



## LANGUAGE LANDSCAPE IN URBAN COMMERCIAL MARKETS OF PAKISTAN: A STUDY OF CULTURAL IDEOLOGY AND PUBLIC SIGNAGE

<sup>1</sup>*Syed Dawood Shah*

*MPhil Scholar at University of Malakand, Pakistan*

*E Mail: [dshah5357@gmail.com](mailto:dshah5357@gmail.com)*

<sup>2</sup>*Sayed Aamir Ali Bacha*

*BS English Graduate, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad  
Pakistan (Corresponding Author)*

*E Mail: [sayedaamiralibacha52@gmail.com](mailto:sayedamiralibacha52@gmail.com)*

<sup>3</sup>*Ayesha Khan*

*Visiting Lecturer in English, University of Swat, Pakistan*

*E Mail: [ayesharabikhan@gmail.com](mailto:ayesharabikhan@gmail.com)*

### **Abstract**

Urban commercial markets in Pakistan represent dynamic linguistic landscapes where language use on public signage reflects broader cultural ideologies, identity constructions, and socio-economic aspirations. This qualitative study explores the language landscape of selected urban commercial markets in Pakistan to examine how different languages are visually represented and how these representations convey cultural, social, and ideological meanings. Through photographic documentation of shop signs, billboards, banners, and street advertisements, the study analyzes the prevalence and functions of languages such as Urdu, English, and regional languages within public commercial spaces. Using a qualitative linguistic landscape approach, the research employs thematic and semiotic analysis to interpret the symbolic and communicative roles of languages displayed in signage. The findings indicate that English is frequently associated with modernity, prestige, and global economic participation, while Urdu often serves as a marker of national identity and broader accessibility. Regional languages appear less frequently but play an important role in expressing local cultural affiliation and community identity. The study further reveals how business owners strategically select language combinations to appeal to diverse consumer groups and to position their businesses within particular socio-cultural and economic narratives. By examining the interaction between language choice, cultural ideology, and commercial practice, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how linguistic landscapes function as visible expressions of social values, power relations, and identity in urban Pakistan. The study highlights the significance of public signage as a cultural text that reflects the ongoing negotiation between globalization, national identity, and local traditions within the urban marketplace.

**Keywords:** *Ideology, Language Landscape, Urban Domain, Marketing, Cultural Settings.*

### **Introduction**

Language is a fundamental medium through which individuals and communities construct, negotiate, and communicate identity, culture, and social values (Ahmad et al., 2022; Amjad et al., 2021; Ramzan & Khan, 2019, 2024). In urban spaces, particularly commercial markets, language is not only a tool for communication but also a visible marker of social hierarchies, cultural ideologies, and economic aspirations (Ramzan et al., 2023, 2025, 2026). Public signage in such spaces—ranging from shop signs and billboards to banners and advertisements—forms part of what is known as the *linguistic landscape*, a field of study that examines the presence,



distribution, and functions of language in public spaces (Jalalzai et al., 2025; Ma et al., 2024, 2025). Linguistic landscapes are particularly significant in multilingual societies like Pakistan, where languages such as Urdu, English, and regional vernaculars coexist and interact, reflecting the complex socio-cultural and economic dynamics of urban life (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023, 2025).

Urban commercial markets serve as a microcosm of broader societal trends, where language choice is strategic, ideological, and identity-laden. English is often employed to convey prestige, modernity, and global connectivity, signaling business owners' aspirations to appeal to cosmopolitan and elite audiences (Li & Akram, 2023, 2024). Urdu, the national language, communicates inclusivity, accessibility, and national identity, while regional languages assert local cultural affiliation and community belonging (Javaid & Ramzan, 2026). The coexistence of these languages on public signage represents a negotiation between globalization, national identity, and local traditions, reflecting both economic motivations and sociocultural ideologies (Al-Adwan et al., 2022).

