



MAPPING HEGEMONY: A THREE-DIMENSIONAL CDA OF URDU-CENTRIC MUNICIPAL SIGNAGE AND STATE DISCOURSE IN PUNJAB

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Abstract

This study investigates the linguistic landscape of Gujranwala, Pakistan, analyzing how municipal signage functions as a discursive mechanism for state-sanctioned linguistic homogenization. Although Punjab is a multilingual province, municipal installations in Gujranwala demonstrate a rigid commitment to Urdu-only typography, reflecting an administrative drive toward linguistic uniformity. Utilizing the three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework developed by Fairclough (1995), this study dissects the semiotic choices, institutional production processes, and social implications of signage implemented by the Punjab Horticulture Authority (PHA). The analysis reveals a systematic "semiotic erasure" of regional scripts, which functions as a form of symbolic violence that marginalizes the cultural capital of the local Punjabi-speaking population. By synthesizing Bourdieu's (1991) theory of symbolic power with Landry and Bourhis's (1997) research on ethnolinguistic vitality, this study argues that the observed Urdu-centric landscape is not an incidental byproduct of administrative oversight, but a deliberate outcome of top-down state policy. The findings demonstrate that public signage in Gujranwala serves as a precise indicator of the state's efficacy in implementing national linguistic homogeneity at the expense of regional cultural preservation. The study concludes by advocating for a decentralized approach to urban design and the adoption of inclusive signage policies that acknowledge the demographic realities of diverse language groups. This research offers a critical contribution to sociolinguistic discourse, particularly within post-colonial urban settings where state ideology and regional identity remain in constant negotiation.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Linguistic Landscape, Language Policy, Punjab Horticulture Authority, Urdu, Symbolic Power*

Introduction

Public spaces function as critical sites for the negotiation of national and regional identities, where the linguistic landscape serves as a visible manifestation of state ideology (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). The selection of scripts in municipal signage—ranging from Saraiki-centric displays in the south to the Urdu-dominant environments of industrial centers like Gujranwala—reveals complex power relations and administrative interests within Punjab, Pakistan. The standardization of Urdu scripts in municipal installations by the Punjab Horticulture Authority (PHA) (see Figures 1 & 2) indicates a conscious effort to impose a standardized administrative discourse, often at the expense of regional linguistic identity. This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to deconstruct these signage arrangements (Fairclough, 1995), arguing that the persistent prioritization of Urdu in cities like Gujranwala is not merely a matter of convenience, but a discursive move aimed at identity construction and central control (Bourdieu, 1991; Norton, 2013). By interrogating the semiotic choices and typographical arrangements within these urban landscapes, this research aims to uncover the hidden ideological motivations that dictate why

certain regions embrace multilingualism while others remain anchored in national linguistic homogeneity.

Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Background of the Study

The linguistic landscape is an ideological reflection of the state; public signage is not merely functional, but serves as a tool for social and political orientation. The public presence of a language, as stressed by Landry and Bourhis (1997), is inherently associated with the ethnolinguistic vitality of a community and serves as a major indicator of group status and cultural legitimacy. In the Pakistani context, the conflict between centralized national language policies and the assertion of regional identity is increasingly visible within this landscape. Bourdieu (1991) argues that language acts as "symbolic capital," and the state's monopoly over official scripts tends to dictate the "exchange rate" of vernaculars in the social space. This power dynamic is particularly apparent in the contrasting linguistic decisions made across Punjab, where regional scripts in the south are increasingly visible, in contrast to the Urdu-based municipal installations in industrial centers such as Gujranwala. As Norton (2013) highlights, such environments necessitate that individuals constantly negotiate their identities in response to socio-political pressures, often prioritizing pragmatic investment over heritage preservation. By applying Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework, this study seeks to unpack how top-down administrative discourse practices in municipal signage shape, and are shaped by, the broader ideological landscape of contemporary Pakistan.

