

Linguistic Landscapes and Cultural Identity Formation in Multilingual Urban Spaces

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to examine how linguistic landscapes in multilingual urban spaces reflect sociolinguistic hierarchies and contribute to processes of cultural identity formation. It seeks to understand the relationship between language visibility in public signage, power relations, and the ways urban residents negotiate belonging and recognition within the city.

Subjects and Methods: The research employed a qualitative case study design grounded in linguistic landscape studies. Data were collected through systematic field observations, photographic documentation of public signage, and semi-structured interviews with community members, residents, and business owners in selected multilingual urban areas. The data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, linguistic landscape categorization (top-down and bottom-up signage), and critical discourse analysis to interpret language choice, visibility, and ideological implications.

Results: The findings reveal a patterned distribution of languages in urban public spaces, with the national language dominating official signage and heritage languages appearing primarily in localized, community-based contexts. Bottom-up signage demonstrated greater linguistic creativity through multilingual and mixed-language practices, functioning as sites of identity negotiation and cultural expression. Linguistic visibility was strongly associated with feelings of cultural recognition and belonging, while linguistic absence contributed to perceptions of marginalization.

Conclusions: The study concludes that linguistic landscapes actively shape cultural identity and social inclusion in multilingual cities. More inclusive language policies are needed to recognize heritage languages and support equitable linguistic representation in urban public spaces.

INTRODUCTION

Urban spaces in the contemporary world are increasingly characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity (Syam et al., 2023; Chríst & Thomas, 2008; Krase & Shortell, 2011). Globalization, migration, and transnational mobility have transformed cities into complex multilingual environments where multiple languages coexist, compete, and interact in public spaces. These linguistic dynamics are not only communicative phenomena but also powerful social symbols that reflect broader cultural, political, and ideological processes shaping urban life.

Gorter (2013) and Nikolaou (2017) said that, one of the most visible manifestations of multilingualism in cities is the linguistic landscape, commonly defined as the presence of written language in public spaces such as street signs, billboards, shop names, advertisements, and public

notices. Linguistic landscapes function as semiotic resources that communicate information, index social identities, and signal power relations among linguistic communities (Lepani et al., 2025; Xia, 2025). As such, they offer a unique lens through which to examine how language operates beyond formal institutions and into everyday urban experiences.

Research on linguistic landscapes has expanded significantly over the past two decades, moving beyond descriptive accounts of language visibility to more critical analyses of language ideology, globalization, and identity. According to Siziba & Maseko (2024) and Wekjira & Bányi (2024), scholars have demonstrated that linguistic landscapes are shaped by both top-down forces, such as government language policies and institutional regulations, and bottom-up practices, including local businesses, community initiatives, and individual linguistic choices. These layers of influence make urban linguistic landscapes dynamic and contested spaces.

In multilingual urban settings, the visibility of certain languages over others often reflects broader socio-political hierarchies (Begum & Sinha, 2021; Barakos & Selleck, 2019). Dominant or official languages tend to occupy prominent positions in public signage, while minority or migrant languages may appear in more localized or informal contexts. This unequal distribution of linguistic resources can contribute to the marginalization of certain groups while legitimizing others, thereby reinforcing existing power structures within the city.

At the same time, linguistic landscapes serve as important sites for cultural identity formation. The languages displayed in public spaces can shape how individuals perceive themselves and others within the urban environment (Rojo, 2014). For multilingual residents, encountering their heritage language in public signage can foster a sense of belonging, recognition, and cultural validation. Conversely, the absence or erasure of a language may contribute to feelings of exclusion or invisibility (Jones et al., 2012).

Cultural identity in urban contexts is not static but continuously negotiated through everyday social interactions and symbolic representations. Canakis (2019) said that, linguistic landscapes play a crucial role in this process by mediating how cultural identities are constructed, performed, and contested in public space. Through language choice, script selection, and visual design, signs communicate messages about who belongs, who is addressed, and whose culture is valued.

Multilingual signage also reflects the fluid and hybrid identities that emerge in urban spaces. Rather than adhering strictly to monolingual norms, many urban linguistic landscapes display code-mixing, transliteration, and creative language blending (Atta, 2021). These practices challenge traditional notions of language boundaries and highlight the adaptive strategies of multilingual communities navigating diverse cultural environments.