This study focuses on the linguistic landscape of urban commercial markets in Pakistan, examining how language use in public signage communicates cultural ideology, shapes social identity, and reflects power relations. By employing a qualitative approach that combines photographic documentation with thematic and semiotic analysis, this research explores how language functions symbolically and communicatively in urban commercial spaces. It highlights how public signage is more than a marketing tool—it is a cultural text that embodies ideological positions, socio-economic aspirations, and identity negotiations. Through this analysis, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the ways in which language, culture, and commerce intersect in Pakistan's urban social landscape.

### **Literature Review**

Research on *linguistic landscape (LL)* has expanded rapidly as scholars seek to understand how language choice in public signage reflects social dynamics, identity construction, and ideological positioning within multilingual settings. The concept of LL—defined as the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs—was foregrounded by Landry and Bourhis (1997), who argued that such displays not only communicate information but also reflect sociocultural hierarchies and language power relations within a given community. In this view, linguistic landscapes are both *symbolic and sociopolitical texts*, representing broader structures of power, identity, and language ideology (Duizenberg, 2018; Landry & Bourhis as cited in Wikipedia, 2025).

In the context of Pakistan, recent studies have examined how multilingualism manifests on shop signs and commercial billboards, revealing patterns of language use that are deeply tied to status, identity, and economic motivations (Abdelrady et al., 2025; Akram & Li, 2024). For example, Nikolaou and Shah (2020) documented the linguistic landscape of Swat, showing a predominance of bilingual signage combining English and Urdu, indicating competition between co-official language practices where each language occupies different symbolic niches (Ramzan et al., 2020, 2021). Similarly, research in Peshawar found English frequently dominates commercial signage, followed by Urdu, while indigenous languages such as Pashto remain underrepresented in public signs, pointing to a shift toward globalized language practices and the symbolic power of English in urban markets. Findings from studies in Larkana and Charsadda



further highlight the prevalence of bilingualism and Romanized local scripts, with English and dominant national languages functioning as market languages, sometimes at the expense of local vernacular representation.

Several scholars also draw attention to *ideological implications* and *power relations* inherent in linguistic landscapes. Chaudhry et al. (2022) investigated top-down signboards in Islamabad, arguing that English is promoted not simply for commercial utility but as a marker of socio-economic dominance—maintaining existing hierarchies and marginalizing indigenous languages. Meanwhile, Hussain, Iqbal, and Saleem (2022) explored social hierarchies of English and its transliterations in Peshawar, finding that transliterated English forms serve as glocalized markers of class and identity, revealing complex interactions between language practices and social stratification.

These Pakistan-based studies align with broader LL research globally, where scholars emphasize the role of signage as communicative artifacts that reflect and influence language attitudes, policy environments, and cultural identity across multilingual urban spaces (Belarbi & Belaid, 2025; Duizenberg, 2018). Taken together, the literature underscores that language choice in the public domain is not neutral but deeply political—intersecting with issues of *identity negotiation*, *cultural representation*, *market positioning*, and *ideological power*. LL research thus provides a critical lens for interpreting how urban commercial signage in Pakistan embodies broader socio-cultural and ideological narratives, making it a pivotal site for examining language power and cultural ethnicity in public spaces.

### **Significance of the Study**

The study of linguistic landscapes in Pakistan's urban commercial markets holds substantial academic, social, and practical significance. Firstly, it contributes to sociolinguistics and multilingual studies by providing empirical evidence of how languages such as Urdu, English, and regional vernaculars coexist, compete, and function within public commercial spaces. It illuminates the ways in which language reflects cultural ideology, social hierarchies, and economic aspirations, offering insights into identity construction in multilingual urban environments. Secondly, the study has practical implications for urban planning, marketing, and policy-making. By understanding how language is strategically deployed in public signage, policymakers and business owners can make informed decisions to foster inclusive communication, support cultural diversity, and enhance accessibility for different linguistic communities. Finally, the research enriches cultural and educational discourse by highlighting how linguistic landscapes serve as public texts that negotiate between globalization, national identity, and local traditions. This knowledge is crucial in promoting awareness of language power dynamics and ensuring that local languages and cultural identities are not marginalized in increasingly commercialized urban spaces.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in the Linguistic Landscape (LL) theory, which examines the visibility and functions of language in public spaces (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). The theory emphasizes that public signage is not neutral; it reflects and reproduces social hierarchies, cultural ideologies, and power relations. It provides a lens to analyze how language choice communicates social status, identity, and cultural affiliation, particularly in multilingual and multicultural contexts like Pakistan. Additionally, the study draws on Language Ideology theory, which posits