Research Problem

Although existing literature has explored the symbolic role of public signage in multilingual communities, a significant gap remains regarding the ideological underpinnings of the unequal use of regional scripts in Punjab, Pakistan. A distinct dichotomy has emerged: urban centers in South Punjab, such as Bahawalpur and Multan, are gradually adopting regional linguistic markers to promote identity, whereas Gujranwala maintains a rigid commitment to Urdu-only municipal signage. This contradiction presents a compelling research problem: if state linguistic policy is intended to be homogeneous, why do administrative units in cities like Gujranwala eschew regional multilingualism in favor of national linguistic homogeneity? This homogenization—often masked as "administrative neutrality"—functions as a discursive device that marginalizes regional identities and limits the symbolic capital of Punjabi speakers. There is an immediate need to examine whether this Urdu-centric signage serves to reinforce central state power or whether it reflects a "market misfit" where regional scripts are deemed to lack commercial or administrative

utility. By leaving these covert ideological agendas unquestioned, scholars have overlooked the active role of typography and semiotics in constructing, rather than merely mirroring, the social reality of citizens. This study aims to address this issue by deconstructing these discursive practices, thereby exposing the power relations that govern the linguistic geography of the region.

Figure 1: Schematic Representation of Research Problem



Research Questions

Q1. How are semiotic resources—specifically script choices, typographical arrangements, and visual imagery—deployed in the municipal signage of Gujranwala compared to the multilingual landscapes of South Punjab?

Q2. In what ways do the linguistic and visual discourses within Gujranwala's municipal signage reveal an administrative preference for national linguistic homogeneity over regional identity?

Q3. In what ways does the prioritization of Urdu in Gujranwala's linguistic landscape serve as a discursive mechanism for the consolidation of central state authority and the marginalization of regional identity?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in its potential to advance the theoretical and empirical frontiers of Linguistic Landscape (LL) studies within the specific socio-political setting of Pakistan. The systematic deconstruction of linguistic decisions in the municipal signage of Gujranwala makes this study a crucial addition to the discussion of regional identity negotiation within the framework of a centralized nation-state. Theoretically, this research bridges the gap between Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis model and contemporary LL studies, offering a robust framework for interpreting how public script installations function as instruments of state ideology (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Moreover, this research holds practical value for policymakers and urban planners by highlighting the effects of linguistic homogeneity on regional cultural preservation. According to Norton (2013), how language is capitalized in public spaces directly affects the identity formation of citizens; by determining the mechanisms underlying the "market mismatch" and administrative preference for Urdu, this study sheds light on the conflict between national integration and the marginalization of regional linguistic resources (Bourdieu, 1991). Therefore, the results provide important evidence to scholars, cultural historians, and governance elites, contributing to a better



comprehension of how the visual preeminence of a national language in public realms can influence, limit, or legitimize the shared perceptions of a multinational group of language users. Finally, this study serves as a catalyst for discussions regarding the decolonization of local linguistic practices and the institutionalization of local languages in a post-colonial nation-state.

Literature Review

Related Studies

To contextualize this study within existing scholarly discourse, it is important to trace the evolution of linguistic landscape research from foundational explorations of symbolic power to recent investigations into sociolinguistic shifts in the digital age. Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) initiated this empirical path by demonstrating that the visual availability of languages in community spaces serves as a measure of group identity and power. This was later broadened by Shohamy (2006) and Shohamy and Gorter (2009), who demonstrated that public signage functions as a *de facto* language policy that often marginalizes minority languages. Similarly, Blommaert (2013) shifted the emphasis to the sociolinguistics of globalization, supporting the idea that urban landscapes reflect complex hierarchies where English and national languages dominate regional vernaculars. Rudolph (2018) further refined these observations, detailing how the visual environment in post-colonial settings reflects the tension between state-imposed nationalism and indigenous pride. Analyzing the Pakistani context, Rahman (2018) found that state-based language policy has historically focused on maintaining Urdu, establishing a socio-political environment that hinders the maintenance of regional languages. Bagna et al. (2020) explored how immigration and urbanization in the 21st century have necessitated new frameworks for mapping linguistic diversity in cities. Blackwood (2024) provided a comprehensive review of multilingualism in linguistic landscapes, asserting that script choices are deeply rooted in national ideologies. Moreover, Carr (2019) conducted a comparative study on the application of signage to achieve a compromise between heritage conservation and economic feasibility in municipalities. More recently, Syrjälä (2025) challenged administrative control of public space, highlighting that top-down signage is rarely neutral and serves as a tool of bureaucratic control. Lastly, Al-Jarf (2026) highlighted the dynamic character of public signage in Punjab, noting that current municipal signage is a symptom of a purposeful trend toward national linguistic homogeneity in industrial urban centers.

