"EXPLORING MULTILINGUALISM IN ADVERTISING SIGNS: A LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS AT TIMOR PLAZA, DILI, TIMOR-LESTE"

Agus Martins, Dr.Drs. Kletus Erom, M.Hum, Fransiskus Bustan, Agelita Gomes
Emal:agusmartins28@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examines the linguistic landscape (LL) of advertising signs at Timor Plaza in Dili, Timor-Leste, focusing on language usage, the distribution of monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual signage, and the motivations behind language choices. Using a qualitative research approach, data were collected through documentary analysis of 130 advertising signs, semi-structured interviews with shop owners and managers, and photographic documentation. The findings reveal that English (58%) and Tetun (26%) are the dominant languages, with bilingual signs (Tetun and English) accounting for 28.7% and multilingual signs (Portuguese or Bahasa Indonesia) representing only 1.3%. English is primarily used for its global appeal to international customers, while Tetun ensures accessibility for the local population. The occasional inclusion of Portuguese and Bahasa Indonesia reflects Timor-Leste's historical and regional context. The study concludes that the linguistic landscape at Timor Plaza reflects a strategic balance between globalization and local identity, demonstrating the interplay of economic aspirations and cultural preservation. This study expands the theoretical understanding of multilingualism in public spaces while offering practical implications for language policy in commercial settings within multicultural societies.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape, Multilingualism, Commercial Spaces, Sociolinguistics, Timor-Leste, Globalization.

A. INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental medium of communication and interaction, shaping human connections and societal functions (Jackson et al., 2022). In modern urban settings, language is omnipresent, embedded in public spaces through billboards, shop signs, product packaging, and other visible texts, forming a rich tapestry of linguistic practices (Santos Rovira, 2024). This visible use of language constitutes what scholars term the linguistic landscape (LL)—a concept that provides a lens for understanding the sociolinguistic fabric of a given community (Актамова, 2024). The linguistic landscape not only reflects the linguistic diversity of a community but also offers insights into the ways in which languages interact and coexist in public spaces (Dagenais et al., 2008). Through the LL, researchers can explore linguistic

diversity, social power structures, and cultural values. Furthermore, the LL captures the dynamic interplay of globalization and localization, which shapes language practices in contemporary societies (Hatoss, 2022). These processes highlight how languages serve not only as tools for communication but also as markers of identity and symbols of broader societal dynamics, enabling researchers to delve into the intersections of language, culture, and power.

Timor Plaza, the largest shopping mall in Dili, Timor-Leste, serves as a focal point for commerce, leisure, and cultural exchange, making it an ideal site for exploring the linguistic landscape in an urban, multilingual context. As a sociocultural and economic hub, Timor Plaza attracts a diverse demographic of local residents, expatriates, and tourists, reflecting the rich linguistic diversity of Timor-Leste. The advertising signs in this setting feature multiple languages, including Tetum, Portuguese, English, and occasionally Indonesian, demonstrating the coexistence of local, national, and global influences. By investigating these signs, this study aims to uncover the intricate relationships between language, commerce, and sociocultural identity in a rapidly evolving and multilingual society. Moreover, the multilingual signage reveals how businesses strategically position themselves to cater to diverse audiences while aligning with cultural and economic trends (Clorion et al., 2024). This context offers a microcosm for understanding how language practices in commercial spaces embody broader social and political dynamics, providing a unique lens to examine the negotiation of linguistic and cultural identities.

Shopping malls, as hubs of social and economic activity, are pivotal sites for examining the dynamics of the linguistic landscape (Parra, 2022). The multilingual signage in such spaces often mirrors the broader sociocultural dynamics, reflecting identity negotiations and power structures (Mehan, 2024). For instance, English is frequently used in mall signage to signal modernity, cosmopolitanism, and global connectivity, while local languages such as Tetum and Portuguese maintain cultural resonance and familiarity (Shang & Guo, 2017). This duality illustrates how businesses leverage language to communicate both practical and symbolic messages to their audience (Oswald, 2015). Thus, malls like Timor Plaza offer a unique microcosm for studying how languages function as both practical tools for communication and symbolic resources for social and cultural positioning. The use of multiple languages on signage also reflects the socio-political context of Timor-Leste, where historical ties and contemporary aspirations influence linguistic choices in public and commercial domains.

Advertising signage within Timor Plaza serves dual functions: conveying practical information and projecting cultural, social, and economic values. These signs embody the interplay between globalization and local identity, where linguistic choices are shaped by

factors such as economic aspirations, cultural pride, and consumer behaviour. For example, English, as a global lingua franca, often symbolizes modernity and internationalism, appealing to affluent and cosmopolitan audiences (Salomone & Salomone, 2022). Conversely, Tetum and Portuguese resonate with local and national identity, fostering a sense of belonging among Timorese consumers. Occasionally, Indonesian also appears in signage, reflecting the country's historical ties and its proximity to Indonesia. This nuanced use of language underscores the strategic balancing act businesses perform to address the diverse needs of their audience while navigating the tension between global and local appeals. Additionally, the prominence or subordination of certain languages on signage can reveal underlying power dynamics and societal values, offering insights into the ways in which language choices shape and are shaped by cultural and economic priorities.

