

Linguistic Landscape of Bilingual Shop Signs in Abha, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This article delves into the emerging field of linguistic landscape (LL) studies, which focuses on the examination of languages displayed publicly on billboards, road signs, shop fronts, graffiti, and other inscriptions in urban environments. It contends that language serves as a direct identifier of people and a sensitive gauge of societal transformations. Despite its pervasive presence, the linguistic landscape often goes unnoticed by the public. The article provides an overview of approaches to linguistic landscape research, with a particular focus on bilingual signboards in Abha City, Saudi Arabia, reflecting a growing interest in this interdisciplinary field.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape (LL), bilingual, sign boards, Abha

1. Introduction

The study of the linguistic landscape is a prominent area within applied linguistics, focusing on the language present in public spaces such as road signs, billboards, street names, shop signs, and various forms of media like films, radio, and magazines. This field has seen significant growth in the modern world and has captured the interest of scholars worldwide. Scholars from various regions, including Europe, Asia, and the West, have delved into research on the linguistic landscape, approaching it from diverse perspectives such as pedagogical, sociolinguistic, and applied linguistics. Notable researchers like Landry and Bourhis (1997), Gorter and Cenoz (2008), and Backhaus (2006), among others, have contributed to the understanding of linguistic landscape through their studies.

According to Shohamy and Gorter (2009), linguistic landscape refers to the linguistic content present in a particular context and the interpretation of its meaning within that context. This introductory paragraph provides a glimpse into the significance and scope of linguistic landscape studies, highlighting its multidisciplinary nature and global appeal.

According to Landry and Bourhis (1997), the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban area is comprised of the language present on public roads, advertising billboards, street names, commercial shop signs, and government building signs. This linguistic landscape serves two primary functions: an informational function and a symbolic function. Abha, situated at an altitude of 2,200 meters amidst the peaks of the Sarawat Mountains in the southwestern region of Saudi Arabia, holds significant importance for understanding both its natural allure and cultural diversity. As one of Saudi Arabia's premier tourist attractions, Abha's exceptional location offers visitors the chance to experience the awe-inspiring beauty of its mountaintops. Furthermore, the presence of a diverse population comprising individuals from various nationalities adds richness to the social fabric of Abha, making it an intriguing research subject. Investigating Abha provides valuable insights into the factors driving its tourism appeal and sheds light on the dynamics of multicultural coexistence in this captivating mountainous region, contributing to our broader understanding of both tourism development and cultural diversity within Saudi Arabia.

The informational function of the linguistic landscape helps people understand the meaning and functions of products and signs. It provides essential information about products, services, directions, and other practical aspects of daily life through the language displayed in public spaces.

Additionally, the symbolic function of the linguistic landscape goes beyond mere information dissemination. It conveys deeper meanings, cultural values, and societal identities through the language choices and representations present in public spaces. This symbolic aspect contributes to shaping perceptions, fostering social cohesion, and reflecting the cultural diversity of a given area.

1.1 Research Objective

1. To analyze the contextual meaning of discourse used in signboards.
2. To find out the features of the linguistic landscape.
3. To suggest the pedagogical implications.

1.2 Research Questions

The study investigated the following questions to fulfill its objectives:

1. How do different types of discourse on signboards serve to assist people in various ways?
2. How can we characterize the elements and attributes present in linguistic landscapes?
3. How can teachers effectively utilize LL signboards as instructional tools in the ESL classroom?

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study aims to investigate the linguistic attributes found in signboards, facilitating the effective communication of meaningful messages to the public. It holds significance for its application as educational material within language classrooms, leveraging linguistic landscape as a practical teaching tool. Exploring various linguistic elements such as scripts, stylistics, hybrid language usage, metaphor, irony, code-switching, and code-mixing provides both teachers and students with insights into sociolinguistic aspects like customs, culture, and multilingual environments. Additionally, this research delves into the features of the linguistic landscape, offering valuable insights for language education and sign language instruction.

1.4 Comprehension of the key terms

Discourse Analysis: Language's ambiguity is highlighted by Zellig Harris, who coined the term "discourse analysis" in 1952. Harris describes it as a method to analyze connected speech or writing, expanding descriptive linguistics beyond single sentences to understand broader linguistic contexts. His definition underscores the importance of examining language in its entirety, considering its nuanced use beyond individual sentences.

Code mixing/ switching: Code-mixing/switching refers to the simultaneous use of linguistic elements from multiple language systems, often resulting in a mixture of codes or words within communication. It involves blending or alternating between languages, demonstrating a fluid interchange of linguistic features.