A Research Gap

Despite a growing body of work on linguistic landscapes in diverse global settings, a significant gap exists concerning the ideological premises of script distribution within the industrialized urban centers of Punjab, Pakistan. While the symbolic role of public signage in multilingual contexts has been widely documented, existing literature lacks a comparative analysis of municipal language policies between South Punjab and industrial hubs such as Gujranwala. Previous studies have often framed regional signage within a dichotomous struggle between national and regional identities; however, they have yet to address why cities like Gujranwala exhibit a dogmatic, Urdu-only approach that contravenes broader regional patterns of multilingualism. This study fills this critical gap by exploring how top-down administrative discourse—rather than bottom-up community usage—functions as a tool of central control and linguistic homogenization. Moving beyond mere descriptive narratives, this research provides an explanatory account of the hidden ideological drivers determining script hierarchies in contemporary Pakistani urban landscapes by focusing on this specific geographical and administrative outlier.

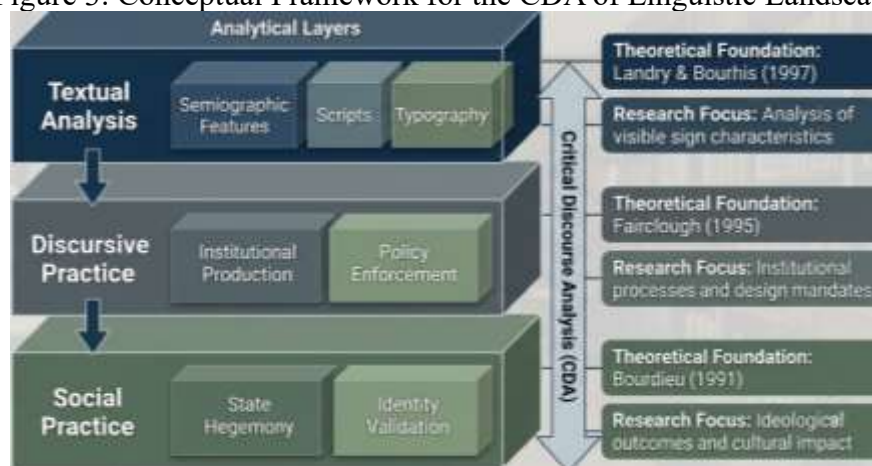
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study rests upon three interrelated pillars, which together enable a multidimensional analysis of linguistic landscapes. First, the Linguistic Landscape Theory proposed by Landry and Bourhis (1997) provides the necessary context for interpreting the symbolic role of public signage. According to this theory, the presence of specific languages in public spaces serves as a measure of ethnolinguistic vitality, allowing researchers to trace how script distribution reflects the power status of a community. Second, the primary methodological driver is Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Fairclough posits that discourse transcends mere linguistic description to function as a social practice. His three-dimensional model—focusing on text, discursive practice (production), and social practice (ideology)—offers a mechanism to deconstruct the process of encoding power within the administrative sphere. Finally, Bourdieu's (1991) Theory of Symbolic Power complements this framework by elucidating the motivations behind language choices. Bourdieu defines language as a form of "symbolic capital"; official languages accrue significant capital in state-approved spaces, while vernaculars are often systematically marginalized as unauthorized discourse. This theory allows the study to interpret the standardization of Urdu in Gujranwala as a state-sanctioned exercise of symbolic power. By synthesizing these perspectives, this research explores why Gujranwala acts as an exception to the broader Punjabi linguistic environment, effectively bridging the gap between national ideology and regional practice.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework integrates the aforementioned theories into a cohesive analytical model. As illustrated in Figure 3, the study follows a sequential analytical path, applying the theoretical lenses to each of the three layers of CDA. The framework establishes that the Textual Layer identifies the visible hierarchy (what is present), the Discursive Practice Layer examines the institutional process (how the discourse was produced), and the Social Practice Layer evaluates the ideological outcome (the implications for regional identity).

