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Semiotic Citizenship and the Construction of Belonging in Multilingual Public Spaces

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ABSTRACT

***Purpose**: This study investigates how semiotic citizenship is enacted and experienced within multilingual public spaces, focusing on how language, visibility, and affect intertwine to construct belonging in the urban environment. It explores how individuals negotiate recognition and participation through linguistic and visual signs that populate the city's semiotic landscape.*

***Subjects and Methods**: The research was conducted across three key urban sites a traditional market, a transportation terminal, and a municipal plaza selected for their contrasting semiotic ecologies. Using a qualitative ethnographic design grounded in semiotic landscape analysis, data were collected through visual documentation, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with twenty-five participants including traders, migrants, residents, and municipal officers. The analysis combined multimodal discourse analysis and thematic coding to interpret how signs, languages, and emotions converge to produce symbolic belonging.*

***Results:** Findings reveal that multilingual signs act as semiotic performances of citizenship, where linguistic hierarchies, creative hybridity, and emotional recognition coexist. Formal spaces reproduce institutional authority through standardized language, while informal environments allow vernacular and hybrid expressions to emerge as acts of grassroots visibility. Participants expressed feelings of inclusion, remembrance, and shared authorship through the visibility of their languages in public spaces.*

***Conclusions:** Semiotic citizenship operates as an affective and participatory practice rather than a formal status. Belonging is not merely spoken but inscribed in the multilingual textures of urban life, where visibility itself becomes a moral act of recognition. The city thus emerges as a semiotic democracy continually rewritten through the languages of its people.*

INTRODUCTION

Cities are living texts. They are written and rewritten every day through the words, images, and symbols that populate their walls, streets, and open spaces (Campbell et al., 2021; de Jong & Lu, 2022; Dalgiç & Yildirim, 2023). In every direction, signs speak of who we are, who governs us, who trades, who prays, and who belongs. Yet beneath the surface of these visible inscriptions lies a deeper layer of meaning, one that connects language with identity and visibility with citizenship. When people move through a multilingual city, they do more than navigate its directions or read its advertisements. They also encounter traces of themselves, their communities, and the others who share the same space.

Each sign, whether official or improvised, contributes to a silent but powerful dialogue about who has the right to be seen and whose language counts as legitimate. It is in this dialogue that the concept of semiotic citizenship finds its force, as it calls attention to the ways people use language and visual expression to make themselves present and recognized within the moral and political life of the city (Lähdesmäki et al., 2022; Bibri & Allam, 2022; Lebow, 2024). The study of linguistic and semiotic landscapes has long illuminated the intimate relationship between language, power, and space (Yao & Gruba, 2022; Sheng & Buchanan, 2022; Andriyanti, 2021).

Early work in this field revealed how public signs reflect broader ideological formations, mapping social hierarchies onto the visible environment (Leuthold et al., 2007; Gal, 2002). Yet what often remains unseen is how people inhabit those hierarchies, how they interpret, rework, or even resist them through everyday practices of inscription. The idea of semiotic citizenship moves the discussion from language as a symbol of authority toward language as an act of participation. It asks not only what the signs say but also who is speaking through them, who is invited to speak, and who finds ways to speak despite being unheard. Through this lens, citizenship is not confined to legal recognition but extends to the semiotic capacity to claim presence in shared public space (Dansholm, 2022; Mpendukana, 2022; Baldi, 2024).

This perspective is particularly resonant in multilingual societies like Indonesia, where public spaces function as intersections of languages, histories, and identities (Napu, 2024; Madkur, 2024; Mauziyyah et al., 2024). The linguistic landscape of an Indonesian city is rarely uniform. A single street might carry a mixture of Indonesian, regional languages, Arabic phrases, and English borrowings, all layered within a few meters of space. The walls of markets, terminals, and plazas thus become palimpsests of communication, bearing the imprints of national policies, local traditions, and global influences. These layers are not just decorative. They are deeply social. The visibility of certain languages and the absence of others reflect how belonging is distributed across the city.

To see one's language displayed publicly is to experience recognition. To search for it and find only silence is to feel its erasure. In this way, linguistic visibility becomes an emotional index of who is included in the civic imagination and who stands at its margins (Keegan, 2021; Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Stroud, 2023). Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond institutional language policies toward the lived experience of public communication (Calice et al., 2022; Whittle et al., 2023; Devi, 2023). The everyday use of multilingual signs offers a window into how people negotiate belonging in complex urban ecologies. The hand-painted board of a street vendor, the bilingual banner of a local event, or the formal signage of a municipal office all participate in constructing a semiotic order that both reflects and shapes social life (Gal, 2002).