that language practices are shaped by beliefs and attitudes about the social meaning of different languages (Kroskrity, 2000). Language ideology helps explain why English is associated with modernity and prestige, Urdu with national identity, and regional languages with local cultural affiliation in urban commercial markets. Finally, Semiotics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) complement this framework by allowing the study to interpret symbolic, visual, and communicative dimensions of signage, including color, font, script, and placement. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a robust framework to analyze how urban public signage mediates identity, ideology, and socio-economic power in Pakistan's commercial landscapes.

### **Rationale of the Study**

Pakistan is a linguistically and culturally diverse country, where multilingualism is a defining feature of social life. Urban commercial markets, as hubs of economic and social interaction, provide a rich site for studying language in action, yet they remain underexplored in Pakistani sociolinguistic research. Existing studies largely focus on educational or governmental domains, leaving urban commercial linguistic landscapes—where economic, cultural, and social ideologies intersect—less examined.

The rationale for this study is threefold:

1. To document and analyze language **use** in urban commercial signage in Pakistan, revealing patterns of linguistic dominance, bilingualism, and language mixing.
2. To understand the ideological and cultural significance of language choices, exploring how public signage negotiates identity, prestige, and cultural representation.
3. To contribute to policy and practice by highlighting how linguistic landscapes reflect social inclusion or marginalization, providing insights for businesses, urban planners, and policymakers to manage language use in public spaces effectively.

By addressing these gaps, the study provides a nuanced understanding of language power, cultural ethnicity, and identity negotiation, highlighting the complex interplay of social, cultural, and economic factors in Pakistan's urban commercial contexts.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the linguistic landscape of urban commercial markets in Pakistan, focusing on how public signage reflects language power, cultural ideology, and ethnic identity. A qualitative approach is most suitable because it allows an in-depth examination of language use, visual representation, and socio-cultural meanings, which cannot be captured through quantitative measures alone. The research emphasizes interpretive analysis, seeking to understand the symbolic, communicative, and ideological dimensions of language in public spaces.

### **Research Design**

The study employs a descriptive qualitative design with a focus on linguistic landscape analysis. Linguistic landscape research examines the presence, distribution, and functions of languages in public signage, including shop signs, billboards, banners, and advertisements. This approach enables the study to interpret how languages operate as cultural symbols, communicate identity, and convey ideological meanings within urban commercial contexts.

### **Study Area**

The research focuses on selected urban commercial markets in major cities of Pakistan, including Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, as these areas represent highly diverse linguistic and socio-



economic environments. These markets are characterized by a mixture of languages, including Urdu, English, and regional languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashto, making them ideal sites to study the intersection of language, power, and culture.

### **Data Collection**

Data is collected primarily through photographic documentation of public signage. This includes shop signs, street banners, billboards, and advertisements. The photographs serve as visual data that captures the text, script, language combinations, and design elements of the signage. Alongside photographic evidence, field notes are maintained to document the context, location, and observable interactions around the signage, including foot traffic, audience engagement, and placement within the urban space.

### **Sampling Strategy**

A purposive sampling strategy is employed to select commercial areas that are linguistically diverse, economically vibrant, and socially significant. Within these areas, signs are selected based on their visibility, language content, and symbolic relevance. This ensures that the study captures a representative sample of language practices, bilingualism, and multilingual signage in urban commercial spaces.