Figure 3: Conceptual Framework for the CDA of Linguistic Landscape

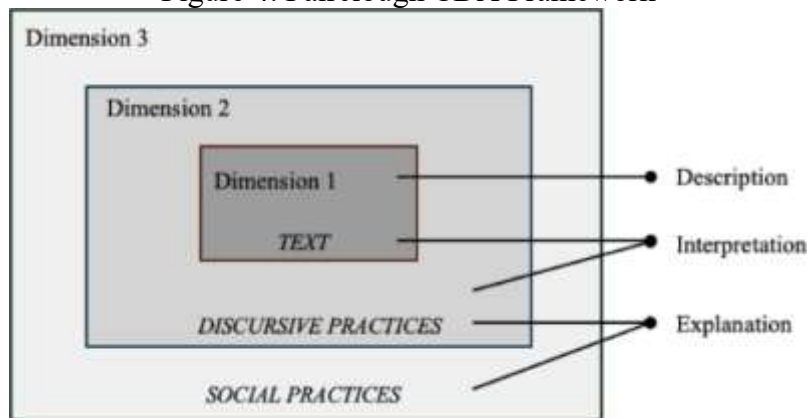


Research Methodology

Research Design (CDA)

This study employs a qualitative, interpretative research design rooted in the three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework proposed by Fairclough (1995). This design is selected for its capacity to bridge the gap between microscopic linguistic analysis and macroscopic socio-political interpretation. Through the CDA lens, this research transcends the limitations of viewing signs as mere static objects; instead, it treats them as dynamic sites of discursive struggle where administrative policy intersects with public identity (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Fairclough CDA Framework



Data Collection

The data consisted of visual records of municipal signage installed by the Punjab Horticulture Authority (PHA) in Gujranwala. Data collection involved systematic field photography conducted throughout 2026, which encompassed a variety of urban locations to ensure a representative sample of municipal discourse. The final dataset included individual installations (see Figures 5 & 6) that were selected for their high visibility and explicit administrative markers. This primary evidence was supported by secondary research regarding municipal governance mandates in Punjab, which provided necessary context for the photographic analysis.

Figure 5.



Figure 6.





Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis follows a three-step process aligned with the layers outlined in the conceptual framework:

1. **Textual Analysis:** Photographs are coded for their linguistic and semiotic elements, tracing the distribution of Urdu relative to regional vernaculars and assessing typographical layouts.
2. **Discursive Practice Analysis:** The signs are contextualized within the institutional environment of the PHA. This stage focuses on how institutional bureaucratic norms dictate the "production" of these signs, effectively standardizing administrative discourse.
3. **Social Practice Interpretation:** Finally, the patterns identified in the previous steps are interpreted through Bourdieu's lens. This stage addresses the explanatory research question and theorizes how the observed script hierarchies reinforce national linguistic homogeneity and influence the symbolic capital of the local population.

Ethical Considerations

This study is conducted in accordance with rigorous ethical standards to ensure the integrity of the findings. Because the primary data consists of public signage in open municipal areas, the study inherently respects privacy, as no human subjects were involved in the data-gathering process. All photographs utilized in the analysis were taken in public spaces, ensuring no violation of individual privacy or property rights. Moreover, the researcher ensures that data interpretation remains impartial; the analysis is conducted objectively, avoiding personal or political bias in the critical deconstruction of institutional signs. All secondary literature—including the theoretical foundations provided by Fairclough (1995), Bourdieu (1991), and Landry and Bourhis (1997)—is properly cited. Finally, the results are presented with the sole aim of contributing to academic discourse and enhancing the comprehension of language policy and urban discourse, rather than targeting any specific institution or administrative unit.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Empirical evidence from Gujranwala's municipal signage indicates that the city's public space is a contested site, where administrative discourse is systematically biased toward promoting national linguistic homogeneity. In the following section, Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model is used to unpack the semiotic and ideological terrain of the city.

Textual Analysis: Semiotic Hierarchies

The textual level of analysis examines the internal structure of the signs. A systematic typographical stratification is evident throughout the dataset. Urdu is the most prominent script, occupying the central visual field and utilizing the largest font size—which, as Landry and Bourhis (1997) note, is an immediate indicator of a language's predominant ethnolinguistic vitality. English is relegated to a secondary, functional status, typically employed only for administrative or directional clarity, while Punjabi/Saraiki is completely absent. This absence of regional scripts constitutes a form of "semiotic erasure." Furthermore, the uniformity of the font (e.g., Naskh Urdu) imbues the signage with institutional permanence, positioning Urdu not merely as a language, but as the sole legitimate voice of the municipal state (see Table 1).