Migration has been a particularly influential factor in reshaping urban linguistic landscapes. Cities that attract large migrant populations often experience rapid changes in public language use, as new languages enter the visual space through ethnic businesses, religious institutions, and community centers. These linguistic traces document the evolving demographic composition of cities and the transnational connections of their inhabitants.

Biró (2021) said that, digitalization and globalization have further intensified the complexity of linguistic landscapes. Global brands, English as a global lingua franca, and digital communication technologies contribute to the standardization of certain linguistic forms while simultaneously enabling localized expressions of identity (Sung, 2014; Bibi et al., 2024). This tension between global and local languages is especially visible in urban commercial signage and advertising.

The study of linguistic landscapes also intersects with questions of urban governance and language policy. Municipal regulations regarding signage language, script usage, and visual aesthetics influence which languages are permitted or restricted in public spaces. These policies can either promote linguistic diversity or enforce linguistic homogenization, with significant implications for cultural inclusion and social equity.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, linguistic landscapes provide valuable insights into how language ideologies are materialized in space (Manan & David, 2016). The choice of language in signage is rarely neutral; it reflects assumptions about audiences, economic value, and social

status. Analyzing these choices helps uncover the implicit norms and ideologies that shape multilingual urban life.

Importantly, linguistic landscapes are not merely passive reflections of social reality but active agents in shaping it. By normalizing certain languages and identities in public space, linguistic landscapes influence language attitudes, social interactions, and intergroup relations. Over time, repeated exposure to particular linguistic configurations can contribute to the naturalization of specific cultural narratives within the city.

Despite growing scholarly interest, there remains a need for more nuanced research that connects linguistic landscapes directly to processes of cultural identity formation. While many studies document language distribution and policy implications, fewer examine how urban residents interpret, negotiate, and internalize the linguistic environment in relation to their sense of self and community.

Understanding the relationship between linguistic landscapes and cultural identity is particularly important in contexts marked by social inequality and cultural contestation (Aristova, 2016). In such settings, public language use can become a site of struggle over recognition, representation, and belonging. Examining these dynamics can contribute to more inclusive approaches to urban planning and language policy.

This study seeks to explore how linguistic landscapes in multilingual urban spaces contribute to cultural identity formation among city inhabitants. By examining the languages, symbols, and semiotic strategies present in public signage, this research aims to illuminate the ways in which urban linguistic environments both reflect and shape the lived experiences of multilingual communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early studies on linguistic landscapes conceptualized public signage as a reflection of language presence and power in public space. Seminal work by Landry & Bourhis, (1997) introduced the linguistic landscape framework to examine how the visibility of languages in public signage influences ethnolinguistic vitality and group identity. Their research emphasized that linguistic landscapes serve both informational and symbolic functions, signaling which languages and communities are recognized within a given territory. Subsequent studies expanded this framework by demonstrating that linguistic landscapes are shaped by broader socio-political forces, including language policy, nationalism, and urban governance.

As the field developed, scholars began to adopt more critical and interpretive approaches to linguistic landscape analysis. Researchers such as Shohamy (2012) argued that linguistic landscapes should be understood as dynamic, contested spaces where language ideologies are negotiated rather than merely reflected. This perspective highlighted the role of power, agency, and resistance in shaping public language use. Studies in multilingual cities revealed that bottom-up signage produced by local communities often challenges top-down language policies, thereby transforming linguistic landscapes into arenas for identity assertion and cultural expression (Santos, 2025; Bagna et al., 2020).

The relationship between linguistic landscapes and cultural identity formation has become a central concern in more recent scholarship. Empirical studies have shown that the presence of heritage and minority languages in urban signage contributes to feelings of belonging, recognition, and cultural legitimacy among multilingual populations (Sloboda et al., 2012). Conversely, the dominance of majority or global languages has been associated with identity marginalization and linguistic erasure. Research focusing on migrant communities demonstrates that linguistic landscapes function as symbolic spaces where transnational identities are negotiated and maintained through language choice, script usage, and visual design.

