The Linguistic Landscape of Peshawar City: A Study of Language Use in Shops Signs and Billboards

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Abstract

This study investigates the linguistic landscape of Peshawar city, focusing on the commercial signage in urban public spaces. Given the prevalence of billboards and shop signs, the research examines the languages employed in these visual displays to understand their sociolinguistic implications. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. Data were collected through 200 digital photographs of shop signs across various urban areas, categorized by business type. The quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), employing percentage calculations and standard deviation. Additionally, descriptive statistics and narrative analysis were utilized to interpret the data. The findings reveal a multilingual landscape, with English predominating on billboards, followed by Urdu. Notably, Pashto, the indigenous language, is underrepresented in commercial signage, indicating a shift towards globalized linguistic practices. This study contributes to the understanding of how language use in public signage reflects and influences cultural identity and social dynamics in Peshawar.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape, Multilingualism, Commercial Signage, Sociolinguistics, Peshawar, Language Policy

Introduction

Language serves as a cornerstone of human interaction, permeating various facets of society, including politics, commerce, education, and cultural practices. It manifests in two primary forms: oral and written. While both are integral, the written form holds particular significance in the public domain due to its permanence and accessibility.

This phenomenon, where language appears in public spaces through signage, advertisements, and inscriptions, is termed the "Linguistic Landscape" (LL). LL encompasses all linguistic elements present in public spaces, reflecting the sociolinguistic dynamics of a region. In Peshawar, the capital city of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, the linguistic landscape is notably diverse. According to the 2023 census, Peshawar's population stands at approximately 4.76 million, with a literacy rate of 53.28%. The city exhibits a significant urban-rural literacy disparity, with urban areas reporting higher literacy rates compared to rural counterparts. The predominant languages spoken in Peshawar are Pashto and Hindko, with Pashto being the most widely spoken language. Urdu, while understood by many, is not the primary language of communication for the majority of the population. Despite the relatively low proficiency in Urdu among the populace, the linguistic landscape of Peshawar plays a crucial role in various sectors, including business, education, and tourism. The city's rich cultural heritage and historical significance attract a substantial number of tourists annually. Recent reports indicate that over 10 million tourists visited Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023, with a significant portion exploring Peshawar's historical landmarks. This influx of tourists underscores the importance of effective communication strategies in the city's linguistic landscape to cater to diverse linguistic backgrounds and enhance the overall visitor experience. This study aims to explore the linguistic landscape of Peshawar, focusing on the use of Pashto in public signage and its implications for cultural identity, communication, and tourism. By examining the interplay between language, space, and society, this research seeks to contribute to the understanding of how linguistic landscapes shape and reflect the socio-cultural dynamics of urban environments.

Literature Review

The study of Linguistic Landscape (LL) has emerged as a significant area of research within applied linguistics and sociolinguistics. LL refers to the visibility and salience of languages in public spaces, encompassing elements such as street signs, shop names, advertisements, and public notices. These linguistic elements serve not only as tools of communication but also as markers of cultural identity, social power, and political authority.

Landry and Bourhis (1997) were among the pioneers in defining LL, emphasizing its role in reflecting the linguistic diversity and language policies of a region. They argued that LL provides insights into the sociolinguistic landscape by highlighting which languages are given prominence in public spaces. Subsequent studies have expanded on this framework, examining how LL can reveal underlying social hierarchies, power relations, and cultural dynamics.

In the context of multilingual societies, LL serves as a site of negotiation between dominant and minority languages. Gorter (2013) highlighted the role of LL in promoting language vitality, noting that the presence of minority languages in public signage can contribute to their maintenance and revitalization. This is particularly

pertinent in regions where minority languages face the threat of extinction due to dominance by national or global languages.

The relationship between LL and tourism has also been a subject of scholarly interest. Shohamy and Gorter (2009) explored how LL can influence tourists' perceptions and experiences, suggesting that the linguistic landscape can either facilitate or hinder communication and cultural understanding. In regions with rich cultural heritage, such as Peshawar, the linguistic landscape plays a pivotal role in shaping tourists' experiences and their engagement with local culture.

In Pakistan, the linguistic landscape reflects the complex interplay of multiple languages, including Urdu, English, and various regional languages such as Pashto, Punjabi, and Sindhi. Rahman (2005) discussed the linguistic hierarchies in Pakistan, noting that English and Urdu occupy dominant positions, while regional languages often remain marginalized. However, recent initiatives have sought to promote the use of regional languages in public spaces, aiming to enhance cultural representation and inclusivity.