Timor-Leste presents a compelling case study for linguistic landscape research due to its unique multilingual environment, shaped by its colonial history, independence struggles, and contemporary globalization. As a former Portuguese colony and later a territory under Indonesian occupation, Timor-Leste's linguistic profile is characterized by the coexistence of official languages (Tetum and Portuguese), working and foreign languages (Indonesian and English), and numerous indigenous languages. These linguistic layers reflect the intersection of historical, cultural, and political influences. Within this context, the multilingual advertising signs in Timor Plaza offer a lens to examine how businesses navigate this complex linguistic landscape to cater to diverse audiences and market demands. Moreover, the coexistence of these languages highlights the resilience and adaptability of Timorese linguistic practices, which balance heritage preservation with engagement in global economic networks (Taruvinga, 2019). This interplay provides a rich foundation for analysing how historical legacies continue to shape linguistic identities and practices in contemporary settings.

The present study seeks to explore the intersection of multilingualism, commerce, and sociocultural identity through an analysis of advertising signs at Timor Plaza. Specifically, it examines the languages represented in signage, their visual presentation, and the motivations behind their selection. The study also considers the sociopolitical and economic implications of these linguistic practices, investigating how language choice and visual hierarchy reflect broader societal dynamics. For instance, the prominence of English or Portuguese in font size and layout may signal prestige and global connectivity, whereas the inclusion of Tetum underscores cultural roots and national pride. These elements reveal how advertising signs function as both communicative tools and cultural artifacts, embodying the negotiation of identity, power, and economic aspirations in Timor-Leste. By focusing on the intricate details

of signage design and language use, this study illuminates how linguistic choices both reflect and shape the evolving sociolinguistic landscape of the region.

By situating this analysis within the broader framework of linguistic landscape studies, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how language mediates the interplay between global forces and local realities. Through its focus on Timor Plaza, the study highlights the strategic role of language in shaping consumer behaviour, fostering cultural identity, and navigating sociolinguistic diversity in a globalized world. This nuanced exploration not only advances the academic discourse on multilingualism in advertising but also provides valuable insights into the sociocultural dynamics of Timor-Leste. Additionally, the findings underscore the importance of considering linguistic landscapes as active sites of meaning-making, where language practices reflect and influence broader processes of cultural and economic transformation (Wu & Huang, 2024).

B.   METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to comprehensively analyze the linguistic landscape (LL) of advertising signs at Timor Plaza. The research integrated documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, and photographic documentation to capture the multifaceted dynamics of language use in this commercial space. Data collection involved purposive sampling of 130 advertising signs to ensure representation across different types of businesses and locations within the shopping mall. Each sign was systematically categorized as monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, and the specific languages represented were recorded to provide a foundation for subsequent analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 key stakeholders, including shop owners, managers, and the marketing manager of Timor Plaza. The interview questions cantered on the motivations for language choices, the intended target audiences, and the perceived value of multilingual signage in shaping customer engagement. These interviews offered critical insights into the socio-economic and cultural factors influencing language decisions in the mall's advertising practices. Photographic documentation complemented the interview data by providing visual evidence of the signs. This documentation facilitated an in-depth analysis of how languages were presented visually, considering layout, font size, and prominence. The study adopted theoretical framework to examine salience, spatial distribution, and the integration of multiple languages in the signage (Guo, 2024). Finally, data analysis was conducted thematically to identify recurring patterns and sociolinguistic implications of the observed language use. Triangulation was employed to validate the findings by cross-referencing data from interviews, photographic evidence, and

documentary analysis. This methodological approach ensured a robust and nuanced exploration of how linguistic practices in Timor Plaza reflect broader cultural, social, and economic dynamics in the context of multilingualism.