Despite these advances, gaps remain in the literature concerning how individuals interpret and internalize linguistic landscapes in their everyday urban experiences (Flynn & van, 2016). While many studies document language distribution and policy implications, fewer explore how residents actively engage with public signage in relation to their cultural identities. There is also a need for more context-sensitive research in non-Western and Global South urban settings,

where multilingualism is deeply embedded in historical, cultural, and postcolonial dynamics. Addressing these gaps can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how linguistic landscapes shape cultural identity formation in diverse urban environments.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research above is best approached using a qualitative case study design within the framework of linguistic landscape studies. This design is appropriate because the study seeks to explore how languages are displayed, distributed, and interpreted in urban public spaces, as well as how these displays relate to cultural identity and power relations. A qualitative case study allows for an in-depth examination of multilingual urban environments as socially situated contexts, enabling the researcher to capture both observable linguistic patterns and the subjective meanings attached to them by community members.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection should combine systematic field observation, photographic documentation of signage, and semi-structured interviews. Field observations and photographs provide empirical data on language distribution, sign types (top-down and bottom-up), and visual-semiotic features in public spaces. Semi-structured interviews with residents, business owners, and community members are essential to understand perceptions of language visibility, identity, and belonging. This combination ensures methodological triangulation by integrating visual, textual, and experiential data.

Data Analysis Techniques

The primary data analysis technique is qualitative thematic analysis, applied to interview transcripts to identify recurring themes such as cultural recognition, marginalization, identity negotiation, and economic considerations. In parallel, linguistic landscape analysis is used to categorize signs based on language choice, sign type, and functional domain. This involves coding signage data into analytical categories (e.g., official vs. commercial, monolingual vs. multilingual) to reveal patterns of linguistic hierarchy. Additionally, critical discourse analysis (CDA) can be employed to interpret how language choices in signage reflect broader ideologies, power structures, and language policies.

Analytical Framework and Rigor

To strengthen analytical rigor, the study integrates insights from critical sociolinguistics and identity theory, allowing linguistic landscapes to be interpreted as semiotic resources embedded in social and political contexts. Data triangulation across observations, signage analysis, and interviews enhances credibility, while iterative coding and constant comparison support analytical depth. This methodological approach ensures that the findings not only describe linguistic patterns but also critically explain their implications for cultural identity formation and multilingual language policy in urban spaces.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language Distribution in Urban Linguistic Landscapes

The analysis of linguistic landscapes in selected multilingual urban areas revealed a patterned distribution of languages across public spaces. The national language dominated official and regulatory signage, including street names, government buildings, and public service announcements. These signs were uniform in structure and functioned to convey authority and formality. In contrast, commercial and community-based signage displayed greater linguistic diversity, incorporating international languages and local or heritage languages. Observational data showed that heritage languages were concentrated in specific neighborhoods associated with particular ethnic or cultural groups.

“We usually use our heritage language on shop signs or in religious places because people around here understand it. But for anything official, we must follow the national language. Otherwise, it would not be accepted.” (Interview Community member)

Their visibility was strongest in informal domains such as food stalls, religious spaces, and small businesses. This uneven distribution indicates that language presence in urban spaces reflects sociocultural hierarchies and functional domains rather than random linguistic choice.

Table 1. Distribution of Languages in Urban Linguistic Landscapes

Type of Signage	Dominant Language(s)	Observed Function
Official / Government	National language	Regulation and authority
Commercial signage	National + international languages	Economic communication
Community-based signage	Heritage / local languages	Cultural identity expression

Interview data supported these observations. One participant explained that the presence of heritage languages in specific areas reflected community concentration rather than institutional support:

“Our language only appears in places where our community is strong, not in official spaces.” (Interview Community member)

The interview excerpt highlights the structural nature of language visibility in urban public spaces. Rather than reflecting inclusive language policies, the presence of heritage languages appears to be contingent on community density and grassroots initiatives. This suggests that linguistic representation in the urban landscape is shaped more by social capital and collective presence than by formal recognition or institutional planning. The participant’s statement also points to an implicit hierarchy of languages, where the national language occupies legitimized and authoritative domains, while heritage languages remain confined to localized and informal spaces. Such spatial segregation reinforces symbolic boundaries between official identity and community identity, positioning minority languages as peripheral rather than integral to the urban linguistic order. These findings indicate that linguistic landscapes function not only as communicative tools but also as markers of power relations and cultural inclusion.

“If I want to attract more customers, especially visitors, I combine the national language with an international one. Using only our local language would limit who can read the sign.” (Interview Small business Owner)

The limited institutional visibility of heritage languages may contribute to uneven identity recognition, where certain linguistic communities experience affirmation only within their own neighborhoods rather than across the broader urban environment. This dynamic underscores the role of linguistic landscapes in reflecting and reproducing sociocultural inequalities within multilingual cities.

