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English Prestige and Punjabi Marginalization in Lahore's Linguistic Landscape

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Original Article

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Keywords

Abstract

Linguistic landscape, social identity, linguistic hierarchy, marginalization, social inequality, cultural identity.

This paper examines the limited presence of Punjabi in the linguistic landscape of Lahore, despite it being the most spoken language of the region. This finding draws upon the analysis of over 1000 shopboards and 150 billboards, covering different areas of Lahore with distinct predominant socioeconomic status. The study interprets this limited linguistic visibility as a mirror to linguistic hierarchy, power and social identity. The findings show a striking marginalization of Punjabi; visible in the restricted domain – food-related signage only. This pattern is not mere incidental. It indicates a systematic linguistic hierarchy according to which English is taken as a symbol of economic stability and prestige, Urdu as a valid expression of national identity, but, Punjabi as socially trivial but culturally significant unit. By examining the visibility of Punjabi through the lens of linguistic hierarchy, power and identity in South Asian context, this study demonstrates how linguistic visibility reflects and contributes to social inequality and cultural identity.

Introduction

The term linguistic landscape refers to any piece of writing in the public space, including street signs, shopboards, billboards, advertisements, addresses and public notices (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). They are not only communicative rather carry deep social meanings. In a

multilingual society, the visibility or absence of a language in its linguistic landscape shows broader dynamics of identity, power and hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1991). In Lahore, this dynamic is particularly striking. Here Punjabi, which is the language of majority of the population, remains absent from public signage and is dominated by Urdu and English.

The present work argues that the linguistic landscape of Lahore does not only reveal a pattern of language choice but also construct hierarchy, social identity and power. Within the present hierarchy, the limited presence of Punjabi on shopboards and billboards presents its restricted symbolic prestige. In the public domain, English stands as marker of economic power and social prestige, Urdu functions as marker of national identity but Punjabi remains underrepresented. It reflects Punjabi's marginalized position. The scarce presentation of Punjabi, despite of its widespread use in everyday communication, pinpoints the process through which a language is rendered symbolically and socially peripheral. The current study presents the patterns of language use so that they can be interpreted in regard to broader social processes such as establishment of linguistic hierarchies, the function of language in shaping social class, ideology, and identity, and selective use of language in developing cultural authenticity.

Across billboards and shopboards, the findings of the study show a notable dominance of English, stable presence of Urdu and rare appearance of Punjabi – that only on food-related boards and low-cost brands meant for lower-income customers.

Further, this paper makes valuable contribution to the ongoing debate on power, identity, language and linguistic hierarchy by setting linguistic landscape as a key component for understanding social and ideological processes. Moreover, it exhibits that the miserly representation of Punjabi in Lahore's public spaces mirrors structural inequalities within the linguistic hierarchy.

The visibility of languages is not an individual's choice rather institutional and ideological forces shape it (Tierl, 2024). According to this, the underrepresentation of Punjabi is symbolic. As, it is a language which remains almost invisible irrespective of its demographic dominance in Punjab. This symbolic invisibility is politically and socially structured and it plays crucial role in shaping identity and constructing power relations. Public displays are reflection of community life and social interaction. Accordingly, the study of public signage serves as a valuable lens to view a region's culture, power and values.

According to Chisti and Piplai (2024) linguistic hierarchies are not natural. They are constructed socially often through education systems. English functions as a gatekeeping language, connected to education and employment and consequently to upward mobility. Precisely, it serves as an instrument of inclusion and exclusion. Indigenous languages are sidelined by their affiliation with the lower status and exclusion from formal domains. It happens in such ways that with the passage of time people internalize this hierarchy. Subsequently, speakers prefer dominant languages to attain prestige and opportunities which further accelerates the marginalization of regional languages in public sphere. The choice of language, therefore, represents aspirational as well as ideological motivations.

A recent study on the outlet signboards in Rahim Yar Khan suggests that linguistic and semiotic choices construct consumer's mindset and maintain socio-cultural identity (Salam et al., 2025). In the same vein, the study on shopboard in Larkana shows the dominance of English and almost absence of local languages (Batool et al., 2021). Another study, on cinema signage in Lahore, show that English and Urdu are linked with high social status while Punjabi with low status (Kirk, 2018). Further, Yasir and Khalid (2024) found that in Lahore public attitude

reinforces the high prestige of English. It is considered a key to commercial success and business promotion.

