

Digital Mapping of Nairobi's Linguistic Landscape: Interrogating how Commercial Signage Reflects Language Status and Communicative Appeal in Kenya's Urban Multilingual Context

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Received: 01/04/2026

Accepted: 09/05/2026

Published: 30/06/2026

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Citation:

Mudogo, B. A., & Muriungi, S. W. (2026). Digital Mapping of Nairobi's Linguistic Landscape: Interrogating how Commercial Signage Reflects Language Status and Communicative Appeal in Kenya's Urban Multilingual Context. *Studies in Linguistics and Language Education*, 2(1), 60–69.

ABSTRACT: *The linguistic landscape of a city consists of an urban visual space that reflects the languages, cultural multiplicity and linguistic representation of identities of societies, making them an interesting area for research. In this paper, we interrogate the display of multiple languages on commercial building names in Nairobi. Based on Spolsky's (2008) Sociolinguistic Theory of Public Signage, we examine the status and communication appeal of languages used based on their commercial function in the cityscape. From a mixed method perspective, purposive sampling is used to select a total of 162 signs, to assess their implications in the cityscape. The findings reveal a high incidence of English in the cityscape, though Kiswahili is the preferred code on bilingual and multilingual signs and tends to be used to represent the primary commercial. The results provide further insights into the impact of globalization, the place of indigenous languages and the spread of the English language in the urban cityscape.*

KEYWORDS: Cityscape, Commercial Function, Communication Appeal, Multilingualism, Virtual Mapping.

Studies in Linguistics and Language Education (SLLE)

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Published by the University of
Oran 2 Mohamed Ben
Ahmed, Algeria.

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Introduction

Commercial signage constitutes a multilingual public display whose language selection may reflect aspects of its location. The signage may be monolingual, bilingual or multilingual, primarily targeted at different types of readers. The signs perform a variety of communication functions in the cityscape including facilitating decision making and interaction. For instance, in cities, shop signage is designed to attract the attention of both pedestrians and passengers by ensuring high visibility and strategic placement that enhances its appeal to potential customers (Oktaviani 2019). In addition, commercial signage can help us understand the linguistic landscape (LL) of a place, which as described by Shohamy & Gorter (2008), represents the various ways in which visual multilingualism in the public space is expressed and disseminated through the languages use in the public signage. As observed by (Vandenbroucke, 2015), the use of language on public signage tends to be manifold in a multilingual context where there is no official policy guiding the choice of language use. In this paper, we focus on public commercial signs in Nairobi city based on existing language choices; English, Kiswahili and local languages. An interrogation of Nairobi's LL can shed some light on the status and communication appeal of different languages in urban cityscapes in Kenya. In addition, the paper also examines whether and how LL can be used as a methodological tool for understanding urban multilingualism.

Kenya employs a triglossic system of language where three languages are utilized concurrently (Nabea, 2009). These are; English, Kiswahili and indigenous languages. English, an ex-colonial language dominates the formal and international domains of interaction, while Kiswahili works as the lingua franca for speakers of different ethnic backgrounds. This is in addition to *Sheng*, a mixed code widely used by the Kenyan youth. In the cosmopolitan urban settings of Nairobi and other cities in Kenya, people interact through English, Swahili and the indigenous local languages in a complex and unstable manner, giving rise to code switching, random language mixing, and language shift (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997). This dynamic interaction not only mirrors the diverse linguistic landscape of discourses among urban dwellers but also forms the dynamic sociolinguistic identities and practices reflected in the public signage. We interrogate the communication appeal and status of cityscapes as used in Nairobi, exploring how lexical choices on public signage can be used to highlight unique features of appeal in urban speech communities.

Communication appeal and status of cityscapes

Studies into language use in public spaces have been conducted in many parts of the world since the LL notion was introduced in 1997. Some studies have looked at many different points of view, including language attitudes (Mukhwana, 2008), translation of public signage (Napu, 2024), cityscapes and technology (Purschke, 2023), ethnography (Maly & Blommaert 2019) and ethnolinguistic (Botterman, 2011). The linguistic landscape can also be examined in terms of the status and communication appeal of the languages involved based on their distribution in the cityscape. This is because the linguistic landscape offers a multilingual dimension where different languages are displayed, and understanding their status can be utilized to account for the communication appeal of the language coexistence in the public space.