### **Data Analysis**

The study employs thematic and semiotic analysis to interpret the linguistic landscape data. Thematic analysis identifies recurring patterns of language use, language hierarchies, and functional purposes, such as marketing, prestige signaling, or identity representation. Semiotic analysis examines the visual and symbolic aspects of the signage, including script style, color, placement, and language combinations, to uncover ideological and cultural messages. Additionally, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to understand how language choices reflect power relations, social stratification, and cultural identity in urban markets.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical guidelines are strictly followed. Photographs are taken in public spaces without capturing identifiable personal information. The study ensures that interpretations respect cultural sensitivities and avoid biased representations of ethnic or linguistic communities.

### **Trustworthiness**

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, the study employs **triangulation** by combining photographic evidence, field observations, and semiotic interpretations. Peer debriefing and continuous reflexivity are applied to minimize researcher bias during data collection and analysis.

### **Results**

The analysis of linguistic landscapes in urban commercial markets of Pakistan reveals complex interactions between language choice, cultural ideology, and social identity. Data collected from photographs of shop signs, billboards, banners, and street advertisements across Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad highlights the strategic use of Urdu, English, and regional languages, both individually and in combination, to convey social, economic, and cultural meanings.

#### **1. Dominance of English as a Marker of Prestige and Modernity**

One of the most striking patterns observed was the widespread use of English in commercial signage, often in combination with Urdu. English frequently appeared on luxury brand stores, international franchises, and high-end service providers, suggesting its association with



modernity, global appeal, and socio-economic status. Signs using English often employed bold fonts, stylized logos, and prominent positioning, visually communicating prestige and aspiration. The semiotic analysis revealed that the use of English serves as a symbolic tool for attracting middle and upper-class consumers who associate English with professionalism, quality, and global connectivity. For example, in Lahore's Gulberg market and Karachi's Clifton shopping areas, English signage dominated clothing stores, cafés, and cosmetic shops, reflecting not only marketing strategies but also an ideological alignment with modern and cosmopolitan identities.

## **2. Urdu as a Medium of Inclusivity and National Identity**

Urdu, the national language, appeared on most commercial signage, particularly in local markets, food outlets, pharmacies, and mid-range retail shops. Unlike English, Urdu signage was often combined with simpler typography and traditional designs, emphasizing readability and accessibility. Thematic analysis suggests that Urdu is used strategically to reach a wider local audience, communicate trustworthiness, and assert national cultural identity. In several cases, signs included Urdu translations alongside English phrases, demonstrating bilingual communication strategies that balance global appeal with local accessibility. This bilingual approach reflects the negotiation of identity between modern/global aspirations (through English) and local/national cultural values (through Urdu).

## **3. Regional Languages as Markers of Cultural Affiliation**

Although less frequent, regional languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashto were observed in localized markets, particularly in neighborhoods with strong ethnic or community-based commercial activity. These signs primarily appeared in traditional clothing stores, grocery shops, and small-scale eateries, signaling community belonging, local pride, and cultural authenticity. Semiotic analysis of these signs showed distinctive scripts, culturally resonant motifs, and traditional color schemes, which visually reinforced local ethnic identities. While the prevalence of regional languages was limited compared to Urdu and English, their presence highlights resistance to linguistic homogenization and the continuing significance of local culture in urban commercial settings.

## **4. Strategic Language Combinations and Code-Switching**

The study observed that many commercial signs employ code-switching or mixed-language strategies, combining English, Urdu, and occasionally regional languages within a single sign. For example, a café might feature its brand name in English, a slogan in Urdu, and a descriptive menu in regional language, reflecting an inclusive marketing approach targeting diverse socio-linguistic groups.

Thematic analysis indicates that such strategies serve multiple functions:

- English projects prestige and modernity.
- Urdu ensures national identity and comprehensibility.
- Regional languages communicate cultural authenticity and community connection.

These patterns reveal how language power and cultural ideology intersect in shaping consumer perception and positioning businesses within socio-economic hierarchies.