Table 1: Semiotic Stratification in PHA Signage

Sign Type	Primary Script (Urdu)	Secondary Script (English)	Regional Script	Visual Prominence
Welcome Arches	Central/Large	Marginal/Small	Absent	Maximum
Proverbial/Civic Boards	Dominant/Bold	None	Absent	Absolute
Directional Markers	Central/Standard	Subordinate	Absent	High

Discursive Practice: The Institutional Logic of Standardization

At the level of discursive practice, the analysis interrogates the production processes of the Punjab Horticulture Authority (PHA). The visual monotony of the signage implies a centralized design mandate, where local context is sacrificed for administrative streamlining. These signs are produced within an institutional echo chamber, where the primary bureaucratic priority is the projection of a coherent, unified image of the state. This institutional discourse acts as a filter; only those forms of language consistent with national ideological objectives are permitted. By establishing a "discursive enclosure," the PHA effectively excludes regional languages from the municipal public sphere. Consequently, the signage reflects not the linguistic reality of the city's inhabitants, but rather the administrative gaze of state authority.

Social Practice: Symbolic Power and Hegemony

The final layer of analysis, the social practice, employs Bourdieu's (1991) theory of symbolic power to interpret these findings. The accumulation of linguistic capital is clearly reflected in the dominance of Urdu in Gujranwala. The state dictates what is deemed worthy of public visibility through the systemic exclusion of regional scripts, thereby establishing a condition of "hegemonic normalcy." In this environment, the public is socialized to accept that Urdu is the exclusive language of power, prestige, and governance. For the local Punjabi speaker, the absence of their script on municipal signage constitutes a form of symbolic violence, relegating their mother tongue to the domestic realm and implying its unsuitability for the public or state arena. In this manner, the linguistic landscape functions as a pedagogical instrument that fosters a specific national consciousness—one that demands the subordination of local linguistic resources to preserve the perceived integrity of the post-colonial nation-state (see Table 2).

Table 2: Synthesis of Findings

CDA Dimension	Key Analytical Finding	Theoretical Core
Textual (What)	Semiotic erasure of regional scripts; vertical hierarchy of Urdu.	Landry & Bourhis (1997)
Discursive (How)	Institutional standardization via PHA design mandates.	Fairclough (1995)



Social (Why)	Institutionalization of state-sanctioned symbolic power.	Bourdieu (1991)
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Critical Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the linguistic environment of Gujranwala serves as a model of administrative centralization, marking a significant departure from the pluralistic possibilities of urban centers in Punjab. In contrast to areas characterized by linguistic hybridity—driven by code-switching or multilingual displays—the municipal authorities of Gujranwala utilize signage as a conscious process of territorial branding. The empirical evidence indicates that the disconnect between local linguistic identity and state-authorized discourse is not a natural or accidental phenomenon, but rather a planned and highly crafted effect of top-down administrative policy. This analysis aligns with the work of Rahman (2018), who, in his exploration of language policies in Pakistan, emphasized the role of state-driven agendas that have historically prioritized Urdu for national integration at the expense of regional language preservation. Similarly, the results confirm the claims by Shohamy (2006) and Shohamy and Gorter (2009) that public signage functions as a *de facto* language policy, serving as an influential mechanism for imposing hidden agendas of state control. Moreover, the systematic marginalization of regional scripts witnessed in this study reflects the findings of Al-Jarf (2026), who highlighted a movement toward national linguistic homogeneity in the industrial urban centers of Punjab. Conversely, these findings contradict the conclusions of Bagna et al. (2020), who argued that globalized urban environments are becoming increasingly open to linguistic diversity due to the pressures of immigration and international commerce. Although their study suggests that modern cities are becoming more inclusive, the municipal installations of Gujranwala demonstrate the opposite; they exhibit a strict opposition to inclusiveness in favor of traditional, state-centric nationalism. This inconsistency highlights the sociolinguistic theory of globalization proposed by Blommaert (2013), which suggests that the extent of multilingualism in a landscape is directly proportional to the flexibility of the local administrative authority. Hence, this study demonstrates that municipal signage in Gujranwala serves as a potent indicator of the state's success in implementing national linguistic homogeneity. By establishing Urdu as the sole means of municipal communication, the authorities actively marginalize regional linguistic resources. This marginalization confirms Bourdieu's thesis on the symbolic power of language: the state does not merely communicate information through signs; it determines the limits of permissible discourse in society. Ultimately, this study asserts that the linguistic environment of Gujranwala is not a reflection of the natural linguistic behavior of the community, but a 'visual monument' to the administrative imposition of state-sanctioned hegemony.