The LL of cities has sparked the interests of researchers in many cities around the world including Petrah in Jordan, Pettah Sri Lanka, Limbe, Kamal Madura in Pakistan, Beijing China, and Kirkuk Iraq. In Kamal Pakistan, shop signs were noted to be highly multilingual with owners preferring other languages other than Madurese. Badran (2020) investigated shop signs in Palestine. A total of 600 signs were collected from the regions of Hebron, Bethlehem and Ramallah. Semi-structured interviews were also completed by business owners. The results

indicated that the linguistic choice was informed by economic, social and attitudinal factors. The study noted the use of English as a marker of prestige and an enhancer of self-image for the business. The high incidence of English bilingual signs in affluent neighborhoods compared to Arabic monolingual signage in low income areas also revealed deep-set social cultural dichotomies in the Palestinian society.

Siame & Chisenga, (2025) examined the linguistic construction of shop names in the multilingual context of Manyama Market in Kalumbila, Zambia, focusing on their role in trade and business within the informal economy. They identified the morphological processes involved in shop name formation, the factors influencing naming choices, and the communicative value of these names. The findings reveal that shop names are shaped by processes such as compounding, acronymization, loaning, and initialization, and are influenced by factors including anglicisation, religion, commemoration, family ties, and indigenization. The study concludes that naming practices reflect deliberate linguistic choices that convey layered meanings and influence customer perception and engagement.

In Kenya, although many official signs in the country are written in English and Kiswahili, the private signs display totally different patterns, where different language choices are utilized (Muaka, 2018).). Previous studies in relation to languages in public space in the country have examined place names, business names and church names as opposed to the entire breadth of public signs captured by the linguistic landscape approach. For instance, Atieno & Kinegeni (2019) looked into business names in Chogoria town based on the Frame Semantic Theory. They assessed the denotative meanings of the names selected by business owners and established that meanings are literal and separate from the context of use.

Others include who touched on church names; Nderitu (2016) assessed bilingual business names in Murang'a county while Muriungi & Mudogo (2021) examined the school scapes of Kenyan universities. Closely related to linguistic landscape, Mous & Barasa (2021) investigated the use of Sheng and English in the Kenyan public space. They analysed the progression of Sheng and English languages from the street into radio, music print media to final acceptance into advertising and television. Marjie (2022) used a morpheme by morpheme approach to investigate Kiswahili-English code switching on public signage. Using the Matrix language frame model, she analysed the syntax of written texts as used by Kiswahili-English bilinguals. The study however did not consider other elements of the public signage such as the graphics.

Theoretical Framework

To respond to the research questions effectively, the present study will apply Spolsky's (2008) Theory of Public Signage. The theory outlines several taxonomies as criteria for categorizing signs in the LL. To begin with signs may be categorized on the basis of functions such as advertisement, warning, commemorative plaque. Secondly, signage may be analysed according to the type of material from which it is made whether wood, stone, and metal and others. The third mode of classification offered is on the language used and the number of languages as in monolingual, bilingual or multilingual.

Spolsky and Cooper (1991: 81-84) also give three sign rules. These rules focus on the motivation for using some languages and not others on language signs. For analytical clarity, the sign rules are discussed as a single integrated framework in the subsequent analysis

Sign rule 1 (sign-writer's skill condition, necessary graded): 'Write signs in a language you know'

Sign rule 2 (presumed reader' condition-typical graded) 'Prefer to write signs in the language or languages that intended readers are assumed to read'.

Sign rule 3 (symbolic value condition' condition-typical graded) 'Prefer to write signs in your own language or in a language with which you wish to be identified'.

Spolsky & Cooper (1991: 81-84) stipulate three rules based on the motivation for using some languages as opposed others on language signs. The sign rules are also of different types.

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The theory regards the first rule as a graded condition where the sign writer is expected to have a level of proficiency in the language used on the sign. The second rule appreciates different levels of proficiency and language identification among the readers. The rule focuses on informing the reader or attaining economic advantage. The third rule is symbolic in nature and emphasizes political or social motivations that drive language loyalty. Previous views on this theory have also distinguished official top down and private bottom-up signage. The difference between the symbolic and informative functions of linguistic signs have also been the focus of other studies, however, due to its focus on private or commercial signage, the present study emphasized on the symbolic functions.

Methodology

The present study used a mixed method approach in investigating the linguistic landscape of Nairobi through the lens of commercial signs. Quantitative methods were employed in determining the frequency and percentage of languages prevalent in the public signage. This was crucial in assessing the linguistic patterns and their distribution on the sampled data of signs. Qualitative methods utilized content analysis to examine the names and texts used in the visible signs.