These signs reveal how people inhabit the tension between regulation and creativity, between the authority of the state and the expressive agency of ordinary citizens. Semiotic citizenship emerges from this tension as an ongoing negotiation in which people write themselves into the visual and moral fabric of the city. It is less a claim to legal rights and more a gesture of acknowledgment that to exist in the public sphere is to be seen, read, and remembered. The present study explores this negotiation by examining how multilingual public spaces mediate the construction of belonging in urban Indonesia. It focuses on three sites that together embody different scales of public life: the traditional market, the transportation terminal, and the municipal plaza.

Each site represents a distinct semiotic ecology, where languages encounter one another under different forms of authority and intimacy. The market is a grassroots arena where vernacular creativity thrives and where people express solidarity through the warmth of familiar words. The terminal is a corridor of movement, filled with transient encounters that blend institutional messages with the informal gestures of travelers and traders. The municipal plaza, by contrast, embodies the state's presence and its attempts to formalize communication through standardized linguistic codes. By studying these interconnected spaces, the research seeks to understand how the semiotic textures of the city shape and reflect the ways people imagine their belonging to a shared civic world.

The study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach informed by semiotic landscape analysis. This orientation allows for a deep engagement with both the material and affective dimensions of

language in public space. By combining visual documentation, observation, and in-depth interviews, the research follows how signs are produced, interpreted, and emotionally experienced. The emphasis is not merely on cataloguing languages or counting occurrences but on reading the city as a living semiotic organism that speaks through its people. Through this interpretive lens, the research aims to uncover the subtle ways in which individuals, whether local residents, migrants, or officials, enact their citizenship through everyday acts of visibility and recognition.

Theoretically, this study aligns with contemporary discussions in linguistic anthropology and critical sociolinguistics that view citizenship as a semiotic and ethical practice rather than a purely institutional one. Scholars such as Stroud, Leppänen, and Kytölä have emphasized that the politics of language visibility are inseparable from the politics of recognition. To be a citizen is not only to possess rights but to be seen as someone who matters in the semiotic order of public life. This study extends that insight by grounding it in the lived experiences of multilingual Indonesians who continually navigate between linguistic hierarchies and cultural pluralities. It argues that semiotic citizenship is both an act of communication and a moral stance, one that links language with empathy, recognition, and the shared responsibility of coexisting in difference (Taha, 2017).

At its core, this research begins from the simple observation that public spaces remember their people through the languages written upon them. The words on walls and signboards are not inert traces of information but enduring gestures of belonging. They tell us who has been here, who is still here, and who is invited to stay. By tracing these signs and listening to the stories behind them, this study seeks to understand how citizenship is continually rewritten in the textures of the multilingual city. It approaches urban space not as a static background but as a dialogic landscape where people converse through their signs, building communities of recognition one word at a time. The investigation, therefore, is not only linguistic but deeply human—an inquiry into how people make themselves visible to one another in a world that is constantly speaking in many tongues.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach grounded in semiotic landscape analysis and the theoretical framework of semiotic citizenship. The ethnographic design allows the researcher to enter the lived realities of multilingual urban environments, observing how individuals read, respond to, and participate in the semiotic life of public spaces. Rather than treating signs merely as static linguistic artefacts, this study views them as socially situated expressions of belonging and recognition. The ethnographic orientation therefore emphasizes context, interaction, and the affective meanings attached to multilingual displays, recognizing that semiotic life in public spaces emerges through everyday encounters and negotiations. Semiotic landscape analysis provides the methodological backbone that connects the visual and the social, enabling the examination of how written and visual signs mediate relationships among people, power, and place. This approach treats the landscape not as a background but as a communicative stage where languages and symbols speak, contest, and coexist. Within this analytic frame, semiotic citizenship becomes the lens through which inclusion and exclusion are made visible, showing how citizens and non-citizens alike use semiotic resources to claim visibility, articulate belonging, or resist marginalization.