Although many scholars have tried to explore the linguistic landscape from various perspectives, however, to date little research is done to examine the factors which are responsible for the limited visibility of Punjabi in the linguistic landscape of Lahore which is the capital city of the province Punjab where the majority of the population speaks Punjabi. The present study addresses this gap by examining the instances of Punjabi on shopboards and billboards from different areas of Lahore. It looks at the visual distribution as a socially and ideologically structured phenomenon. Hence, it explores the cultural, sociolinguistic and economic factors that are responsible for this marginalization.

The following sections review the relevant literature, outline the method and materials, present findings and finally provide an argument-driven discussion.

Literature Review

This paper draws upon the concept of the linguistic landscape. It examines how linguistic landscape represents power relations among languages and how it shapes the linguistic behavior. The notion of linguistic landscape is broadly applicable across disciplines as education, sociology, architecture, education, economics, linguistics, geography, urban planning and many more. Any public signage – shop names, billboards, road signs, street names and names of the buildings – in an area plays informational as well as symbolic role (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). It also functions as a site where power relations and language ideologies are contested (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). The symbolic dimension of the linguistic sign conveys complex meanings related to status, power dynamics, prestige, and ideology (Carr, 2017). Furthermore, the distinction between “the top-down” (official) and “bottom-up” (private) signage highlights potential differences between institutional and everyday language practices. Such discrepancies often reveal underlying covert suppression, tension, and prevailing instrumentalism as fundamental issues. It also offers insight into the linguistic forms of regions, symbolic boundaries, and spatial domains (Ben Said, 2010).

Local languages are used in order to attract local and lower-income audiences. In contrast, non-local languages, especially English, are used to target middle-class and upper-class customers, appeal to an international audience, and project a ‘fashionable’ image. Language in public spaces serves as a key medium through which globalization is expressed and enacted. In this context, English functions as a dominant global language associated with transnational connectivity and processes of globalization (Carr, 2017; Cenoz & Gorter, 2008; Lanza & Woldemariam, 2013).

The material culture of multilingual settings highlights the significance of everyday objects, physical items, and spaces which, beyond written language, intersect with local and global mindsets, culture, tradition, and social life (Aronin & O Laoire, 2012).

Studies of linguistic landscape across South Asian countries demonstrate the dominance of English at the expense of national languages. In Bangladesh, the pervasive display of English is linked to ‘colonial influence’ (Dong et al., 2020; Tasnim, 2020).

Kandel (2019) also identifies the prevalent use of English and the underrepresented status of Nepali in the linguistic landscape of Nepal, which caused the vernacular language to struggle for existence. Gogoi and Sinha (2023) link the prominence of English in Sivasagar, India, to broader processes of globalization.

Research on Tokyo's linguistic landscape reveals a remarkable degree of multilingualism, particularly in non-official signs, which display a diverse range of languages (Backhaus, 2006). It reflects the coexistence of multiple linguistic identities in an urban setting.

A multimodal analysis of the linguistic landscape of Peshawar demonstrates how English functions as an indicator of the socioeconomic status of public perceptions and policy (Hussain et al., 2022). Notably, Urduized transliterations index a convergence of global and local linguistic influences, which vary with the socioeconomic profile of the surrounding community. The study suggests a strong connection between socio-economic affluence and the use of English. Whereas, an increase in Urduization is noticed from affluent to urban and suburban areas, with a striking inverse correlation between Urduization levels and socioeconomic status: areas with higher socioeconomic status exhibit lower levels of Urduization.

In Pakistani TV dramas, Urdu is often used to construct images of respectability, morality, and proper Pakistani identity (Khan, 2023). The preference for Urdu in media dramas reflects its association with socially constructed respect and legitimacy. Khan (2023) describes family drama as 'a perfect metaphor for the public arena' where the national culture of Pakistan is contested. Thus, language use functions as a performative act through which 'identity' is constructed and displayed. Urdu is used to construct a refined and respectable identity, while regional languages are often perceived as incompatible with such identities.

Studies on Lahore show the dominance of English. Yasir and Khalid (2024) found that English is used widely in the advertisements in Lahore. It is adopted as an effective resource of promoting business. Research on cinema signage in Lahore explores the linguistic hierarchy and highlights that Urdu and especially English are associated with education and social advancement (Kirk, 2018). On the other hand, despite being the most spoken language of the region, Punjabi owns little social status. It is stigmatized as a rural, unsophisticated language. Taken together, the relevant literature shows that public signage acts as a visible site of language contact. It offers insight into coexistence and competition among languages in a society.

Despite these insights, the linguistic landscape of Lahore remains unexplored which highlights the need to examine how linguistic hierarchy, power and social identities are created in multilingual contexts.