Target population for the current study consisted shop signs around the central business district of Nairobi. The city has 73 streets based on nomenclature research. The present study sampled five of the busiest streets in Nairobi featuring the upper central business district (CBD) and in the lower section of the CBD. These are Moi Avenue, Ronald Ngara Street, Kenyatta Avenue and Tom Mboya downtown Nairobi we sampled Kirinyaga road, Luthuli Avenue and sections of River Road. Although 200 photographic images were initially collected, a total of 162 signs were retained for analysis after excluding duplicates, unclear images, and signs that did not meet the selection criteria of textual legibility or commercial relevance. This refinement ensured data reliability and analytical consistency.

The study focused on textual data in form of the specific languages used on commercial or shop signs. To ensure that data gathered was relevant, purposive sampling was employed as proposed by Creswell (2012) The sampling procedure was limited to still images and did not take into account the moving signage such as writings on buses. The sample is also exclusive to only signage displayed publicly on the streets rather than signs inside shops or business premises. The sample was therefore predominantly bottom-up and its focus with private commercial signage being our focus.

Data collection involved navigating via the Google street view and taking photographs of shop signs and documenting them. A coding scheme was developed to indicate the languages on display in the shop signs. To ensure validity, the linguistic data was double checked to eliminate instances of duplication.

Data analysis classified signage according to the language patterns displayed as in monolingual, bilingual and multilingual. Monolingual signs were then categorized based on the individual language used and its frequency of occurrence. Multilingual and bilingual signs on the other hand were analysed for the language combinations occurring in the shop signs. Data analysis All this culminated into the interpretation of the analyzed result by the researcher.

Results

In this section, we present the results and discussion of the data on commercial public signage, with a focus on the priority of language used and word formation processes.

The status of languages used on commercial public signage

To make public signs on their premises, business men have to think of which languages to use. From the data collected, the trend established is shown on Table 1 Below

S/N	Languages	Groups	Number	Proportion
1.	English	Monolingual	79	49%
2.	Kiswahili	Monolingual	8	5%
3.	English and Kiswahili	multilingual	46	28%
4.	Official/Local language	multilingual	22	14%
5.	Local language/religious/others	multilingual	7	4%
6.	Totals		162	100

The findings revealed a high incidence of English language signage in the linguistic landscape of Nairobi. English only signs were 49 % of the sampled signage in the Nairobi Central business district.

The variation in language patterns across commercial signage can further be attributed to spatially different socioeconomic contexts within Nairobi's CBD. High visibility of English signage is more prevalent in formal and high-traffic commercial zones, while bilingual and multilingual signage tends to dominate informal trading streets characterized by heterogeneous customer demographics. Although this study does not include interview data, these patterns demonstrate that language choice is clearly aligned with consumer socio-economic profiles.

In Fig 1 below, the name of the business and its retail or economic activities are explained in English



Figure 1



Figure 2

The use of English in majority of commercial signage is owed to its prolonged dominance as the official language in Kenya until Kiswahili was constitutionally elevated as a national and official language under the 2010 Constitution of Kenya. Additionally, English is the language of commerce that dominates in business correspondence, meetings and other interactions. Sherman & Nekvapil (2018), notes that English is the lingua franca for international business. The language also forms part of the compulsory subjects in Kenya from grade 4 (upper primary school).

The language education policy in Kenya also recognizes English and recommends its use as the medium of instruction from upper primary level up to the tertiary levels. As observed by Kioko, & Muthwii, (2010). English remains an important language for all literate Kenyans as it is a tool for public interaction. This means that a majority of the population who are the target customers of these businesses understand the English language. In linguistic landscape studies, the symbolic communication appeal of a sign are derived from the social psychological context of use (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). This encompasses the value and status of the language in comparison with others as perceived by users. Akindele(2011), argues that the language chosen for signage reveals aspects of ethnic identity, dominance or status of the language as well as its economic significance. The preference for English may point to modernization where the language dominates in branding and advertising as noted in the signs. For instance, in Figures 1 and 2 above, the language is in English.

The monolingual dominance of English in Nairobi can further be explained by its other symbolic function of globalization. Gorter (2006) indicates that the prevalence of English in the linguistic landscape is a mark of globalization. The growing positive attitudes towards English ensure its position as a symbol of elitism and progress (Mudogo, 2018; This phenomenon is common in most urban linguistic landscape, further reinforcing the popularity of English.