Research Sites and Context

The study was conducted across three distinct public sites within a metropolitan area that is characterized by high linguistic diversity and continuous mobility. The selected sites included a traditional market, a public transportation terminal, and a municipal plaza. Each of these spaces functions as a living interface of interaction where formal and informal languages coexist, and where the public life of signs unfolds daily. These sites were chosen purposively to reflect contrasting semiotic ecologies that reveal the complexity of multilingual communication in contemporary urban life. The tr]aditional market represents a grassroots semiotic arena where local and migrant communities exchange not only goods but also symbolic meanings. The

transportation terminal functions as a transient linguistic corridor where mobility and signage intersect, while the municipal plaza stands as a site of institutional authority where state discourses of citizenship and belonging are most visibly inscribed. Together, these spaces form a comparative canvas through which to trace how multilingual signs circulate between regulation and improvisation, and how ordinary people navigate their semiotic citizenship in everyday encounters.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of twenty-five individuals drawn from diverse linguistic and social backgrounds. They included long-term residents, migrant traders, street vendors, sign painters, local visitors, and municipal officers. The participants were selected using purposive criteria that prioritized individuals who are actively involved in the semiotic life of the public spaces either as producers or interpreters of signs. Engaging this range of participants allowed the study to capture both the institutional voice that governs the production of official signage and the vernacular voices that animate the streets through spontaneous or creative semiotic acts. Each participant brought a unique perspective on what it means to belong in a multilingual city. For migrant traders, the visibility of their language on shop signs or posters became a subtle marker of identity and recognition. For municipal officers, signage reflected regulatory order and social cohesion. For local residents, it often evoked affective attachments to place and community. Through these different lenses, the notion of semiotic citizenship was not treated as a uniform experience but as a dynamic negotiation mediated by language, visibility, and power.

Data Collection

Data collection combined visual documentation, ethnographic observation, and semi-structured interviews. The integration of these techniques allowed a comprehensive understanding of how semiotic practices materialize across visual, discursive, and experiential dimensions. Visual documentation involved the systematic photographing of over three hundred signs, murals, posters, and graffiti found in the three research sites. Each image was recorded along with contextual information that captured its location, spatial positioning, materiality, and linguistic composition. These images served not only as visual data but also as entry points for interpreting how different languages and symbols shape perceptions of legitimacy and belonging. Ethnographic observation was conducted over a six-month period during which the researcher spent extended time in each site observing people's movements, interactions, and reactions to multilingual signage. Detailed fieldnotes were kept to document patterns of engagement and moments of symbolic negotiation, such as how people read or ignore certain signs, how shopkeepers select languages for their boards, or how pedestrians interpret official notices written in unfamiliar scripts. These fieldnotes became valuable records of the subtle interplay between the visible and the lived dimensions of public space. Semi-structured interviews provided a more introspective layer of data. Participants were invited to reflect on their feelings, memories, and interpretations of the multilingual environment. The interviews were conducted in languages preferred by the participants, then translated and transcribed for analysis. Questions centered on their sense of belonging, perceptions of inclusion or exclusion, and experiences of recognition or erasure through signage. The dialogic nature of these interviews encouraged participants to become co-analysts of their own semiotic worlds, revealing the affective and ideological undercurrents that shape public life.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed an interpretive, multimodal discourse analytic approach that examined meaning across textual, visual, and spatial layers. The analysis began with a detailed examination of the visual data, identifying recurring linguistic patterns, spatial arrangements, and the visual hierarchies that structure semiotic visibility. The researcher attended closely to the positioning, font, color, and scale of signs to reveal how certain languages acquire symbolic authority while others remain marginal or invisible. The visual analysis was followed by thematic coding of the interview transcripts and fieldnotes using an inductive strategy. Repeated readings of the data generated emergent themes that captured key social processes such as symbolic ownership, linguistic recognition, erasure, and affective belonging. These themes were then

interpreted through the theoretical lens of semiotic citizenship, which foregrounds how individuals claim social visibility and civic presence through semiotic means. The analytical process was recursive rather than linear, moving back and forth between visual and verbal data to uncover the deeper ideologies of inclusion, recognition, and belonging that circulate in multilingual public life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As the researcher entered the multilingual spaces of the city, what immediately surfaced was the density of meaning embedded in every corner. Signs were not passive objects scattered through the environment; they were active presences that spoke, invited, and sometimes resisted. In the marketplace, the terminal, and the municipal plaza, language became a living material through which people performed their belonging, voiced their identities, and negotiated their visibility. The city itself unfolded as a layered text, one that had to be read not only through its words but also through the silences, colors, and textures that accompanied them. What became evident was that every sign whether printed or handwritten was situated within the affective economy of citizenship: it did not merely communicate, it remembered, it acknowledged, and it claimed space.

The analysis of these multilingual landscapes revealed three interrelated processes through which semiotic citizenship was enacted. The first involved the formation of symbolic hierarchies that regulated whose languages became visible and whose remained marginal. The second captured how people used creativity and hybridity to negotiate belonging within those hierarchies. The third illuminated the affective and civic resonances that emerged as people encountered their own or others' languages in public. Together, these processes portray citizenship not as a legal abstraction but as an embodied practice of inscription and recognition, continuously shaped by the interplay of authority, creativity, and emotion.