Types of Linguistic Signs in Multilingual Urban Spaces

Two primary categories of linguistic signs emerged from the data: top-down and bottom-up signage. Top-down signs, produced by governmental or institutional authorities, predominantly employed the national language and occasionally included an international language for accessibility. These signs rarely incorporated local or minority languages. Bottom-up signage, created by individuals and private businesses, demonstrated significantly more linguistic creativity. Many signs combined multiple languages through code-mixing, parallel translation, or transliteration. Visual elements such as colors, cultural symbols, and non-standard typography frequently accompanied these multilingual expressions, reinforcing cultural meanings beyond text alone.

Table 2. Characteristics of Top-Down and Bottom-Up Linguistic Signs

Sign Type	Language Use	Key Characteristics
Top-down	National (occasionally international)	Formal, standardized, institutional
Bottom-up	Mixed: national, international, heritage	Flexible, creative, identity-oriented

A shop owner described this contrast clearly:

*“Official signs follow rules, but shop signs show who we really are.”
(Interview Shop Owner)*

The interview statement emphasizes the symbolic distinction between institutional authority and personal or communal identity in multilingual urban spaces. By contrasting “official signs” with “shop signs,” the participant highlights how top-down signage functions primarily as a mechanism of regulation and standardization, while bottom-up signage serves as a space for self-expression and cultural visibility. This distinction suggests that linguistic landscapes operate on multiple semiotic levels, where meaning is not only conveyed through language choice but also through who controls that choice.

*“Government boards are clear and formal, but they don’t represent our daily life. When people make their own signs, they can include our language and symbols.”
(Interview Community Member)*

The reference to shop signs as representations of “who we really are” indicates that bottom-up linguistic practices allow urban actors to assert identity, belonging, and cultural pride in ways that are not accommodated by formal language regimes. The creative mixing of languages and visual elements reflects intentional identity work, where language becomes a resource for positioning oneself within the urban cultural mosaic. Such practices align with previous research that views bottom-up signage as a site of resistance to monolingual norms and a means of reclaiming visibility for marginalized linguistic groups. These findings suggest that multilingual urban spaces are shaped by an ongoing negotiation between imposed linguistic order and lived linguistic reality. While top-down signs reinforce dominant language ideologies, bottom-up signs reveal the dynamic, hybrid, and locally grounded nature of urban multilingualism. This dynamic underscores the importance of examining linguistic landscapes as sociocultural texts that reflect power relations, identity construction, and the everyday practices of urban communities.

Linguistic Landscapes and Cultural Identity Visibility

Interview findings revealed that linguistic visibility in public spaces played a significant role in shaping perceptions of cultural recognition. Participants whose heritage languages appeared in urban signage reported a stronger sense of belonging and cultural affirmation. The presence of their language in public spaces symbolized acknowledgment and legitimacy within the urban environment. Participants whose languages were absent or marginally represented expressed feelings of invisibility. The dominance of national and global languages was perceived as limiting opportunities for minority cultural expression.

Table 3. Perceived Relationship Between Language Visibility and Cultural Identity

Language Visibility	Participant Perception
High visibility	Cultural recognition and belonging
Limited visibility	Marginalization and invisibility

One interviewee articulated this connection explicitly:

*“Seeing our language on the street makes us feel that our culture matters here.”
(Interview Community member)*

The interview excerpt highlights the symbolic power of linguistic visibility in urban spaces as a marker of cultural recognition and social inclusion. The presence of a heritage language in public signage functions not merely as a communicative tool, but as a public acknowledgment of the community’s existence and legitimacy. For participants, seeing their language displayed in the urban landscape affirmed their cultural identity and reinforced a sense of belonging within the city. This suggests that linguistic landscapes operate as semiotic resources through which communities interpret their social positioning. The reported feelings of marginalization among participants whose languages were absent underscore how linguistic invisibility can translate into social exclusion.

“When our language is written in public places, it feels like the city accepts us as part of it. It is more than words; it is recognition.” (Interview Community Member)

The dominance of national and global languages was perceived as privileging certain identities while rendering others less visible or valued. This imbalance reflects broader sociopolitical hierarchies in which language policy and economic power shape whose cultures are publicly recognized. As a result, linguistic landscapes become sites where inequality is both produced and experienced. These findings indicate that language visibility in public spaces has tangible implications for cultural identity formation and community well-being. Linguistic landscapes not only reflect existing power relations but also actively contribute to shaping how individuals and groups perceive their place in urban society. The results reinforce the view that inclusive linguistic representation in urban signage can play a meaningful role in fostering cultural recognition and social cohesion in multilingual cities.