Linguistic landscape: (LL) encompasses the linguistic elements present in public spaces such as billboards, shop signs, street names, and road signs. It involves both verbal and nonverbal forms of language widely utilized within public domains, reflecting the linguistic diversity and cultural identity of a community or region.

Signboard: A board displaying business names or product logos, offering information about a specific place, product, or event.

Style: Involves individualizing speech and writing through linguistic description, stylistic devices, and special grammar or vocabulary usage.

Translation: The process of converting words, phrases, or texts from one language to another, preserving the original meaning while allowing for word-to-word or sense translation. Translation tells the meaning of a word from one language to another language.

Transliteration: A form of translation focusing on converting texts from one script to another while maintaining phonetic accuracy. Transliteration gives the reader an idea of how a word is pronounced in another language.

2. Literature Review

In the domain of linguistic landscape, as outlined by scholars such as Backhaus (2006), Cenoz & Gorter (2009), and Kallen (2009), bilingual or multilingual signs are commonly classified into two main categories: "public" and "private," although alternative terms may be utilized. Public signs typically encompass those associated with government institutions, and street and road names, serving fundamental functions such as directing, prompting, restricting, and compelling, as elucidated by Guo (2012). On the other hand, private signs, including commercial and business signs, as well as private announcements, primarily serve the purpose of promoting and advertising goods and services. Within this context, bilingual Arabic-English signs assume a distinctive significance, reflecting the dual drive of English as a symbol of globalization and modernity.

According to Cenoz and Gorter (2006), multilingualism is a common phenomenon, which can be studied from different perspectives including the use of languages in the sociolinguistic context. One of the possibilities is to analyze languages in context by focusing on the written information that is available on language signs in a specific area.

As a burgeoning area of study, Linguistic Landscape (LL) has been explored from various angles, encompassing themes such as multilingualism, code preference, signage categorization, and LL functions globally. Initially, LL research primarily focused on outdoor signage in streets and shopfronts, but it has since expanded to include educational spaces like schools and universities. This widening scope reflects the evolving nature of LL research and its growing relevance in diverse societal contexts. Recently, many LL studies have extended their scope to include the analysis of LL in educational spaces like schools, universities, etc. (Krompák et al., 2022; Suuriniemi & Satokangas, 2021; Wang, 2015; Wu et al., 2021)

The presence of signs and symbols in urban environments conveys social meaning within specific contexts, whether through official or unofficial advertising. Linguistic landscapes (LLs) serve as platforms for disseminating various messages of public interest, including information, directions, warnings, marketing, and advertising. Public signs

encompass a wide range of mediums such as newspapers, images, logos, digital content, and advertisements, varying in size from small to large billboards, found in diverse spaces belonging to both public institutions and private businesses. Griffin (2004) examined the presence of English in the Linguistic Landscape (LL) of Rome, analyzing its appearance on street signs, billboards, advertisements, and graffiti. The study aimed to understand the extent to which English influences the LL of a non-English-speaking country and in what contexts it manifests in Rome. Similarly, Asfaha (2010) investigated the LL of Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea, noting the widespread use of English alongside Tigrinya and Arabic, promoted by the Eritrean government. Asfaha found that English is prominently featured on government and business signs in Asmara, reflecting its status as one of the official languages and the most used language in government ministries, agencies, corporations, higher education institutions, and sports associations in Eritrea.

3. Design and Method of the Study

The research methodology employed in this study is qualitative descriptive research, a commonly utilized approach for investigating various social phenomena (Lamberts, 2012). This descriptive qualitative research design focuses on analyzing the discourses present in signboards and exploring the features of LL. The methodology involves a detailed description and analysis of the language used in signboards, aiming to uncover patterns, themes, and contextual meanings within linguistic expressions found in public spaces. Through this approach, the study seeks to gain insights into the linguistic features and communicative functions of signboards within the broader context of LL.

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design, which aims to generate data that describe the "who," "what," and "where" of events or experiences from a subjective perspective. In this qualitative research design, the researcher collects, analyzes, and interprets the data to derive findings. Through this approach, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic features and contextual aspects of signboards within the linguistic landscape.

3.1 Data Collection

The data collection method described involves using photographs of signboards from the busy streets of Abha as the primary source of data for the study. This method utilizes purposive non-random sampling, meaning that the selection of signboards was deliberate and based on specific criteria rather than random selection. The reason for choosing these streets is their high representation of LL on public signboards, indicating that they offer a rich and diverse sample for analysis. By collecting photographs from these locations, the researchers can capture a comprehensive snapshot of the linguistic features present on public signboards in Abha.