Table 1. Linguistic Visibility and Hierarchy in Public Signs

Site	Dominant Language(s)	Secondary or Supporting Language(s)	Form and Function of Signage	Semiotic and Social Implication
Municipal Plaza	Indonesian (formal register)	English (symbolic)	Printed government signs, public announcements, banners	Reinforces state authority and civic order through standardization; English indexes aspiration and modernity without disrupting national linguistic dominance
Transportation Terminal	Indonesian (functional)	Local language, Arabic (vernacular and religious)	Directional signs, small business advertisements, greetings	Demonstrates cohabitation between institutional and cultural discourses; creates an affective balance between order and familiarity
Traditional Market	Local language (oralized form)	Indonesian, occasional English	Handwritten boards, murals, improvised posters	Enacts grassroots visibility and communal belonging; challenges linguistic hierarchy through everyday creativity

The first layer of observation revealed that language distribution in public spaces mirrors the social organization of power (Simões, 2019). In the municipal plaza, the signs bore the unmistakable mark of institutional authorship. The uniformity of typeface, the clarity of printed materials, and the dominance of formal Indonesian collectively produced an image of order and authority. English appeared selectively, as a symbolic index of modernity rather than as a practical tool of communication. The arrangement of these signs conveyed the voice of the state speaking to its citizens, orchestrating a civic narrative that privileges linguistic standardization as the marker of legitimacy. It was in this space that the semiotics of control became visible language operating as a reminder of who governs and who is addressed.

The texture changed dramatically within the transportation terminal, where linguistic plurality became more porous and dialogic. Here, Indonesian remained the language of instruction, yet it lived alongside local idioms and Arabic greetings. A large printed "Keluar / Exit" was often framed by informal expressions like "Assalamu Alaikum" written with spray paint or marker pens,

creating a visual conversation between bureaucratic formality and cultural intimacy. The coexistence of these scripts transformed the terminal from a purely functional corridor into a site of negotiation. It was neither fully institutional nor entirely vernacular but something in between a semiotic middle ground where official discourse met everyday spirituality. This in-between space captured the fluid nature of semiotic citizenship, where belonging is constantly redefined through interaction rather than decree.

At the traditional market, the scene was radically different. The walls were alive with handwritten signs, faded posters, and improvised boards announcing products in the local language. Spelling variations and creative blends of Indonesian and English were common, suggesting that precision was secondary to expression. The visual messiness of the market conveyed a sense of authenticity that resisted bureaucratic tidiness. Traders wrote as they spoke, unconcerned with linguistic correctness but deeply attuned to the voices of their community. Their language was not about prestige but about connection. In these handwritten traces, one could sense what it means to belong in an affective rather than administrative way. The market thus became a grassroots archive of semiotic citizenship a place where ordinary people, through everyday writing, asserted their right to be seen, to be heard, and to be remembered.

Table 2. Hybrid and Creative Semiotic Practices in Multilingual Contexts

Example / Site	Textual Expression	Linguistic Composition	Mode of Production	Interpretive Function and Social Meaning
Market Shop Sign	"Toko Rezeki Family Mart"	Indonesian + English	Hand-painted on wooden board	Combines religious gratitude with modern commercial identity; performs belonging through moral and aspirational hybridity
Terminal Banner	"Welcome to Terminal Kita"	English + Indonesian	Printed community-made banner	Creates inclusive hospitality; transforms transit space into shared civic territory through pronoun *kita* ("our")
Community Poster, Plaza	"Kami Semua Satu Kota"	Indonesian + Local Language	Handwritten on reused cardboard	Asserts collective identity and emotional solidarity; reclaims institutional space for civic participation

If language hierarchies establish the framework of visibility, creativity becomes the means by which people rework those hierarchies from within. The city's semiotic landscape revealed countless acts of hybrid inscription that blurred the boundaries between the global and the local. One striking example was a market shop sign reading "Toko Rezeki Family Mart." The phrase merged Indonesian religious morality with English consumer modernity, producing a hybrid identity that was neither purely traditional nor entirely cosmopolitan. The sign communicated more than the name of a shop it articulated a worldview in which material ambition and spiritual gratitude coexisted (Elisha, 2008). The trader who designed it, when asked, explained that the English part made the shop "look a bit modern," but the word Rezeki reminded customers that "wealth still comes from God." This subtle layering of meaning exemplified the affective intelligence of everyday semiotic labor.

