

Advertisement Signs in the Multilingual City Scope of Addis Ababa

Rukya Hassen (PhD)
Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics, Wollo University

Abstract

Linguistic landscape is the study of written language as posted in different displays of public space. The approach serves as a useful tool to study language use in multilingual urban settings where the linguistic landscape often is a major means to display different realities of the society. In this paper the researcher explores the linguistic landscape of such a multilingual urban setting, Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. Based on a corpus of advertisement posts that display written language, this paper explores the variety, functions, distribution and prominence of the country's various languages and foreign languages in the city scope of Addis Ababa. Advertisement displays from Arat Kilo to Merkato (Gojjam Berenda) were taken for analysis. The assumptions of language use and the functional domains of the languages displayed in the signs provide insights on the language use patterns influenced by the historical, political and cultural aspects of the country.

Keywords: linguistics, landscape, Addis Ababa, semiotic

1. Introduction

Scholars in the field such as Backhaus state that linguistic landscape research is a relatively young sociolinguistic sub-discipline (Backhaus, 2007:3). In sociolinguistics and applied linguistics there is a growing interest in linguistic landscape (Gorter, 2005:81).

According to Cenoz and Gorter (2006:67) the perspective of analyzing languages in context by focusing on the written information that is available on language signs in a specific area is known as linguistic landscape. It is defined as:

The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration. The linguistic landscape of a territory can serve two basic functions: an informational function and a symbolic function (Landry & Bourhis, 1997: 25).

The general definition of the linguistic landscape as written communication in the public space is used in this study, with the focus on language choice, pattern and use. Linguistic landscape refers to the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region (Landry and Bourhis, 1997:1; Cenoz and Gorter, 2006:67; Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:13). It may serve important informational and symbolic functions as a marker of the relative power and status of the linguistic communities inhabiting the territory (Landry & Bourhis, 1997:1).

The linguistic landscape is written discourse in the public space, and the study thence investigates linguistic choices and the motivations behind these choices (Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:128).

2. The Language Situation in Addis Ababa

Addis Ababa is one of the multilingual cities in the world. The ethnolinguistic make-up of Addis Ababa is complex. There are more than 75 ethnic groups in Ethiopia of which some languages are represented in the LL of Addis Ababa.

The linguistic landscape of the city shows representations of the dominant languages in the country. There are many place names in Addis Ababa that represent the different ethnic groups. Place names such as Gojjam Berenda (the Veranda of Gojjam), Wollo Sefer (Wollo Village), Somale Tera (Somali Area), Sidamo Tera, Gonder Berenda, and Wolega Tera represents examples of the different ethnic groups of the country. Place names such as Mexico, Ferensay, German, Talian Sefer, Engliz Embassy, Bulgaria, and Rwanda are examples of the different area names that adopt foreign country names after the Embassy of the countries in Addis Ababa.

The study area names Piasa and Merkato are names adopted from Italian language ever since Italia colonized Ethiopia.

Since some languages of the ethnic groups of the country are represented in Addis Ababa, various names of different languages are shown in the displays of the linguistic landscape of the city.

3. Research Questions

This paper focuses on the relationship between linguistic landscape and the sociolinguistic context of Addis Ababa.

- 3.1. Which languages are visible in the public sphere and thus constitute the linguistic landscape of Addis Ababa?

- 3.2. Are there any significant patterns of language use in the city scope?
- 3.3. What are the functions of the languages involved in the LL of the city?
- 3.4. How are the languages distribution and prominence in the display patterned?

4. Methodology

4.1. Signs

The signs taken for the analysis of this study are billboards, shop names, shop and product names, and advertisements. The displays of language visible to the public from Arat Kilo to Gojjam Berenda are included in this study. The approach of collecting data involved taking digital pictures of all texts we saw on the street. A total of 327 pictures were taken. Each picture was used as a unit of analysis.

1. Location

The particular location of a sign is worth exploring in Addis Ababa as the city contains major shopping streets. The corpus of this study includes a complete inventory of the linguistic landscape of two streets in Addis Ababa. The streets selected for this study were 'Arat Kilo_Piasa' which includes commercial and non-commercial signs, and 'Piasa – Gojjam Berenda' which mainly has commercial signs that is one of the central shopping streets of Merkato at the centre of the town.

2. Languages

The majority of the languages in the displays are English and Amharic. The other languages are Oromo, Arabic, and other languages.

3. Remarks

A main dichotomy in the study of linguistic landscapes has always been the distinction between bottom up and top down signs of language (Muth, 2008:130). According to Backhaus (2007:52), official signs are designed to legitimize the existing power relations and non-official signs make use of foreign languages in order to legitimize solidarity. In this paper, such a distinction will not be made.