In Peshawar, the use of Pashto in public signage has gained attention as part of a broader movement to promote the mother tongue and assert cultural identity. Local campaigns have encouraged businesses and institutions to incorporate Pashto in their signage, reflecting a growing recognition of the language's cultural significance. This trend aligns with broader global movements advocating for linguistic diversity and the preservation of minority languages.

This literature review underscores the multifaceted role of LL in reflecting and shaping social, cultural, and political dynamics. It highlights the importance of examining LL as a means of understanding the complexities of language use in public spaces and its implications for identity, communication, and social cohesion.

Problem Statement

Peshawar, the capital city of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, is a multilingual urban centre where Pashto predominates as the most widely spoken language. Despite this, the linguistic landscape (LL) of the city exhibits a complex interplay of languages, with Urdu, English, and Hindko also prominently featured on public signage. Notably, Pashto, despite its widespread use among the local population, is underrepresented in the LL, particularly in commercial signage. This discrepancy raises concerns about the visibility and representation of Pashto in public spaces, which may have implications for cultural identity and social inclusion. Previous studies have extensively examined the LL in various Pakistani cities, focusing on languages such as Urdu and English. However, there is a paucity of research addressing the representation of Pashto in Peshawar's LL, especially concerning its role in reflecting the identity of the Pashto-speaking community. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the extent to which Pashto is represented in the city's LL and how this representation correlates with the community's linguistic identity.

Research Objectives

This study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify the languages displayed on shop signs and billboards in Peshawar city.
2. To determine the dominant language in the city's linguistic landscape.
3. To assess the degree to which the linguistic landscape reflects the identity of the Pashto-speaking community.

1.7 Research Questions

The study will address the following research questions:

1. Which languages are represented on the shop signs and billboards in Peshawar city?
2. Which language predominates in the linguistic landscape of Peshawar city?
3. To what extent does the linguistic landscape of Peshawar city mirror the identity of the Pashto-speaking community?

1.8 Delimitations of the Study

This research is confined to the examination of the linguistic landscape within the urban areas of Peshawar city. The study focuses exclusively on commercial signage, including shop signs and billboards, and does not extend to other forms of public signage such as road signs or governmental notices. Additionally, the research is limited to the analysis of languages displayed in these signs and does not delve into the content or context of the messages conveyed.

Significance of the Study

The linguistic landscape of a city serves as a tangible manifestation of its sociolinguistic dynamics and cultural identity. In multilingual societies like Pakistan, the representation of various languages in public signage can influence perceptions of social inclusion and cultural recognition. This study is significant as it provides an in-depth analysis of how the Pashto language is represented in Peshawar's linguistic landscape and explores the implications of this representation for the identity of the Pashto-speaking community. By focusing on the commercial signage sector, the research highlights the role of language in economic and social interactions within the city. The findings aim to inform policymakers and urban planners about the linguistic needs and preferences of the local population, potentially guiding decisions that promote linguistic diversity and cultural inclusivity in public spaces. Furthermore, this study contributes to the broader field of linguistic landscape research by adding to the understanding of language visibility and identity in South Asian urban contexts. It also offers insights into the interplay between language, commerce, and identity in a rapidly globalizing world, where local languages often face challenges in maintaining their presence in public domains. In conclusion, this research underscores the importance of examining the linguistic landscape as a means to understand and promote the cultural and linguistic identities of communities, particularly those whose languages are underrepresented in public spaces. Through its focus on Pashto

in Peshawar, the study aims to foster greater awareness and appreciation of linguistic diversity in the city's public life.

Research Design

A research design serves as a structured plan guiding the entire research process, encompassing data collection, analysis, and interpretation. For this study, a mixed-methods design was selected, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to enrich the understanding of the linguistic landscape. According to Cenoz and Gorter (2008) mixed-methods research allows for the collection and analysis of both numerical and textual data, facilitating a more nuanced interpretation of complex phenomena. This approach is particularly effective in exploring multifaceted issues, such as the interplay between language, identity, and public space.