The data collection method involves the gathering of various types of information, including numbers, opinions, images, figures, facts, ideas, and other relevant materials. This diverse range of data serves as the unit of information that researchers use to justify, analyze, and draw appropriate findings.

Importantly, the collected data are kept confidential and used solely for research purposes, ensuring the privacy and integrity of the individuals involved. This ethical consideration is crucial in maintaining trust and upholding the standards of responsible research conduct.

3.2 Result and Analysis

Discourse Analyses of languages used in signboards. Discourse refers to the language and communication conveyed through the text and visuals displayed. Understanding the contextual meaning of discourse is essential, as it serves specific functions within its context. Signboards use discourse to convey information, instructions, warnings, promotions, or other messages to their intended audience. Given that words can have multiple meanings, deciphering the precise meaning within the context is crucial for effective communication and interpretation by the audience.



Pictures 1 and 2 represent typical bilingual signs found in commercial or official buildings, featuring Arabic and English languages. They serve as prime examples of linguistic diversity in such spaces. On the other hand, Pictures 3 and 4 depict common road signs, showcasing bilingual elements for effective communication on the streets. While each picture represents a single word, their usage can vary significantly depending on context, highlighting the nuanced nature of language in communication. Understanding the specific context is essential for accurately interpreting the intended meaning of these words depicted on the signboards. These signs exemplify the practical application of multilingualism in

everyday contexts, facilitating understanding and inclusivity within diverse communities. The Code Preference here is Arabic over English as Arabic is the first and the official language of Saudi Arabia.

3.2.1 Monolingual Signboards, Pictures 5 and 6 a Monolingual Sign in Arabic has a Compound name, and the English signboard is a single word. The prevalence of bilingual or multilingual signboards underscores the linguistic diversity within a community. It also reflects the practical need to cater to a diverse audience who may speak different languages. Pictures 7 and 8 demonstrate the effectiveness of visual communication in conveying the message about the products being sold. Even though these signboards may be monolingual, they rely on clear and visually appealing imagery to communicate their message to the audience. This showcases another aspect of communication strategy, where visuals play a significant role in complementing or even replacing textual information.



Picture 5



Picture 6



Picture 7



Picture 8

3.2.2 Code- mixing/ switching. Code-mixing or code-switching indeed adds flavor and versatility to communication, especially in multilingual environments. It's fascinating how different languages and codes can blend seamlessly to convey messages effectively. In the context you described, using code-mixing on signboards and billboards can cater to diverse audiences and add a unique touch to the brand's identity. It's like a linguistic art form that reflects the multicultural nature of society. Pictures 9,10 and 11 showcases bilingual code-mixing, transitioning seamlessly between Arabic and English, representing prominent beauty product brands in Saudi Arabia. This deliberate use of both languages on signboards illustrates the brands' desire to appeal to a diverse customer base, encompassing both Arabic-speaking and non-Arabic-speaking individuals.



Picture 9



Picture 10



Picture 11

In the study of bilingual and multilingual signs, the concept of language preference or dominance is often analyzed based on factors such as script size, spatial allocation, and positioning on the display board. This practice, referred to as code preference or code priority in the linguistic landscape literature, as discussed by scholars like Scollon & Scollon (2003), Backhaus (2006), and Shang & Zhao (2017), offers insights into the power dynamics between languages within a given context. For instance, according to Scollon and Scollon (2003), if a language's script occupies the top, left, or center position on a sign, it signifies its dominance over other languages. However, in the case of Arabic, this criterion is adjusted to include positions such as "on the right," reflecting the unique right-to-left script orientation of the Arabic language.

3.2.3 Stylistics, a facet of linguistics, explores the diverse features and styles of language, incorporating elements such as signs, symbols, logos, and numerical expressions. With its blend of creativity and informativeness, stylistics serves as a powerful tool in various settings, including shops, restaurants, boutiques, and streets, captivating audiences while effectively conveying information about goods, foods, and more. Pictures 12, 13, and 14 utilize visual elements to convey the nature of the stores. In Picture 12, Centerpoint's logo reflects the diversity of products with its colorful concentric circles. Pictures 13 and 14 unmistakably depict Albaik's focus on chicken and Hashi Basha's specialty in camel meat through vivid imagery, facilitating easy understanding for customers.



