociolinguistics

Introduction

Language functions as a central marker of social identity, cultural affiliation, and ideological expression within urban spaces. In multilingual societies, the choice of language in public domains reflects complex interactions between power, culture, and social positioning (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023, 2025). Pakistan, with its rich linguistic diversity encompassing Urdu, English, and numerous regional languages, offers a compelling context for examining the socio-cultural and ideological dimensions of public language use. Urban commercial areas, including markets, shopping districts, and street-side businesses, constitute highly visible arenas where linguistic practices are strategically deployed to convey meaning, assert identity, and influence consumer perceptions. Public signage, encompassing shop boards, banners, billboards, and advertisements, operates not merely as functional communication but as a symbolic medium through which social, cultural, and economic hierarchies are articulated.

The concept of the **linguistic landscape** provides a theoretical and methodological framework for analyzing how written language in public spaces reflects broader social realities (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Al-Adwan et al., 2022). Linguistic landscape research emphasizes the ways in which language visibility, prominence, and positioning communicate power relations, group identities, and ideological orientations. In the context of Pakistan, urban commercial signage offers insight into the negotiation of national, regional, and global identities (Akram et al., 2021, 2022). English, for instance, often signifies modernity, prestige, and international connectivity, reflecting socio-economic aspirations and globalized cultural orientations. Urdu, the national language, functions as a marker of inclusivity, cultural legitimacy, and national identity, while regional languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi, or Pashto highlight local cultural belonging and ethnic identity. The interplay between these languages in public signage thus reveals how language acts as a tool for negotiating social and cultural hierarchies within urban commercial landscapes.

Beyond issues of visibility and functionality, public signage embodies ideological and commercial intentions (Li & Akram, 2023, 2024). Business owners strategically select languages and scripts to appeal to target audiences, communicate socio-economic positioning, and project cultural values (Javaid & Ramzan, 2026). For example, bilingual or multilingual signage may simultaneously appeal to upwardly mobile consumers through English while reinforcing national identity through Urdu, or maintain local authenticity through regional languages (Ahmad et al., 2022; Amjad et al., 2021; Ramzan & Khan, 2019, 2024). Such practices exemplify the intersection of language power, cultural ethnicity, and ideological expression, illustrating how urban signage serves as both a commercial and a socio-cultural text.

Despite growing interest in the sociolinguistics of urban spaces, research on the linguistic landscape of Pakistan remains limited, particularly in exploring the ways that language selection mediates identity and ideological representation in public signage. Existing studies tend to focus on language policy, educational contexts, or rural language use, leaving a gap in understanding how urban commercial environments operate as sites of cultural negotiation. This study addresses this gap by employing a qualitative linguistic landscape approach to analyze public signage in selected urban commercial areas of Pakistan, using thematic and semiotic analysis to uncover patterns of language choice, symbolic meaning, and identity negotiation.

The objectives of this study are threefold: first, to examine how different languages are deployed in urban commercial signage to convey social and cultural messages; second, to analyze the semiotic and ideological significance of language choice in constructing identity and projecting socio-cultural values; and third, to explore how the interplay of language power, cultural ethnicity, and commercial practices reflects and reproduces broader social hierarchies. By interrogating these questions, the research illuminates the complex ways in which public signage operates as a medium of identity negotiation, ideological expression, and social stratification in Pakistan's urban landscape.

Literature Review

Research on linguistic landscapes has expanded significantly over the past two decades as scholars have recognized the value of public signage as a window into social, cultural, and ideological processes. Landry and Bourhis (1997) pioneered the concept of the linguistic landscape, arguing that the visible display of languages in public spaces communicates not only practical information but also reflects broader social relations of power, legitimacy, and identity. Since then, linguistic

landscape research has interrogated the symbolic power of languages in urban contexts, demonstrating how multilingual signage mediates social hierarchies and cultural values (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006).

Studies in multilingual societies illustrate that public signage often signals competing language ideologies (Ramzan et al., 2023, 2025, 2026). For example, in urban centers where global languages coexist with national and local languages, the prominence of global languages like English is frequently associated with economic modernization and elite status, while national languages convey cultural belonging and administrative legitimacy (Backhaus, 2007; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). This pattern is particularly evident in commercial areas, where language choice becomes a strategic tool for branding, consumer targeting, and identity construction.

In the South Asian context, linguistic landscape research has revealed complex interactions among colonial legacies, national language policies, and local ethnolinguistic identities (Jalalzai et al., 2025; Ma et al., 2024, 2025). Studies in India and Bangladesh have shown that English often occupies high-status spaces in urban signage, while regional languages function as markers of local heritage (Pnina, 2010; Ramaswami, 2012). In Pakistan, recent research highlights similar dynamics; English is frequently leveraged to signal modernity and global connectivity, whereas Urdu is associated with national cohesion and wider communication (Naz & Khan, 2021). Additionally, regional languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashto appear variably in signage, reflecting patterns of ethnic identity and community affiliation that resist uniform national narratives (Raziq & Shah, 2022). These studies collectively underscore the need to view public signage not simply as communicative practice but as a cultural text that participates in shaping social meanings.