Population and Sampling

The target population for this study comprises the commercial signage in urban areas of Peshawar. Given the impracticality of examining every sign in the city, a convenience sampling method was employed. Convenience sampling involves selecting samples based on their availability and proximity to the researcher, which, while not statistically representative, is often used in exploratory research for its practicality and efficiency. Data were collected from three major commercial hubs in Peshawar: Saddar Bazar, Hayatabad, and Qissa Khawani Bazar. These areas were chosen due to their high density of commercial activity and diverse linguistic representations. Photographs of shop signs and billboards were taken randomly within these locations to capture a broad spectrum of linguistic features.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved photographing 200 shop signs and billboards across the selected commercial areas. A smartphone camera was used to ensure portability and ease of access. The photographs were categorized based on the languages displayed and the type of business, including food outlets, grocery stores, clothing shops, and others. The signage was further classified into three categories: monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual, to assess the prevalence and prominence of Pashto relative to other languages.

Data Analysis Procedures

The collected data were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Quantitative analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 21.0, to calculate frequencies and percentages of language use across different signage categories. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize the data, providing insights into the linguistic composition of the signage. Qualitative analysis involved a narrative approach to examine the contextual and cultural significance of the linguistic choices observed. This method allowed for an in-depth understanding of how language functions as a marker of identity and social practice in the public domain.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, permission was sought from shop owners to photograph their signage, ensuring respect for their property and privacy. The purpose of the study was clearly communicated to all participants, and their consent was obtained. All collected data were anonymized and stored securely to maintain confidentiality. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, ensuring that the rights and dignity of all participants were upheld.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The data were collected through a detailed survey of 76 shop signs and billboards across Peshawar city, aiming to explore the linguistic landscape and its reflection of local language practices and cultural identity. The analysis focuses on the types of businesses, the languages used on signage, and the sociolinguistic implications of language choice, particularly concerning the Pashto-speaking community.

Table.1 Types of Sign Boards Written on the Shops and their Strength

Shops name	Frequency	Percentage
Builders	1	1.3
Cloths shop	12	15.8
Sanitary shops	7	9.2
Restaurants	5	6.6
Travels agency	8	10.5
Optics	2	2.6
Mobile shop	1	1.3
Meat Shop	3	3.9
Hospital	1	1.3
Motors Shop	4	5.3
Banking	1	1.3
Surgical Shop	1	1.3
Plastic pottery shops	2	2.6
General store	1	1.3
Jewelry shops	9	11.8
Shoes shops	4	5.3
Foam shop	1	1.3
Sports Shops	1	1.3
Bakery	1	1.3
Juice shops	3	3.9
Tea stires	1	1.3
Shopping mall	1	1.3
Photo Studio	1	1.3
Glass Shop	1	1.3
Weapon shop	1	1.3

W.B store	1	1.3
Medical Store	2	2.6
Total	76	100.0

Figure 1. Picture Evaluation of theTypes of Sign Boards Written on the Shops and their Strength
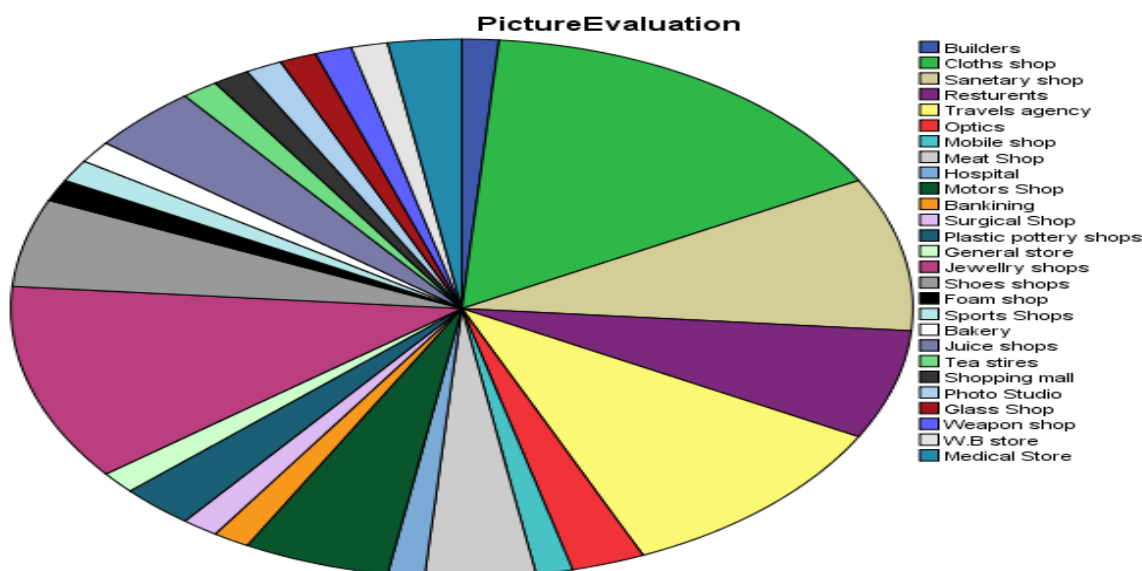
Table 2. Types of Languages written on the signboards of shops and their strength