Conclusion, Implications, Limitations and Future Recommendations

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the linguistic situation in Gujranwala, revealing that municipal signage acts as a potent instrument of state-sanctioned linguistic homogenization. By applying the three-dimensional model proposed by Fairclough (1995), this research demonstrates that the visual marginalization of regional scripts is not an incidental byproduct of administrative control, but rather a discursive policy that seeks to strengthen national unity by regulating urban branding through the exclusive use of Urdu. Textual interpretation reveals a strict semiotic order in which Urdu functions as the absolute authority, effectively depriving regional languages of their right to



visibility in the social dimension. The discursive practice analysis highlights that this dominance is manufactured within the bureaucratic confines of the Punjab Horticulture Authority (PHA), where standardized institutional protocols prioritize national uniformity over local linguistic authenticity. Finally, by integrating Bourdieu's (1991) theory of symbolic power, this study concludes that the absence of regional scripts functions as a mechanism of symbolic violence, systematically devaluing the cultural capital of the local population and conditioning citizens to accept Urdu as the sole legitimate medium of civic engagement. These findings contribute to the broader field of sociolinguistics by challenging the assumption that all urban centers in a globalizing world inevitably move toward greater linguistic diversity. Instead, this study provides empirical evidence that in industrialized cities such as Gujranwala, administrative authorities leverage linguistic landscapes to resist such pressures, opting instead to reinforce traditional state ideologies. Finally, the present study underscores the necessity of recognizing public signage as a site of discursive struggle. It implies that language policy in Pakistan should not be viewed merely as a legislative issue, but as an ecological one, where the "silence" of regional languages in public spaces has far-reaching consequences for identity formation and social integration.

Implications of the Study

This study carries profound implications for linguistic policy and urban planning in Pakistan. Theoretically, it extends Fairclough's (1995) model by demonstrating its utility in analyzing the specific socio-political topography of post-colonial industrial cities, where state discourse and local linguistic realities often exist in a state of tension. Practically, the study identifies the phenomenon of "semiotic erasure" in Gujranwala, suggesting that existing municipal signage policies—though designed to project national unity—can act as an alienating force that undermines the cultural capital of the local populace. These results suggest that administrative authorities such as the PHA ought to reevaluate their design mandates to incorporate more accommodative frameworks that reflect the multilingual nature of the Punjabi-speaking community. In doing so, the state could foster more inclusive interaction between civic institutions and the public, transforming public spaces from sites of symbolic exclusion into mirrors of societal diversity.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study offers a detailed CDA-based investigation, certain limitations must be acknowledged to ensure the transparency and integrity of the findings. While the research presents a critical dissection of institutional signage, it is framed as a diagnostic inquiry into administrative discourse rather than an extensive provincial survey. By explicitly recognizing these methodological boundaries, the study avoids adopting an adversarial stance on governance; rather, the findings serve as a point of departure for comparative sociolinguistic analysis. The scope is limited to the industrial urban center of Gujranwala, and results may not be entirely applicable to other regions where language dynamics and local administrative interests differ. Furthermore, the analysis is confined to municipal signs placed by the state; while these are highly symbolic, they represent only one layer of a multifaceted linguistic landscape, excluding informal or commercial signage that might offer a more polyvocal image of the city. Lastly, as a qualitative CDA study, the interpretative nature of the analysis necessitates acknowledging the researcher's subjective role in deconstructing semiotic choices. To mitigate this, the research maintains strict adherence to Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework, yet it remains a case-based study intended as a diagnostic snapshot rather than a comprehensive provincial survey.

Recommendations and Future Directions

Based on the analysis, it is recommended that provincial and municipal authorities adopt a decentralized strategy for public signage, incorporating regional languages alongside Urdu and English. Such a policy shift would not only strengthen the symbolic capital of regional vernaculars but would also demonstrate a concrete commitment to linguistic human rights and cultural preservation. Furthermore, urban planners



should be sensitized to the socio-political impact of their design decisions, ensuring that municipal signage reflects the realities of local inhabitants rather than a monolithic national identity. Regarding future research, it is recommended that scholars conduct longitudinal ethnographic studies to capture the perspectives of citizens regarding the linguistic landscape. These voices would provide a more granular understanding of how top-down language policies influence local identity formation, community self-efficacy, and regional social cohesion.

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