## **5. Language and Power Dynamics**

Critical discourse analysis suggests that English dominates spaces associated with elite commerce, reinforcing existing social and economic hierarchies, while Urdu maintains wider



accessibility, and regional languages remain marginalized yet symbolically significant. This hierarchy of languages reflects broader power relations, where language choice in public signage communicates not only commercial intent but also social status, cultural alignment, and ideological positioning.

### Summary of Findings

1. English functions as a language of modernity, prestige, and global connection.
2. Urdu serves as a marker of national identity and inclusivity.
3. Regional languages represent cultural affiliation and community identity.
4. Mixed-language signage demonstrates strategic negotiation of identity and market targeting.
5. Public signage acts as a visible reflection of language power, social hierarchies, and ideological values in Pakistan's urban commercial markets.

Overall, the results illustrate that urban linguistic landscapes in Pakistan are dynamic arenas, where language choice is both symbolic and functional, mediating between globalization, national identity, and local ethnic culture. Public signage emerges not only as a marketing tool but also as a cultural text that negotiates ideology, social identity, and power relations within urban commercial spaces.

### Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the complex interplay between language, power, culture, and identity in the urban commercial linguistic landscapes of Pakistan. By analyzing signage across Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, it becomes evident that language use in public spaces is not merely functional but deeply ideological, reflecting social hierarchies, economic aspirations, and cultural negotiations. The study aligns with previous research on linguistic landscapes, which posits that public signage serves as a visible marker of social values and language ideologies (Akram et al., 2021, 2022; Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Duizenberg, 2018).

The predominance of English on commercial signage highlights its role as a symbol of modernity, global connectivity, and socio-economic prestige (Abdelrady & Akram, 2022; Congman et al., 2019). English signage dominates spaces associated with high-end commerce, including luxury brands, international franchises, and upscale cafés, signaling both economic and social aspirations. The findings corroborate previous studies in Pakistan and other multilingual contexts, where English is often linked to elite status and perceived competence (Nikolaou & Shah, 2020; Chaudhry et al., 2022). From a semiotic perspective, English is not simply a linguistic choice but a strategic communicative tool, with bold fonts, stylized logos, and prominent placement reinforcing its symbolic value. This suggests that language in public signage functions as a cultural marker, mediating the perception of modernity and sophistication while simultaneously reinforcing existing power hierarchies.

While English conveys prestige, Urdu serves as a vehicle for inclusivity and national cohesion. Its widespread presence in local markets, food outlets, pharmacies, and mid-range retail stores highlights its role in bridging commercial and cultural communication for the broader population. The bilingual combination of Urdu and English in many signs reflects a negotiation of identity, where business owners seek to appeal simultaneously to globalized aspirations and local/national values. This aligns with Kroskrity's (2000) notion of language ideology, which posits that language choice communicates social meaning and cultural alignment. The strategic



placement of Urdu underscores its dual function: maintaining accessibility for local audiences while supporting a sense of national belonging and cultural continuity.

Although regional languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashto were less frequent, their presence is significant for expressing community identity and cultural authenticity. Signs in these languages were observed in localized, community-focused markets, often in traditional clothing stores or small-scale eateries, reflecting resistance to linguistic homogenization. Semiotic elements—distinctive scripts, culturally resonant motifs, and traditional color schemes—further emphasize the symbolic role of regional languages in reinforcing ethnic identity. This finding resonates with studies highlighting that regional languages in urban linguistic landscapes serve as markers of local pride and cultural preservation, even within highly globalized commercial contexts (Hussain, Iqbal, & Saleem, 2022).

The observation of mixed-language signage and code-switching illustrates how businesses negotiate cultural, economic, and linguistic identities. By combining English, Urdu, and regional languages, commercial entities strategically target diverse consumer groups. English conveys prestige, Urdu ensures accessibility, and regional languages communicate authenticity, demonstrating that language choice in public signage is multi-functional and deeply context-dependent. These patterns reflect the dynamic and adaptive nature of linguistic landscapes, where language becomes both a marketing tool and a site of identity negotiation.