Languages	Frequency	Percent
English	37	48.7
Urdu	12	15.8
English and Urdu	21	27.6
Pashto	2	2.6
Translated	4	5.3
Total	76	100.0

Table 2 presents the distribution of languages observed on shop signboards in Peshawar. The data indicate that English appears on the highest proportion of signage, accounting for 48.7% of the total. Urdu is used on 15.8% of the signs, while 27.6% feature a combination of English and Urdu. In contrast, Pashto is minimally represented, appearing on only 2.6% of the signs. Additionally, 5.3% of the signage includes translated content, predominantly into English.

Figure 2. Use of English Language as a Trend

In the Pakistani context, English is widely regarded as a marker of social prestige and educational attainment. It is often associated with the elite and educated classes, who use the language as a means of demonstrating their social status and academic background. Proficiency in English is generally viewed as a source of pride and a symbol of upward mobility within society. Although a large portion of the population is proficient in Urdu and various local languages, English maintains a prominent role in public and commercial domains due to its perceived prestige and aesthetic appeal. It is valued for its clarity, formality, and communicative effectiveness, and is officially recognized as a second language alongside Urdu. As an example, the signage of a uniform shop named *"Peshawar House"* illustrates this trend; although the majority of the local population can read Urdu or Pashto, the shop owner opted for English likely to enhance the brand's perceived sophistication and appeal. This practice reflects the broader societal pattern where English is commonly used in branding and marketing to target consumers who associate the language with modernity, professionalism, and higher socioeconomic status.

Figure 3. Use of English Language as a Trend

The image referenced depicts the storefront signage of *"MASUD Optical Co. & Watch Dealer."* Despite the fact that a significant portion of Pakistan's population lacks fluency in English, the language continues to dominate commercial signage due to its association with social prestige and branding appeal. In this case, the use of English in the shop's name likely serves a strategic marketing function aimed at projecting professionalism and attracting customers by aligning with modern branding trends. In the Pakistani sociolinguistic context, English is often perceived as a symbol of status and educational achievement. Members of the educated and elite classes frequently use English to convey their social standing and academic background, and fluency in the language is often regarded as a source of pride. While Urdu and regional languages are widely understood and spoken, English retains its status as both an official language and a language of aspiration. Its use in signage and literature is valued for qualities such as clarity, completeness, and aesthetic appeal. Consequently, the presence of English in commercial spaces reflects broader societal attitudes toward language, identity, and socioeconomic mobility.

Figure 4. Use of Urdu Language as a Trend

The image under discussion features a jewelry shop named *"Diamond Jeweler's."* In the Pakistani commercial landscape, many shop owners consider the linguistic preferences of their customers and frequently opt for Urdu on their signboards to enhance accessibility. In some cases, Roman Urdu is used to bridge literacy gaps, enabling broader public comprehension. Urdu, as the national language of Pakistan, functions as a unifying medium of communication across diverse linguistic communities. It is widely spoken and understood, and holds cultural and historical significance not only in Pakistan but also among Muslim communities in India. As a symbol of national identity and social cohesion, Urdu occupies a central place in everyday communication. Despite the presence of multiple regional and cultural languages, Urdu continues to serve as a common linguistic thread that connects people from various backgrounds, reinforcing its status as both a practical and symbolic language in public and commercial discourse.

Figure 5. Use of Urdu Language as a Trend

The image features signage from *"Modern Pipe Store,"* where the use of Roman Urdu reflects an effort to accommodate the linguistic preferences and literacy levels of a broader customer base. Roman Urdu, written using the Latin alphabet, is frequently employed in commercial contexts to enhance readability and accessibility. As the national language of Pakistan, Urdu serves not only as a widely spoken means of communication but also as a symbol of cultural identity and unity. It holds particular

significance among Muslim communities in both Pakistan and India, where it continues to function as a shared linguistic heritage. The widespread understanding of Urdu fosters a sense of pride among speakers and reinforces its role in everyday social and commercial interactions.