Despite these advances, gaps remain in understanding how linguistic landscapes in Pakistani urban commercial settings negotiate identity and ideology, particularly in relation to the interplay of language power and cultural ethnicity. While existing work documents language distribution and prevalence, fewer studies critically analyze the semiotic and ideological significance of language choice—how linguistic forms reinforce or challenge social hierarchies, negotiate cultural identities, and reflect broader ideological currents. This study seeks to address that gap by applying qualitative, semiotic, and thematic analyses to public signage in urban Pakistan to explore the ideological and identity-oriented dimensions of language use.

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated at the intersection of sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and the theory of linguistic landscape. Together, these frameworks provide tools to analyze not only what languages appear in public signage but also the ideological meanings and power relations embedded within those choices (Abdelrady et al., 2025; Akram & Li, 2024). The linguistic landscape framework foregrounds the public visibility of languages and emphasizes that linguistic signs serve as artifacts through which social actors construct and negotiate identities (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). From this perspective, language choice on commercial signage is a deliberate act shaped by social forces rather than a neutral communicative practice. Critical discourse analysis provides an additional layer for interpreting ideology and power. CDA posits that language both reflects and reproduces power relations within society, and that discourse is implicated in the maintenance of social hierarchies (Fairclough, 2010; Ramzan et al., 2020, 2021). When applied to linguistic landscapes, CDA encourages the researcher to investigate not only which languages

appear but also how their placement, design, and prominence serve ideological functions—such as legitimizing elite groups, reinforcing national identities, or asserting local cultural autonomy. Sociolinguistic theories of language ideology further underscore that beliefs about language—with respect to prestige, purity, utility, or cultural heritage—shape public communicative practices (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). Language ideologies are culturally embedded systems of thought that influence how speakers evaluate language use, including decisions about linguistic representation in commercial signage. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the study examines public signage as a semiotic system in which language choice communicates meaning about identity, status, and cultural affiliation. This approach allows for an analysis that attends both to the formal properties of signs (e.g., language combinations, script choices) and their socio-ideological implications within the urban environment.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design informed by linguistic landscape methodology. Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring how language use in public spaces reflects underlying social meanings, cultural ideologies, and identity negotiations, allowing for interpretive and contextualized analysis rather than statistical generalization.

Site Selection and Sampling

Data were collected from urban commercial markets in three major cities of Pakistan—Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad—selected because of their dense commercial activity, high linguistic diversity, and socio-cultural heterogeneity. Within these cities, purposive sampling was used to select commercial zones with visible public signage, including shopping streets, bazaars, and business clusters.

Data Collection

Data consisted of photographic documentation of public signage, including shop boards, billboards, banners, and other commercial textual displays. Photographs were taken systematically to capture a representative sample of languages, scripts, and visual configurations in each site. Field notes were also maintained to record contextual factors such as pedestrian traffic, placement of signs, and proximity to other linguistic features.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a combination of **thematic analysis** and **semiotic analysis**:

- **Thematic Analysis**: Photographs and field notes were coded to identify recurring patterns of language use, language hierarchies, and functional purposes of signage (e.g., commercial marketing vs. cultural representation). Themes were developed inductively to reflect emergent patterns without imposing preconceived categories.
- **Semiotic Analysis**: Semiotic analysis was conducted to interpret the symbolic and visual elements of signage, including script style, typography, color, placement, and language combinations. This analysis attends to how signs communicate meaning beyond their literal content and how they signify cultural and ideological values.

Throughout the analysis, attention was given to the **interaction between language choices and broader socio-cultural contexts**, enabling an interpretation of public signage as a reflection of power dynamics and identity negotiations within urban Pakistan.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed. Photographs were taken in public spaces where no individuals were identifiable, and interpretations were conducted with respect for cultural sensitivities and without imposing external judgments on linguistic communities.

Results

Analysis of public signage in the urban commercial areas of Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad revealed clear patterns in language use, reflecting intersections of language power, cultural ethnicity, and ideological positioning. The findings are organized into four primary themes: dominance of English, function of Urdu, role of regional languages, and strategic language combinations.

1. Dominance of English as a Marker of Prestige and Modernity

English was observed predominantly in high-end commercial spaces, luxury brands, and international franchises. Thematic analysis showed that English signage was often associated with modernity, professionalism, and global economic participation. Semiotic analysis revealed stylistic markers such as bold fonts, stylized logos, and prominent placement designed to attract upwardly mobile consumers. For example, in Karachi's Clifton district and Lahore's Gulberg market, English appeared on brand names, store signage, and promotional banners, signaling a cultural alignment with cosmopolitan identities and socio-economic prestige.