Identity Negotiation in Multilingual Urban Spaces

The results also indicate that linguistic landscapes functioned as sites of ongoing identity negotiation. Business owners and community members reported making deliberate choices regarding language use in signage. While national or international languages were often prioritized for economic reasons, heritage languages were incorporated symbolically to maintain cultural ties. Several participants described mixed-language signage as a reflection of their hybrid urban identities. This practice mirrored their everyday multilingual communication and illustrated how cultural identity in urban spaces is dynamic rather than fixed.

Table 4. Identity Negotiation Strategies in Linguistic Landscapes

Strategy	Purpose
Use of international language	Economic reach
Inclusion of heritage language	Cultural affirmation
Mixed-language signage	Hybrid identity representation

As one participant explained:

*“We mix languages because that’s how we live part tradition, part modern city life.”
(Interview Urban Resident)*

The interview excerpt illustrates that language choices in urban signage are not neutral, but instead represent conscious strategies of identity negotiation. The use of international or national languages for commercial visibility reflects pragmatic considerations related to market access and economic sustainability. At the same time, the inclusion of heritage languages serves a symbolic function, allowing individuals and communities to assert cultural continuity within rapidly modernizing urban environments. This dual orientation demonstrates how economic rationality and cultural expression coexist in multilingual urban spaces.

“I need the national and international languages so everyone can understand and come in, but I still add our traditional words to show where we come from.” (Interview Business Owner)

The prevalence of mixed-language signage highlights the emergence of hybrid identities shaped by everyday multilingual practices. Rather than signaling linguistic confusion, these combinations reflect flexible and adaptive identity constructions that integrate tradition with contemporary urban life. As expressed by the participant, multilingual signage mirrors lived experiences in which individuals simultaneously navigate local cultural affiliations and globalized urban realities. These findings suggest that linguistic landscapes operate as dynamic arenas where identities are continuously constructed and renegotiated. Urban residents actively use language as a semiotic resource to balance economic demands, social belonging, and cultural heritage. This reinforces the understanding that cultural identity in multilingual cities is fluid, negotiated, and visibly enacted through public linguistic practices rather than being fixed or singular.

Discussion

The findings indicate that linguistic landscapes in multilingual urban spaces function as structured representations of sociolinguistic hierarchies rather than neutral reflections of language diversity. The dominance of the national language in official signage reinforces its symbolic authority and

institutional legitimacy, while the limited visibility of heritage languages in formal domains suggests their marginal position within the public linguistic order. This imbalance highlights how language visibility is shaped by power relations and institutional control, with minority languages gaining presence primarily through community initiative rather than policy support. As a result, linguistic landscapes reproduce existing social inequalities by privileging certain languages and identities while rendering others less visible across the broader urban environment. At the same time, bottom-up multilingual signage demonstrates how urban residents actively negotiate identity through language use. The strategic combination of national, international, and heritage languages reflects efforts to balance economic considerations with cultural affirmation, producing hybrid linguistic expressions that mirror everyday multilingual practices. These practices challenge monolingual norms and reveal linguistic landscapes as dynamic spaces where identity, belonging, and social positioning are continuously constructed. Overall, the findings suggest that linguistic landscapes play an active role in shaping cultural identity and social inclusion, emphasizing the need for more inclusive language policies that acknowledge and support the multilingual realities of urban life.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that linguistic landscapes in multilingual urban spaces are not merely functional displays of language but powerful social texts that reflect and reproduce sociolinguistic hierarchies, identity dynamics, and power relations. The dominance of the national language in official signage reinforces institutional authority and marginalizes heritage languages, whose visibility depends largely on community initiative rather than formal policy support. At the same time, bottom-up multilingual signage reveals active identity negotiation, where urban residents strategically balance economic pragmatism with cultural affirmation through hybrid language practices. Linguistic visibility emerges as a key factor in shaping feelings of recognition, belonging, and cultural legitimacy, while linguistic absence contributes to perceptions of marginalization. Overall, the findings highlight the need for more inclusive and multilingual language policies that acknowledge the lived linguistic realities of urban communities and support equitable cultural representation in public spaces.

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