Figure 6. Mixture of English and Urdu language as a trend

The image illustrates the bilingual use of Urdu and English on commercial signage, a practice increasingly prevalent in Peshawar's linguistic landscape. This strategic blending of languages reflects the growing cultural influence of English within the city, particularly in appealing to the educated and socioeconomically privileged segments of society. English, often viewed as a symbol of modernity and status, dominates many signboards either in its original form or in transliteration. The incorporation of both English and Urdu has become socially acceptable and is generally well-received by consumers, as it ensures accessibility for a wider audience. While Urdu remains widely understood across the population, English adds a sense of prestige and commercial appeal. In contrast, Pashto—despite being the mother tongue for many residents is rarely used in written form on signage. This is partly due to lower literacy levels in Pashto script, even among fluent speakers, which limits its practical application in public signage. Consequently, the linguistic choices in Peshawar's signage reflect not only functional communication strategies but also deeper sociocultural dynamics, including language preference, identity, and perceived linguistic capital.

Figure 7. Mixture of English and Urdu language as a trend

The image labeled *"PESHAWAR HOUSE"* showcases bilingual signage, with the shop name presented in both English and Urdu. This dual-language approach reflects a

broader trend within Peshawar's linguistic landscape, where the simultaneous use of English and Urdu on signboards is increasingly common. Such linguistic choices are often made to attract a wider customer base, particularly the educated and socially privileged segments of society, for whom English carries connotations of modernity, sophistication, and higher socioeconomic status. The influence of English on Peshawar's urban culture is clearly visible, as a substantial proportion of commercial signage either uses English directly or incorporates transliterated forms of the language. The bilingual format offers practical advantages as well, catering to both Urdu- and English-literate consumers. While Urdu remains widely understood across Pakistan, English is often perceived as more marketable in the context of branding and advertisement. In contrast, Pashto—despite being the mother tongue of a significant portion of the population appears rarely on signage. This limited visibility is attributed to lower levels of Pashto literacy, even among native speakers, many of whom find it easier to read in Urdu or English. As a result, Pashto is largely absent from the city's commercial landscape, reinforcing the dominance of Urdu and English in public textual spaces.

Figure 8. Use of Local Language as Cultural Identity as a Trend

The shop featured in the image displays its name in Pashto, reflecting a conscious effort by the shop owner to align with the linguistic preferences of the local community. Recognizing that Pashto is the mother tongue for a significant portion of the population in Peshawar, some shopkeepers choose to use Pashto on their signboards to ensure cultural relevance and foster a stronger connection with their customers. The use of Pashto in signage, though less common overall, demonstrates responsiveness to local identity, language affinity, and the linguistic needs of the target audience.

Figure 9. Use of Local Language as Cultural Identity as a Trend

The shop name is presented in Pashto, reflecting the owner's awareness of the linguistic and cultural preferences of the local community. In an effort to connect more effectively with their customer base, some shopkeepers deliberately choose to display their signage in Pashto. This language choice is often guided by the recognition of Pashto as the native language of a significant portion of the population and reflects sensitivity to the community's linguistic identity and communicative needs.

Figure 10. Use of Transliteration as a Trend

The image features the signboard of *Peshawar Fish Centre*, where transliteration is employed to enhance clarity and readability. This practice has become increasingly common in commercial signage, often driven by both stylistic preferences and practical considerations. In some cases, suitable equivalents in Urdu or other local languages may be lacking, prompting shop owners to transliterate English terms instead. The use of transliteration is not only a functional choice but also reflects a broader trend in the linguistic landscape, where mixing scripts and languages is perceived as modern and culturally acceptable.

Findings

This study addressed the following three research questions:

1. Which languages appear on the shop signs and billboards in Peshawar city?
2. Which language dominates the linguistic landscape of Peshawar city?
3. To what extent does the linguistic landscape of Peshawar reflect the identity of the Pashto-speaking community?