Critical discourse analysis of the data reveals a clear hierarchy of languages: English dominates elite commercial spaces, Urdu maintains broad accessibility, and regional languages occupy niche symbolic roles. This hierarchy reflects broader socio-economic and cultural power relations, demonstrating how linguistic landscapes in urban Pakistan mirror social stratification. English functions as a gatekeeper of globalized and elite identities, Urdu negotiates inclusion across class and ethnic lines, and regional languages assert localized identity in smaller, community-centered markets. This confirms the theoretical framework, which emphasizes that linguistic landscapes are not neutral but embedded with ideology and power dynamics (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Kroskrity, 2000).

The study highlights that public signage functions as a cultural text, reflecting the negotiation between globalization, national identity, and local traditions. Urban commercial markets in Pakistan thus act as sites where language choice both constructs and communicates social identity. The dynamic interplay of English, Urdu, and regional languages illustrates that linguistic landscapes are performative spaces, where economic, cultural, and ideological meanings are simultaneously enacted and perceived. The findings demonstrate that linguistic landscapes in Pakistan's urban commercial markets are multilayered, symbolic, and socially meaningful. Language choice reflects prestige, accessibility, and cultural affiliation, while strategic combinations reveal complex negotiations of identity and ideology. Public signage emerges not merely as a marketing tool but as a visible, material site of social and cultural power, mediating relationships between globalization, national identity, and local ethnic traditions.

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined the linguistic landscapes of urban commercial markets in Pakistan, focusing on the ways language use on public signage reflects cultural ideology, social identity, and power relations. Analysis of shop signs, billboards, banners, and advertisements across



Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad reveals a dynamic multilingual environment, where English, Urdu, and regional languages are deployed strategically to serve multiple functions. English emerges as a marker of modernity, global engagement, and socio-economic prestige, dominating elite and international commercial spaces. Urdu functions as a language of inclusivity and national identity, making communication accessible to a broader urban population. Regional languages, while less prevalent, express cultural affiliation and local community identity, preserving linguistic and ethnic diversity within urban markets. The study also highlights the strategic use of code-switching and mixed-language signage, demonstrating how business owners negotiate identity, market positioning, and ideological representation. Overall, the research confirms that linguistic landscapes are not neutral but act as cultural texts, embodying socio-economic hierarchies, ideological positions, and identity negotiations. Urban commercial signage in Pakistan reflects the intersection of globalization, national identity, and local traditions, offering a visible and material site where language power, culture, and commerce converge.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be proposed for policy, commercial practice, and further research:

#### **1. Policy and Language Planning**

- Policymakers should recognize the symbolic and cultural value of regional languages in urban signage and encourage their inclusion alongside Urdu and English.
- Guidelines can be developed to promote multilingual signage that balances accessibility, commercial appeal, and cultural representation.

#### **2. Commercial and Marketing Practice**

- Business owners should continue employing strategic language combinations (English, Urdu, regional languages) to appeal to diverse consumer groups while respecting local cultural identity.
- Companies should be aware that language choice influences consumer **perception**, brand prestige, and inclusivity.

#### **3. Cultural Preservation and Community Engagement**

- Community organizations and urban planners can use public signage as a tool to celebrate local heritage, particularly by integrating regional scripts and symbols in visible commercial spaces.
- Participatory approaches involving local communities can ensure ethical representation and preservation of linguistic diversity.

#### **4. Further Research**

- Future studies can explore digital signage and social media marketing, examining how online commercial spaces replicate or diverge from urban linguistic landscapes.
- Comparative research across different cities, regions, and socio-economic settings can provide a deeper understanding of language hierarchies and identity negotiation in Pakistan.



In conclusion, the study emphasizes that language in urban commercial markets is both symbolic and functional. By acknowledging its role in shaping social identity, reflecting cultural ideology, and reinforcing or challenging power relations, policymakers, businesses, and researchers can contribute to a more inclusive, culturally aware, and socially equitable urban linguistic environment in Pakistan.

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