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. How is Punjabi presented in the linguistic landscape of Lahore?
2. Which sociolinguistic and economic factors shape Punjabi's limited visibility?
3. How does linguistic visibility show broader patterns of inequality and identity?

Methodology

This study investigates the presence of Punjabi in the linguistic landscape of Lahore, with particular focus on shopboards and billboards. Further, it explores those sociolinguistic, cultural and economic factors that are responsible for Punjabi's limited visibility.

In order to examine the patterns of multilingualism and the use of Punjabi, the study analyzes 18 locations. On the basis of 'language used' the signs are classified into three primary categories: Urdu, English and mix. According to Backhaus (2007) first two categories correspond to 'monolingual signs' and the third category present 'polylingual signs'. All the shopboards and the billboards were studied for the presence of Punjabi words, irrespective of the script used. Following Pacione (2009) the area was categorized on the basis of its socioeconomic status, land value and historical development.

Category A: Locations with a history of establishment spanning more than 50 years, characterized by high population density, low literacy rates, and a lower-middle and middle-class socioeconomic profile, include "inner-city" with older housing, higher density, and mixed commercial/residential use: Anarkali, Gari Shahu, Chauburji, Shalimar, Dharampura, Saddar, Shahdra, Wahdat Road, Chungi, Gangaram, Abid Market, and Misri Shah Market.

Category B: Locations with a history of establishment ranging from 20 to 50 years, marked by moderate population density, moderate literacy rates, and a middle-class socioeconomic profile aligns with "middle-income residential suburbs" that developed in the mid-20th century: Jail Road, Bhatta Chowk, Jinnah Hospital to Akbar Chowk, Cavalry, Shadman, Township, Model Town Link Road, Walton, DHA Main Boulevard, Liberty Market and Johar Town Market

Category C: Locations with a history of establishment less than 20 years, featuring low population density, high literacy rates, and a predominantly upper-middle and upper-class socioeconomic profile, fit the description of "modern high-income exurbs" or gated communities: Bahria Town Market and DHA-2 Market.

A total of over 1000 shopboards and billboards were analyzed across 18 locations as a representative sample of the linguistic landscape of Lahore. They were studied for 'languages contained' with a particular focus on the presence of Punjabi. As a data collection tool, a mobile camera is used to capture images of the selected locations.

Results

The analysis shows that Lahore's linguistic landscape is characterized by the dominance of English, which appears on almost 60% of billboards and 45% of shopboards. In contrast, Urdu and Punjabi are underrepresented, with Urdu featured on 50 % of the 1001 examined shopboards and Punjabi on only 0.7%. Notably, Punjabi was entirely absent from the 150 billboards analyzed.

The data indicate a limited but consistent presence of multilingual signage. In a sample of over 1000 signs, the majority of signs are monolingual. Only 30% of the signs contain two or more languages.

A closer examination of the shopboards containing the Punjabi language reveals a distinct pattern. All seven instances of the use of Punjabi were related to the food industry (see Figures 1-7).

Figure 1 Shopboard of a Restaurant (Johar Town/WAPDA Town)



Figure 1 shows signage of a food establishment. It is located in Johar Town/WAPDA Town. In our study, it falls under category B. The sign contains a Punjabi word *panga* (fight), written in English script.

Figure 2 Shopboard of a Restaurant (Johar Town/WAPDA Town)



Figure 2 shows signage of a restaurant located in category B. The sign includes a Punjabi word *pind* (village) in English script.

Figure 3 Shopboard of a Restaurant (Johar Town/WAPDA Town)



The sign in Figure 3 is multilingual, and it contains a Punjabi word *di* (of) in Urdu script.

Figure 4 Shopboard of a Restaurant (Johar Town)



Figure 4 depicts signage of a food establishment with a mix of Urdu and Punjabi. *Arrab Patti* (Urdu) *Dhaba* (Punjabi) (Vendor of a billionaire, i.e., 'billionaire' and 'vendor' in a humorous way).

Figure 5 Shopboard of a Restaurant (Chauburji)



Figure 5 is an image of a commercial board of a restaurant. It is located in Chauburji. In our study, Chauburji falls under category A. There are Punjabi words *Rahay Rab Da Naa* (Long live the name of God) and *Khan Baba* (Mr Khan) in Urdu script.

Figure 6 Shopboard of a Restaurant (Shalimar/Dharampura)



Figure 6 contains Punjabi *Huqa pani* (eatables) in English transcript.

Figure 7 Shopboard of a Restaurant (Shalimar/Dharampura)



Figure 7 shows a sign of Punjabi words *Jatt Da Dera* (Camp of a JATT) in Urdu script.