Based on the analysis of the collected data, the following findings have emerged:

i. Language Distribution

The analysis revealed that 48.2% of the billboards were written in English, 15.8% in Urdu, and 26.6% displayed a mixture of two languages (typically English and Urdu). Only 2.6% of the billboards featured Pashto, while 5.3% were translated into English. These figures highlight the marginal representation of the Pashto language in public signage across the city.

ii. Dominance of English

English, including its transliterated forms, was found to be the most dominant language on billboards and shop signs in Peshawar. A significant proportion of signage employs English either in its original orthography or in transliteration. The preference

for English is largely attributed to its perceived aesthetic appeal, clarity, and communicative impact. English has become synonymous with modernity, professionalism, and global connectivity, which has contributed to its widespread use in public advertisements.

iii.   Use of Urdu

Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, is the second most prevalent language in the linguistic landscape of Peshawar. Many billboards are entirely in Urdu, reflecting its widespread understanding among the general population. Despite cultural diversity, Urdu functions as a lingua franca, enabling effective communication across ethnic groups. Its presence on signage ensures accessibility to a broader audience.

iv.   Sociocultural Influence of English

The findings suggest that English exerts significant sociocultural influence on the commercial landscape of Peshawar. Shopkeepers often feel compelled to use English due to its global prestige and market appeal. Whether consciously or unconsciously, business owners incorporate English to align with modern marketing trends and to appeal to a socially mobile, educated audience. This trend has resulted in the near-total dominance of English and transliterated English in the city's signage.

v.   Code-Switching and Bilingual Use

In many instances, English is used in conjunction with Urdu, reflecting code-switching practices. This linguistic blending targets the educated and socioeconomically privileged segments of the population. The integration of English terms into Urdu expressions serves as a marker of status and modernity.

vi.   Marginalization of Pashto

Despite Pashto being the mother tongue of the majority population in Peshawar, its representation in the public linguistic landscape is minimal. The study found that very few billboards are written in Pashto. Several factors may contribute to this underrepresentation. These include limited literacy in Pashto orthography, even among educated speakers, and the low prioritization of Pashto in formal education. Consequently, the linguistic landscape does not reflect the cultural and linguistic identity of the Pashtun community. The dominance of English and Urdu in public signage contributes to the marginalization of Pashto, thereby diluting the city's indigenous linguistic identity.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the linguistic landscape in Peshawar, the study concludes that English (both in its standard and transliterated forms) and Urdu are the two predominant languages used in public signage, including shop signs and billboards. Pashto and Hindko, while spoken by significant portions of the local population, are rarely represented in written form in commercial advertisements. Urdu functions as a *lingua franca* across diverse linguistic communities in Pakistan and is widely understood by the residents of Peshawar. Its inclusion in advertisements serves to accommodate the broader public and ensure effective communication. English, on

the other hand, is often employed as a marker of modernity, prestige, and social status. Its use is particularly prevalent in commercial signage to convey brand value and appeal to educated or affluent consumers. Despite Pashto being the mother tongue of the majority population in Peshawar, its presence in the linguistic landscape is minimal. This underrepresentation can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, Pashto is not commonly taught as a formal subject in schools, which contributes to widespread challenges in reading and writing the script—even among educated individuals. Secondly, the use of Pashto on billboards is not culturally valorized or perceived as commercially effective. As a result, the linguistic landscape does not reflect the cultural identity of the Pashtun community, even though language is a key component of cultural expression. In essence, while the spoken dominance of Pashto is evident in everyday interactions, its exclusion from public signage highlights a disconnection between spoken language use and written language representation in the city's visual environment. This indicates a broader socio-cultural trend where economic and aesthetic considerations override efforts to promote indigenous linguistic identity in public spaces.

Recommendations and Future Possibilities

This study suggests that the linguistic landscape (LL) can be effectively utilized to promote language learning, cultural awareness, and linguistic accuracy. In multilingual contexts like Peshawar, the strategic use of local languages on signage can raise awareness about ethnic identity and social inclusion. English, often seen as a symbol of prestige, can be made more visually appealing to engage students and enhance incidental learning. LL can also serve as a tool to correct common language errors and reinforce proper usage, particularly when integrated into educational activities. Incorporating perspectives from signboard creators can offer valuable insights into language choice, enriching students' understanding of language use in real-world contexts. The inclusion of multimodal elements such as colors, symbols, and typographic features broadens the scope for innovative research and teaching strategies. Comparative studies across cities or rural areas, involving students from different educational levels, can further expand LL research. Quantitative approaches, such as analyzing frequency of code-switching or grammatical patterns, can contribute to broader linguistic studies. Future research should also explore digital LL, including multimedia signage, to assess its influence on language perception. Engaging students in LL-based fieldwork can foster critical thinking and practical language skills. Moreover, LL can be explored as a means to support adult and student language proficiency through exposure, dialogue, and informal learning in the community.

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