4. Analysis

Variety of pictures were selected for the analysis. The selected signs were analyzed based on representation of the majority signs and based on variety of signage in terms of language and pattern. Both the streets are commercial streets. The criteria for selecting signs for analysis include the type of sign, the number of languages on the sign, the languages on the sign, first language on bilingual signs, size of the texts in the bi/multilingual signs, signs of the languages on bilingual signs, amount of information given in each of the languages, translation in bi/multilingual signs, script and orthography and type of font on bilingual signs.

The analysis of the signs was conducted in light of the following points as indicated in the research questions:

- The languages contained
- The patterns of language use in the city scope
- The functions of the languages used
- The prominence and distribution of the languages used

5. The Study of Linguistic Landscape

LL investigates the content of publicly visible signage (David. 2011:7). LL enables the researcher to take the perspective of sociolinguistics further and study the phenomena of variation, language contact and code mixing from a different angle (Muth, 2008:129). The linguistic landscape or parts of the linguistic landscape can have an influence on language use (Cenoz and Gorter, 2006:68).

The study of the linguistic landscape is particularly interesting in multilingual contexts (Cenoz and Gorter, 2006:68). The study of the linguistic landscape(s) of a geographically confined area proved to be a useful tool in analysing patterns of language use (Muth, 2008:143).

The study of LL shows how the marginalized languages and the prestigious languages share the public space. The LL is thus a powerful mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, and hence also of expressing and creating identities (Chrismi-Rinda, 2010: 9).

Different political regimes leave their mark on the LL (Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:20). The LL is a cultural scene, formed by agents who may or may not be authorised to do so, and who have different motivations and intentions (Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:26).

The dominance of a specific language in the LL indicates the power and status of a majority or strong minority group over other groups (Chrismi-Rinda, 2010:26). The symbolic function of the linguistic landscape lies in the choice of message, and more specifically the choice concerning language, on public signage (Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:28). The choice is deliberate.

All semiotic systems operate as systems of social positioning and power relationship both at the level of interpersonal relationships and at the level of struggle for hegemony amongst social groups in any society precisely because they are systems of choice and no choices are neutral in the social world (Scollon & Scollon, 2003: 7 in Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:28).

Shohamy (2006) discusses that the LL is a language policy mechanism:

(T)he presence (or absence) of language displays in the public space communicates a message, intentional or not, conscious or not, that affects, manipulates or imposes *de facto* language policy and practice. Thus, the presence (or absence) of specific language items, displayed in specific languages, in a specific manner, sends direct and indirect messages with regard to the centrality versus the marginality of certain languages in society. The display of language transmits symbolic messages as to the legitimacy, relevance, priority and standards of languages and the people and groups they represent (Shohamy, 2006: 110 in Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:29).

6. Addis Ababa Advertisement Signs

As a new field of research in linguistics, the study of linguistic landscapes (LL) is concerned with language as a medium of communication in its written form including all displays of written language such as shop signs, billboards, placards and other formal and informal displays of written language visible to us in publicly accessible places (Muth And Wolf, 2009:1; Gorter, 2005:81).

There are different traditions and values operating behind particular artistic representations of landscapes (Coupland, 2010:77). The visible languageing of towns and cities is a thoroughly contemporary global trend (Coupland, 2010:78). Sociolinguistic literatures have recognised that political and institutional influences shape linguistic landscapes (Coupland, 2010:80).

The observations presented in this article are part of a larger study on the linguistic landscape of Addis Ababa. "The city is a place of language contact, (...) the signs in public space are the most visible reminder of this" (Backhaus, 2007: 464).

The examples discussed in this article are part of a corpus of approximately 327 pictures compiled in 2011 that contains pictures of displays of written language taken from the predefined streets. From the signs shot for the purpose of this study, some of them that were selected based on the criteria listed above were taken into account and considered as units of analysis. Although we cannot claim it to be exhaustive, the result gives insight about the patterns, functions, prominence and distribution of the languages in the city scope culture of signage.

The fact that the sign is private or government has been identified to be significant factor for the functions, ideology and other roles the sign is meant to serve.

Private signs include commercial signs on storefronts and business institutions (e.g. retail stores and banks), commercial advertising and billboards, and advertising signs displayed in public transport and on private vehicles. Governmental signs refer to public signs used by national, regional, or municipal governments in the following domains: road signs, place names, street names, and inscriptions on government buildings, including ministries, hospitals, universities, town halls, schools, metro stations, and public parks (Landry & Bourhis, 1997: 26f in Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:34).