The analysis of shopboards and billboards reveals distinct patterns of language use. The distribution of languages, for shopboards, is as follows: English-only (50%), Urdu-only (20 %), and multilingual (30%). Billboards show a different linguistic profile, with English-only (60.9%), Urdu-only (10%), and multilingual (30%) being the predominant categories.

Table 1 exhibits Urdu as prevalent on shopboards, with over 50% shopboards featuring Urdu. While, on billboards its frequency decreases to less than 40%. Contrarily, the use of the Punjabi is extremely rare; with only seven shopboards (0.7%) and no billboard featuring any Punjabi word. The study also investigated variation across different socioeconomic areas of

Lahore. The use of Punjabi on the shopboards is found only in Category A and Category B locations. Category C locations do not have any signboard containing Punjabi word.

Table 1 suggests a gradual increase in the use of English on shopboards and billboards from Category A (low-income, older) to Category C (higher income, newer areas). This pattern simultaneously highlights the dominance of English and marginalization of Urdu and Punjabi in the linguistic landscape of Lahore.

Table 1. Summary of Language Distribution on Billboards and Shopboards

Location	Category	English (n)	English (%)	Urdu (n)	Urdu (%)	Mix (n)	Mix (%)	Total	Use of Punjabi Words
Billboards	A	36	50.0	12	16.7	24	33.3	72	0
Billboards	B	56	70.9	3	3.8	20	25.3	79	0
Shopboards	A	165	35.8	105	22.8	191	41.4	461	3
Shopboards	B	235	52.1	98	21.7	118	26.1	451	4
Shopboards	C	77	86.5	3	3.4	9	10.1	89	0

Discussion

The results show that the linguistic landscape of Lahore is characterized by the dominance of English and almost absence of Punjabi. In Pakistan, the Punjabi-speaking community is a large linguistic group. Majority of them reside in the province of Punjab but Punjabi secures a surprisingly limited place in the linguistic landscape of Lahore which is the capital city of Punjab.

The findings suggest that the linguistic landscape is not a neutral function of language use. It is a site where deep social hierarchies are established and expressed. The dominance of English with somewhat stable presence of Urdu and marginal visibility of Punjabi is socially constructed. This construction reflects power relation, class and identity in a metropolitan like Lahore. Punjabi, remained nearly excluded from public and commercial domains, regardless of the fact that it is widely spoken in Punjab. This limited presence is not incidental. It reflects a structured hierarchy in which Punjabi is systematically displaced from the domains linked with power and prestige. In this diglossic region, in the presence of Urdu and particularly English, Punjabi occupies a subordinate place in the linguistic hierarchy. Though Punjabi is not entirely absent yet it is selectively used in the specified contexts; in the food-related signage as the present study shows. This marginalization is not externally imposed; however, it is a reflection of internalized ideologies. The pattern of domain-specific assignment of language use corresponds to broader tendencies where Punjabi is avoided in contexts with higher social status and legitimacy, it thus reinforces the comparatively lower language hierarchy. It demonstrates an ideological pattern in which Punjabi is valued differently; according to the socially constructed meaning assigned to it. Within contemporary urban identity construction, Punjabi is not entirely rejected but is limited in its role.

The findings of this study are comparable to Backhaus (2006), who worked on the coexistence and competition between different languages. In the linguistic landscape, Punjabi lags behind other languages. It reflects a generational shift in the usage of Punjabi. As, younger generation shows a reduced tendency to speak in Punjabi in the public contexts. While stating the reasons behind the absence of Punjabi and this shift, Rabiah (2018) notes the public perception of Punjabi's reduced value and prestige. This marginalization is further linked to urbanization, as newly developed areas (Category C) show no sign of Punjabi.

The findings indicate that the use of the Punjabi language is largely confined to the food industry. This may reflect the role of language in shaping customers' perception of authenticity. In this study, all the shopboards that contain Punjabi words are of 'desi food' establishments where authenticity is a key marketing strategy. This interpretation is supported by Song et al. (2022), who observed similar patterns in Mainland China. Traditional Chinese characters on the signboard make the restaurant seem more authentic compared to simplified characters.

The findings support Abbas and Iqbal's (2018) argument that Punjabi is losing value as speakers increasingly align themselves with other languages. Zaidi (2014) argues that the Punjabi language is excluded from many domains of society. Punjabis themselves are responsible for this exclusion. The limited presence of Punjabi in Lahore's linguistic landscape shows its speakers' limited aspiration for its public visibility and subsequent dominance.