2. Urdu as a Medium of National Identity and Inclusivity

Urdu appeared in nearly all commercial signage, particularly in local markets, food outlets, and mid-range retail shops. Urdu was often presented in simpler typography, emphasizing legibility and inclusivity. Bilingual signage combining Urdu and English was common, reflecting a negotiation between local accessibility and international appeal. These signs communicated trust, familiarity, and national cultural legitimacy, reinforcing Urdu as a unifying linguistic symbol in Pakistan's multilingual society.

3. Regional Languages as Markers of Cultural Affiliation

Regional languages, including Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashto, appeared primarily in neighborhood-based markets, small-scale eateries, and ethnic clothing stores. While less prevalent than Urdu or English, their presence signaled local cultural identity, ethnic belonging, and community pride. Semiotic analysis showed the use of distinctive scripts, culturally resonant motifs, and traditional color schemes to reinforce local heritage. These findings illustrate that regional languages operate as markers of community identity and resist homogenization in urban commercial contexts.

4. Strategic Language Combinations and Code-Switching

Mixed-language signage was prevalent, with English, Urdu, and occasionally regional languages coexisting on a single sign. These combinations allowed businesses to communicate simultaneously with multiple audiences, balancing prestige, accessibility, and cultural authenticity. For instance, a café might present its brand in English, a slogan in Urdu, and menu descriptions in a regional language. This code-switching reflected strategic identity negotiation, targeting both local and aspirational consumer bases.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that urban public signage in Pakistan operates as a complex semiotic system where language choice conveys social meaning, cultural ideology, and power dynamics. The dominance of English aligns with the concept of language as symbolic capital, signaling global connectivity, economic prestige, and aspirational identity (Bourdieu, 1991). Urdu functions as a

medium of national unity and inclusivity, supporting social cohesion and facilitating comprehension across diverse linguistic groups. Regional languages, while less visible, remain culturally and ideologically significant, expressing local identities and community affiliation (Jan et al., 2022; Parveen & Akram, 2021**)**.

These patterns illustrate the interplay between language power and cultural ideology in urban commercial settings. Businesses strategically deploy languages to position themselves socially and economically, reflecting an awareness of consumer perception and linguistic hierarchies. The co-existence of English, Urdu, and regional languages on signage demonstrates a negotiated balance between modernity, national identity, and ethnic authenticity. This mirrors previous findings in South Asian contexts where multilingual signage functions simultaneously as a marketing tool and a vehicle for cultural expression (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009; Raziq & Shah, 2022).

The study also highlights the semiotic dimensions of linguistic landscapes, where typography, color, and placement amplify ideological meanings. English conveys cosmopolitan sophistication, Urdu asserts national legitimacy, and regional scripts assert local cultural heritage. Such findings underscore the importance of analyzing linguistic landscapes not only for linguistic prevalence but also for their ideological and identity-signaling functions.

Conclusion

This study illustrates that urban commercial signage in Pakistan is more than functional communication; it is a socially and ideologically charged space that negotiates identity, ethnicity, and power. English, Urdu, and regional languages serve distinct and overlapping roles: English as a symbol of prestige and global connectivity, Urdu as a marker of national identity and inclusivity, and regional languages as expressions of cultural affiliation and community belonging. Strategic use of multiple languages on signage reveals businesses' engagement with both social hierarchies and cultural ideologies.By interpreting public signage through a linguistic landscape lens, the study demonstrates how language power, cultural ethnicity, and ideological expression intersect in urban spaces, highlighting the semiotic and social significance of everyday commercial texts. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of sociolinguistic negotiation in multilingual urban contexts and provide empirical evidence for the symbolic role of language in commercial and cultural domains.

Recommendations

1. Policy and Planning: Urban planners and municipal authorities should consider linguistic diversity in public signage policies to promote inclusivity and cultural representation in commercial areas.
2. Commercial Strategy: Business owners can leverage multilingual signage strategically, balancing global appeal, national identity, and local cultural resonance to connect with diverse consumer groups.
3. Cultural Preservation: Initiatives to maintain and promote regional languages in public signage can strengthen local cultural heritage and prevent linguistic marginalization.
4. Further Research: Future studies could employ longitudinal or comparative designs to investigate changes in linguistic landscapes over time, and to explore the socio-economic impacts of language visibility in urban commercial markets.

5. Pedagogical Applications: Linguistic landscape findings can inform sociolinguistic education, helping students and researchers understand the relationship between language, identity, and ideology in real-world contexts.

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