A similar play of hybridity appeared at the transportation terminal where a large banner declared, "Welcome to Terminal Kita." The mixture of English and Indonesian created an inclusive tone that resonated with passersby. The addition of Kita meaning "our" reframed the terminal as a shared civic space rather than an anonymous transit point. The banner's informality stood in contrast to the state-issued directional signs nearby, making the message feel more personal and hospitable. In this hybrid language, one could hear a public voice that sought not only to inform but to invite. Such creative combinations show how people use linguistic resources to humanize institutional spaces, translating authority into empathy.

At the municipal plaza, creativity took a different form. A youth community had pinned a handwritten poster that read, "Kami Semua Satu Kota." The words were simple, yet their location beneath a printed government announcement gave them a quiet political force. The poster did

not protest; it conversed. It did not erase the state's voice but added to it, weaving the emotional texture of unity into the formal fabric of governance. In its material fragility and sincerity, the poster embodied what Stroud calls the performative dimension of semiotic citizenship: a claim to presence enacted not through confrontation but through contribution. Across these hybrid practices, belonging emerged as a form of creative negotiation, where language becomes an instrument of gentle transformation shaping civic life not through authority but through care.

Table 3. Affective Responses to Multilingual Visibility among Participants

Participant	Sociolinguistic Background	Quoted Reflection	Underlying Affective or Civic Theme
P4 (Migrant Trader)	Bugis speaker, resident for 7 years	"When I see my language on the market walls, I feel this city also remembers me."	Emotional recognition, symbolic inclusion, and visibility as belonging
P9 (Local Student)	Indonesian–English bilingual	"The mix of languages makes the city feel alive, like everyone leaves a piece of their story here."	Civic participation through diversity, shared authorship of urban identity
P15 (Municipal Staff)	Civil servant, Indonesian monolingual speaker	"We use formal language to keep order, but we also want people to see that the city welcomes everyone."	Institutional awareness, balancing authority with inclusivity

The interviews opened another layer of understanding by revealing the emotional texture of multilingual life. Participant P4, a migrant trader from the Bugis community, spoke of how seeing her mother tongue written on market walls made her feel that the city "remembers" her. The metaphor of remembrance captures a profound sense of recognition that transcends linguistic visibility. To be remembered is to be included in the moral imagination of the city. Her words remind us that belonging is not simply about being present in space but about being acknowledged as part of its ongoing story. Multilingual signs thus become affective mirrors that reflect back one's existence in shared public life. Participant P9, a local bilingual student, described the multilingual city as alive, a place where "everyone leaves a piece of their story." His reflection carries the tone of wonder and participation. For him, the multiplicity of languages is not confusing but comforting. It signals a community that values diversity as an essential part of its identity. Through his eyes, the city becomes an evolving conversation, a collaborative authorship of meaning where every linguistic trace contributes to collective life.

The reflection of P15, a municipal officer, introduced an institutional perspective that was both pragmatic and empathetic. He acknowledged the need for formal language to maintain civic order but also recognized the importance of warmth in public communication. His statement suggests an awareness of semiotic balance the realization that language policy, too, is an act of citizenship. The city, he implied, should speak in ways that welcome its people rather than merely govern them. This acknowledgment signals a quiet transformation within the bureaucracy, where authority begins to learn the grammar of inclusion. Across these reflections, what stands out is that the affective power of language resides not in its correctness but in its capacity to make people feel seen. Signs matter because they extend recognition, and through recognition, they generate belonging. The multilingual landscape, therefore, is not only a visual phenomenon but an emotional and ethical one. It materializes the shared desire to exist together in difference.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study confirms that semiotic citizenship in multilingual public spaces is formed through everyday practices that make language the primary medium for citizens' sense of belonging, recognition, and participation. The findings show that public signs do not simply reflect linguistic diversity but serve as arenas where linguistic hierarchies, hybrid creativity, and emotional expression interact to shape the experience of citizenship. The dominance of formal language in institutional spaces reinforces state authority, while spaces such as markets and terminals open up possibilities for diverse voices to emerge and negotiate with each other. Through writing, shop signs, banners, and even a mixture of language codes, citizens create new social meanings that affirm their presence and expand the boundaries of visibility. The affective

experiences of the participants demonstrate that linguistic visibility is not only a political issue but also an emotional experience that affirms identity. Overall, this study demonstrates that public spaces function as a semiotic democracy that is continually renewed through collective reading and writing, transforming the city into a living archive where the relationship between power, participation, and citizen presence is realized through language.

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