Similar to the patterns observed in the politics of mother tongue classification in the census of India 1941-1971 (Tier, 2024), the absence of Punjabi in Lahore signage can be interpreted not merely accidental or a matter of choice but an intentional choice by which it is governed and symbolically rendered.

According to Shohamy (2006), the importance of a language depends on its presence and absence in the linguistic landscape. The findings of the current study – Punjabi only on 0.007 percent shopboards and on no billboard – demonstrate its status. Here, Blommaert's (2014) argument that linguistic landscapes index local culture is not completely borne out; as despite Punjab's rich culture, music, cuisine and festivals, Punjabi is poorly reflected in Lahore's public spaces.

Baker (1993) viewed dominant language as a strong mean of socioeconomic mobility through which a community can defeat its economic downfall. This remains one of the main reasons of Punjabi's limited visibility. It reflects preferences of local inhabitants. They perceive Punjabi, in comparison to English, as less effective to attract customers. The dominance of English in Lahore's linguistic landscape aligns with Loth's (2016) and Kirk's (2018) argument, who link English with a broad societal identity and high social status.

The stratified relationship exists between English, national, and regional languages, where dominance of English and marginalization of regional language is reflected and reproduced through language visibility (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). What Rahman (2002) finds in Pakistan, Tasnim (2020) sees in Dhaka, Dong et al. (2020) report in Bangladesh, Kendal (2019) finds in Nepal, and Gogoi and Sinha (2023) observe in Sivasagar town support the current argument of marginalization of the regional language.

The fact that billboards, which are often used as sites to promote large businesses, rely less on local languages (i.e., few Urdu words and no Punjabi words) highlights the complex dynamics of language use in urban settings. Low visibility of the Punjabi language on shopboards and no visibility on billboards highlight the need for further research to propose strategies to promote maximum representation of the regional language in public places.

The concept of linguistic capital provides a useful framework for interpreting the marginal visibility of Punjabi in an urban setting (Bourdieu, 1991). The presence of language in public areas elicits its symbolic value and position within social hierarchies. In the present situation of Lahore, where English is used as high-value linguistic capital linked with power, economic strength, and mobility, Punjabi, as part of a multilingual identity, is positioned as a regional language linked to rurality and lower socioeconomic status. Lower socioeconomic status is explicitly shown by the name of a shop in Lahore, *Gariban di Hatti*, which means 'shop for the poor'. This vivid unequal distribution of linguistic capital reveals why the majority of business owners in Punjab overwhelmingly avoid it on their billboards. The use of English, on the other hand, is maximized for symbolic capital and power. Thus, the low visibility of Punjabi on billboards cannot be taken as a matter of preference but a reflection of the underlying ideological hierarchy that provokes linguistic inequality in the city. Billboards and shopboards are sites of symbolic struggle where the power hierarchy among English, Urdu, and Punjabi is reproduced.

Lahore's linguistic landscape showcases a hierarchical order with the dominance of English and underrepresentation of Punjabi. On the signage, English is elevated with abundant presence while Punjabi is thrown to a marginalized position. Social patterns engineer these hierarchies. Abundance of English on shopboards and billboards indicates that it embodies power and is closely associated with economic prestige. On the other hand, exclusion of Punjabi from signage suggests its lower social status in economic sphere. This marginalization of Punjabi is not mainly due to some external pressure rather it comes from internalized language hierarchies linked with low social class and limited symbolic capital. This study exhibits how the presence of Punjabi is confined to food industry mainly to suggest authentic taste. It, sadly, illustrates Punjabi's exclusion from the domains which are related to upward mobility, power and prestige.

Collectively, the patterns derived in this study relate with broad South Asian situations in which linguistic hierarchies, identity, ideology, power and most importantly language have historically been colored by colonial and post-colonial processes.

Conclusion

Despite its regional dominance, the limited presentation of Punjabi in the linguistic landscape of Lahore emphasizes the way linguistic hierarchies are structured through everyday and informal use of language. English symbolizes power and economic stability; Urdu enjoys the status of national language but Punjabi is restricted to cultural and food-related domains. This suggests that marginalization of a language operates not only through formal institutional arrangements but also through internalized ideologies. It tells how the speakers of that language perceive and put it in public situations. The selective use of Punjabi (only to food) emphasizes its marginal position within regional linguistic hierarchy. In addition, its exclusion from domains of modernity and economic stability indicates its actively structured social identity. This study demonstrates how, in South Asian multilingual settings, language visibility links to linguistic hierarchy, power and national identity. Lahore serves as a compelling example of how urban language practices reflect and perpetuate unequal distribution of linguistic power and cultural capital.

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