C.   RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

a. Languages Represented on Advertising Signs at Timor Plaza, Dili, Timor-Leste

The linguistic landscape of advertising signs at Timor Plaza predominantly features Tetun and English, reflecting the socio-cultural and economic dynamics of the region. Based on the interview with Abdul Rozi, the Marketing Manager of Timor Plaza, these two languages are strategically selected. English, as a global lingua franca, serves to attract and facilitate communication with international visitors and expatriates, while Tetun, as a local language, ensures accessibility for domestic audiences. The choice of languages aligns with the development goals of the Jape Group of Companies, the owner of Timor Plaza, which focuses on creating a cosmopolitan yet locally relevant retail environment. Historical insights into the company reveal its origins in Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia, and its strategic expansion to Timor-Leste in 2011. This dual-language policy reflects the blend of international aspirations and local engagement.

b. Language Use in Advertising at Timor Plaza: Patterns and Trends

The study revealed that English is the dominant language (58%) in advertising across the shopping center, followed by Tetun (26%). Bilingual signs combining Tetun and English constitute 28.7% of the total signage, whereas multilingual signs (including Portuguese or Bahasa Indonesia) account for only 1.3%. This pattern underscores the prominence of English in branding and communication while maintaining Tetun for inclusivity and cultural identity. Visual data analysis from banners, posters, and digital advertisements confirms that English dominates indoor and outdoor spaces. This trend suggests that English serves as a marker of modernity and professionalism, appealing to global customers, while Tetun enhances relatability among local shoppers. Multilingual signs, though limited, demonstrate the influence of regional and historical factors, such as Portuguese as a former colonial language.

Table 1. Patterns and Trends

Language Category	Percentage	Key Insights
English	58%	Dominates both indoor and outdoor advertisements; serves as a marker of modernity and professionalism.
Tetun	26%	Enhances relatability and cultural identity among local shoppers.
Bilingual (Tetun + English)	28.7%	Reflects efforts to balance global branding with local inclusivity.
Multilingual (Portuguese/Bahasa Indonesia)	1.3%	Highlights regional and historical influences, including Portuguese as a colonial language.

a. Shop Owners' Language Decisions

Interviews with shop owners and management highlighted practical and strategic reasons for the dominant use of English and Tetun. English is preferred for its universality and appeal to foreign customers, whereas Tetun ensures communication with the local population. Signage decisions, including text on banners, posters, and storefronts, reflect this balance. This bilingual approach is particularly evident in public service announcements and regulations, where clear communication in both languages is crucial. Examples include signage for parking instructions, safety measures, and promotional offers. The inclusion of Portuguese and Bahasa Indonesia in select cases indicates attempts to accommodate specific demographics, such as Portuguese-speaking expatriates.

b. Analysis of Linguistic Landscape: Monolingual, Bilingual, and Multilingual Signs

The linguistic landscape at Timor Plaza consists of 130 advertising signs, which can be categorized into three main groups based on their language use. Monolingual signs dominate the landscape, accounting for 97 signs, or 74.6% of the total. Among these, 26% are exclusively in Tetum, while 38.7% use English only, reflecting the significant role of English in conveying modernity and international appeal. Bilingual signs make up 28.7% of the total, with 43 signs primarily featuring a combination of Tetum and English, illustrating efforts to balance local and global linguistic elements. Finally, multilingual signs are the least common, comprising just 1.3% of the total, with only two signs incorporating additional languages such as Portuguese or Bahasa Indonesia. This distribution highlights the predominance of English and Tetum in the signage at Timor Plaza, with minimal representation of other languages.

Table 2. Monolingual, Bilingual, and Multilingual Signs

Category	Number of signs	Percentages	Details
Monolingual	97	74,6%	-Tetun-only 26% (34 signs)
			-Englsih-only 38,7% (63 signs)
Bilingual Signs	43	28,7%	Predominantly Tetun and Englsih reflecting between local global elements
Multilingual Signs	2	1,3%	Including Portuguese or Bahasa Indonesia showing minimal multilingual representasion

English emerges as the dominant language, reflecting its role as the primary medium of international business and advertising. The bilingual signs signify a balance between local identity and global connectivity. For example, bilingual safety instructions and promotional materials highlight the inclusivity of both languages. The scarcity of multilingual signs suggests limited engagement with linguistic diversity beyond the two dominant languages. However, the occasional use of Portuguese, particularly in outdoor advertisements, indicates an acknowledgment of Timor-Leste's colonial past and its integration into the CPLP (Community of Portuguese Language Countries).

a. Data Representation and Visual Evidence

To substantiate the findings of the linguistic landscape at Timor Plaza, qualitative methods, including interviews, photographic documentation, and direct observation, were employed. Visual evidence was critical in illustrating the diversity of language use in the shopping center. This included a range of signage types, such as monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual signs, each reflecting the complex linguistic environment of Timor-Leste. For example, monolingual signs include "No Left Turn" in English and directional signage in Tetun. Bilingual signs, such as "No Smoking" and "Keep the Area Clean," feature both English and Tetun, demonstrating the integration of local and global languages. Additionally, multilingual signs, such as "Sem Estacionamento Aqui" (No Parking Here) in Portuguese, alongside English and Tetun, highlight the historical and regional influences shaping the linguistic choices in this space. These findings align with the theoretical framework proposed by Cenoz and Gorter, which emphasizes the salience, size, and font type of linguistic items in signage. This framework was instrumental in analyzing the visibility and impact of different languages, allowing for a deeper understanding of how language choices affect the representation of local and global identities in commercial spaces