Picture 12

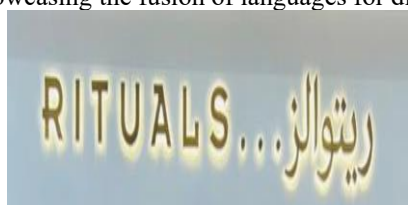


Picture 13



Picture 14

3.2.4 Transliteration, according to Vocabulary. com(2024) is the process of transferring a word from the alphabet of one language to another. Transliteration helps people pronounce words and names in foreign languages. Pictures 15, 16, and 17 exemplify transliteration, where words from one language are represented using letters from another alphabet. In Picture 15, "Rituals" is transliterated into Arabic script, while in Picture 17, "Al Rashid Mall" blends Arabic and English words. Similarly, the Juice Shop Signature demonstrates transliteration by presenting English words using Arabic script, showcasing the fusion of languages for diverse audiences.



Picture 15



Picture 16



Picture 17

3.2.5 Translations Translation provides the meaning of a word in another language, whereas transliteration represents the pronunciation by converting the word's original alphabet into similar-sounding letters in a different alphabet, without changing the meaning. Translation focuses on semantic equivalence, while transliteration emphasizes phonetic representation.



Picture 18



Picture 19



Picture 20

Pictures 18, 19, and 20 exemplify translation in signage, facilitating comprehension for both Arabic and English speakers. "نقطة التجمع" (nuqṭat al-tajāmu') in Picture 18 is translated as "Assembly Point," providing clarity during emergencies. In Picture 19, "سحب" (sah-b) is rendered as "Pull," guiding individuals in both languages. Similarly, Picture 20 translates "مطعم" (maṭ'am) to "Restaurant," ensuring accessibility for speakers of both Arabic and English, thereby promoting effective communication in various environments.

In the ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom, LL (Language and Linguistics) signboards can be invaluable instructional tools for facilitating language acquisition and linguistic understanding. Firstly, teachers can use LL signboards to create an immersive language environment that exposes students to authentic English language materials. By displaying vocabulary words, grammar rules, and language structures on signboards, students are provided with continuous opportunities to engage with the language in meaningful contexts. Additionally, LL signboards can serve as visual aids for illustrating linguistic concepts and principles, helping students grasp complex language rules and patterns more effectively.

Shohamy and Waksman (2009) advocate for the pragmatic significance of the Linguistic Landscape, asserting that every aspect of the environment, from buildings and billboards to outdoor screens and individuals, constitutes a component of this textual narrative that warrants critical examination. By integrating the study of the Linguistic Landscape into education, students are allowed to develop a heightened awareness of the public sphere and the diverse ways in which language is employed beyond the confines of the classroom. Engaging with the Linguistic Landscape enables students to recognize the intricate interplay between language, culture, and society, empowering them to navigate and understand the complexities of linguistic diversity and sociocultural dynamics in real-world contexts.

Sayer's (2010) qualitative research delved into the unique utilization of English signs within the Linguistic Landscape of Oaxaca, Mexico. Through his investigation, he uncovered six distinct social meanings or themes associated with specific

types of businesses or signage, each intricately tied to the language employed to describe them. This research sheds light on the nuanced ways in which language intersects with social contexts and commercial practices within the urban environment, providing valuable insights into the sociolinguistic dynamics and cultural significance of linguistic choices in the public sphere of Oaxaca.

4. Conclusion

Through a multi-faceted analysis, this research delves deeply into the discourse employed on signboards, dissecting their contextual meanings at a micro level. It scrutinizes the linguistic landscape features, uncovering the diverse linguistic elements present on these signboards. Furthermore, the study goes beyond mere observation to elucidate the pedagogical implications inherent in these signboards, examining how they contribute to public literacy and communication strategies. By meticulously examining each layer, this research strives to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the role and impact of signboards in their socio-cultural context. The culmination of these analyses sheds light on the intricate interplay between language, society, and education, ultimately fulfilling the overarching objective of the research.

In conclusion, the researchers assert that the case study provides a compelling illustration of the globalization of services, goods, and economies, as reflected in the linguistic landscape of Abha. They highlight how the discourses used in signboards effectively convey meaning, showcasing a seamless integration of linguistic features. The prevalence of informative and advertising signboards underscores the importance of clear communication in commercial contexts. Furthermore, the strategic use of the linguistic landscape in signboards enhances their uniqueness, visual appeal, and informativeness for passersby. Teachers can similarly utilize signboards as valuable teaching materials, leveraging their informative nature to enrich classroom instruction and facilitate engaging language analysis and comprehension activities for students.

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