Following closely is the combination of English and Kiswahili commercial signs with a 28% prevalence as bilingual signage. In Figures 3 and 4, the signs offer further explanation in Kiswahili and English.



Figure 3



Figure 4

In figure 3 the sign *Salama Chemist* blends the Kiswahili word *Salama* (safe) with the English **chemist** to appeal to the diverse customer base in the multilingual city. The aim is to foster a better comprehension for the audience by using familiar language to convey both safety and the nature of the business, appealing to both local and wider audiences. Similarly, in Figure 4, the Kiswahili phrase ***Kila Kitu (everything)*** is a persuasive way of implying variety in a wholesale and retail business. This multilingual serves as a way of attract both local customers and those familiar with English, maximizing reach and clarity. Marjie (2023) avers that the use of Kiswahili-English in advertising may also be a factor of code switching that occurs frequently in communications that are based on texts. She also notes that its use in instruction from the lower to upper primary levels as stipulated in the Kenyan language policy may point to its presence.

Kiswahili monolingual signs were however limited, with a 5 % prevalence inspite of its official status in Kenya. In Figures 5 and 6 below, the commercial sign is written in Kiswahili as *watu wa Hema* (the Tent guys or Tent people) and *duka la vitabu* (book shop) respectively presenting a simplified way of communicating their business to their target market.



Figure 5



Figure 6

In Figures 5 and 6 above, the signs are designed in Kiswahili, capturing the main business of the enterprise and their contacts. The presence of Kiswahili in monolingual and multilingual commercial signs points to its symbolic and informative functions in kenya. Kiswahili is a

lingua franca in amongst people from diverse ethnic origins in Kenya and East Africa. In addition to its communicative purposes, Kiswahili is symbolic of identity and integration of people from multiple cultures in Habwe (2009).

However, the low presence of Kiswahili-monolingual signage reveals the perception of the language of less prestigious and its lower status in business and formal signage despite it being a national language. This underrepresentation limits its visibility as a language of use in urban signage. In addition, globalization has further complicated the usage of Kiswahili due to competition from other internationally recognized languages such as French and English.

From the sample, business owners also combined a local language with either Kiswahili or English in labeling their premises as seen in figures 7, 8 and 9 below;



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

In Figures 7-9 above, the signs drawn from a busy street in downtown Nairobi acclimatize with the major economic activity of the street which is known for selling motor vehicle spare parts. In Figure 7, the word *Maich Mundu* (a person covered in soot) is drawn from the Dholuo language and is creatively combined with the concept of auto spares to resonate with Dholuo speakers as well as the broader urban population in need of motor repair services. In Figure 8, *Mwene Thayu* (owner of peace) is drawn from the Gikuyu language and is blended with the concept of trading to attract both Gikuyu-speaking clients and a wider urban customer base. In Figure 9, a restaurant combines *Kosewe* (a type of edible vegetable) from Dholuo paired with the concept of food to attract both Dholuo-speaking clients and a wider urban customer base. This may be attributed to social identity marking as well as the need to appeal to customers. The business owners may also prefer this combination due to the linguistically heterogeneous nature of the target market customers. This also indicates that the business owners prioritize understanding in the place of the customer.

The absence of local languages in monolingual signs and their rare occurrence in multilingual signs can be attributed to the fact that Nairobi constitutes an urban locale. Ndungo & Githinji (2025) posit that local languages are a popular mode of communication in rural areas. Despite their uptake in the mass media, indigenous languages majorly serve intra-ethnic purposes in Nairobi and beyond, hence explaining their low pervasiveness.

Conclusion

The paper reveals the dominance of English in Nairobi's commercial signage, reflecting its prestigious status as the language of global appeal. On the other hand, Kiswahili appears to a lesser extent in bilingual signs often as the primary brand identifier. However, its presence

remains marginalized as compared to English, despite its official language status. The indigenous languages remain marginalized in urban LL, highlighting long time challenges to their linguistic inclusion and representation in such public spaces. This situation reveals the complex relationship between language, identity, and economic activity in an increasingly globalized urban environment. It also provides important perspectives for future research on language policy, multilingualism, and the visibility of cultures in public spaces.

The results have implications for language policy implementation, particularly in examining the visibility of English, Kiswahili, and indigenous languages in urban commercial spaces. They also inform urban planning and branding strategies by demonstrating how linguistic choices contribute to economic visibility and contextual representation in multilingual cities

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