Table 3: Data Representation and Visual Evidence

Sign Type	Example	Language Included	Key Observation
Monolingual	"No Left Turn"	English only	Reflect the use of English for universal, regulatory signage
	Directional Signage	Tetun only	Represent the local language for directional guidance
Bilingual	"No Smooking	English and Tetun	Demonstrate integration of local and global language
	"Keep the Area Clean	English and Tetun	Reflect the dua purpose of reaching local and international audience
Multilingual	"Sem Estacionamento Aqui" (No Parking Here)	Portuguese English, and Tetun	Highlights the Influence of Timor-Leste

This table above, reflects the diversity of language use in the linguistic landscape of Timor Plaza. It demonstrates the combination of local (Tetun), regional (Portuguese), and global (English) languages in the signage, emphasizing the socio-cultural and economic dynamics of the area. The visual evidence from these signs, analysed using Cenoz and Gorter's framework, underscores the strategic use of language to reach a broad demographic while maintaining cultural relevance.

D.   CONCLUSION

The study of the linguistic landscape at Timor Plaza, Dili, Timor-Leste, reveals a deliberate interplay between global and local languages, reflecting the socio-cultural and economic aspirations of the region. English dominates the advertising space, serving as a symbol of modernity and an effective tool for engaging international audiences. Tetun, the national language, complements this dominance by ensuring inclusivity and cultural resonance among the local population. The bilingual approach, with 28.7% of signage combining Tetun and English, underscores a strategic balance that accommodates both domestic and international stakeholders. Multilingual signs, though rare (1.3%), highlight Timor-Leste's historical and regional connections, such as its Portuguese colonial past and ties to neighboring countries. Shop owners' decisions to prioritize English and Tetun in their signage demonstrate a pragmatic response to the demands of a diverse customer base.

This choice reflects the dual priorities of economic globalization and cultural preservation. Visual evidence from monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual signs further

substantiates these findings, illustrating the role of linguistic choices in shaping the shopping center's identity. Overall, this analysis highlights Timor Plaza as a microcosm of Timor-Leste's evolving linguistic landscape, where language use mirrors broader trends of globalization, cultural identity, and regional integration. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of multilingualism in commercial spaces, offering a valuable framework for future research in linguistic landscape studies.

REFERENCES

Clorion, F. D. D., Bulado, A. J., Encarnacion, B. A., Dumagay, A. H., Ellomer, G. A., Albani, S. E., Pil, A. O., Devanadera, A. C., Rillo, R. M., & Alrefaee, Y. (2024). Exploring linguistic signage in higher education: An empirical study of a linguistically diverse context. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*, *6*(1), 2049.

Dagenais, D., Moore, D., Sabatier, C., Lamarre, P., & Armand, F. (2008). Linguistic landscape and language awareness. In *Linguistic Landscape* (pp. 293–309). Routledge.

Guo, R. (2024). *A panorama of linguistic landscape studies: by Durk Gorter and Jasone Cenoz, Bristol, Jackson, Multilingual Matters, 2023, xv+ 452 pp., $84.89 (hardcover), ISBN 9781800417151*. Taylor & Francis.

Hatoss, A. (2022). *Everyday multilingualism: linguistic landscapes as practice and pedagogy*. Routledge.

Jackson, J. C., Watts, J., List, J.-M., Puryear, C., Drabble, R., & Lindquist, K. A. (2022). From text to thought: How analyzing language can advance psychological science. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *17*(3), 805–826.

Mehan, A. (2024). *The Affective Agency of Public Space: Social Inclusion and Community Cohesion* (Vol. 22). Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.

Oswald, L. R. (2015). *Creating value: The theory and practice of marketing semiotics research*. Oxford University Press.

Parra, E. G. (2022). *Linguistic Landscape–Economics*. The University of Mississippi.

Salomone, R., & Salomone, R. C. (2022). *The rise of English: Global politics and the power of language*. Oxford University Press.

Santos Rovira, J. M. (2024). Benidorm's linguistic landscape: unveiling the multifaceted tapestry of urban expression. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 1–22.

Shang, G., & Guo, L. (2017). Linguistic landscape in Singapore: What shop names reveal about Singapore's multilingualism. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, *14*(2), 183–201.

Taruvinga, P. (2019). *Stakeholders, conservation and socio-economic development: the case of Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape World Heritage Site, South Africa*.

Wu, J., & Huang, L. (2024). Ethnic identity construction through multimodal linguistic landscape at Ban Arunotai in Thailand. *Asian Ethnicity*, 1–22.

Актамова, B. (2024). Exploring language variations in multilingual communities. *Актуальные Вопросы Языковой Подготовки в Глобализирующемся Мире*, *1*(1).