In this study only private signs were selected since the pattern of the government signs appear to be similar throughout which is confirmable to the language policy of the country. The comparison between the two in the LL of Addis Ababa could, however, be a potential future research area. The analysis of the data will be based on the following four considerations.

i. The languages contained

The data shows that Amharic is firmly deep-rooted in the linguistic landscape of the city. This is exemplified in table below. Furthermore it shows, that English is also used frequently, but as our examples will show, carried rather symbolic functions. Out of the 327 pictures taken between Arat Kilo and Gojjam Berenda, the following languages were prominent.

Language Used in the advertisements	Percentage
Amharic	54%
English	44%
Arabic	1%
Oromifa	0.5%
Other*	0.5%

* This group includes other multilingual signs with languages not frequently observed

ii. The patterns of language use in the city scope
Co-occurrence of Amharic-Arabic-English



Picture 1: Piasa in front of Kelifa building and Merkato, in front of Umer Semeter school

These signs are displayed in the area from Piasa to Gojjam Berenda. This is a hot commercial area. A large number of Muslims are found in this area. The prominence of the Arabic language plays the role of solidarity and identity.

In the first picture, the Amharic appears first. The characters of the Amharic text are Amharic but the names are not. Dubai is obviously not Amharic since it is the name of an Arab country. Restaurant is an English word. Both words are written in Amharic characters and appear first. The next text is Arabic. Both the name and the character is totally Arabic. In the third place comes the English text with the characters English and the words Arabic and English. The address is written in Amharic. In this signage both the primary appearance and the majority prominence of the language could implicate the priority of Amharic over the other languages indicated.

In the second picture, Amharic, English and Arabic appear in order with varying boldness accordingly. The extra information was provided in Amharic. Therefore, the prominence of the Amharic language is still high in this sign too.

Co-occurrence of Amharic-Oromo language



Picture 2: Merkato in front of Anwar mosque and Merkato, Gojjam Berenda respectively

Oromo and Amharic are prominent in these signage. First comes the Amharic with bold followed by the Oromo. The Oromo language is less in boldness and comes next to the Amharic. Just from the appearance, it can be said a high prestige is attached to the Amharic. Extra information is also provided in Amharic which adds to the diglossic situation of Amharic over the Oromo language as displayed in the signage.

Co-occurrence of English-Amharic



Arat Kilo, next to Jolly Bar, Arat Kilo, seba dereja, Arat Kilo, in front of Tourist Hotel, and Arat Kilo around Police Station respectively

Co-occurrence of Amharic -English



Arat Kilo, in front of police station



Ras Mekonen Dildiy
Amharic Only Signs



Arat Kilo, around police Station,
English Only



Piasa

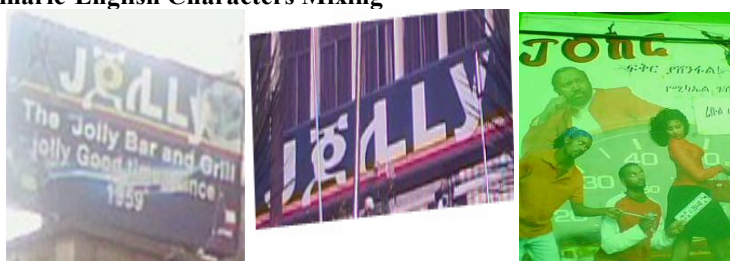
Arat Kilo, seba dereja Ras Mekonen dildiy
Amharic Characters English Signs



Arat Kilo, seba dereja, Piasa, Ras Mekonen Dildiy, Arat Kilo, next to the University



Oxford computer technology, common Course and the waiter
 Arat kilo, next to Birhanna Selam Printing press, and Piasa, in front of Electric House
Amharic-English Characters Mixing



Arat Kilo, next to the Post Office Piasa, Cinema Ethiopia



key social semiotic processes of indexicality and iconicity in language orthographies in the negotiation of residents' local, regional, and (trans)national identities (Curtin, 2007:1).

English Abbreviated



Arat Kilo, seba dereja; paisa, around cinema Empire; Arat Kilo, around Birhanna Selam

iii. The functions of the languages used

Different languages indexing different functions

Signs in multilingual cities public areas serve as a useful tool to find out more about the functions these different languages fulfil within specific contexts. In that respect, Addis Ababa is a multilingual urban centre where the study of public signage will certainly yield interesting results. The displayed languages play a symbolic role besides the informative. Examining such displays of language accessible to everyone give us an insight into function, status and spread of a certain language (Muth, 2008:121).

LL are ideologically based and serve important functions in the (re)presentation of identities (Curtin, 2007:201).

1. Identity

multilingual signage reveal hidden patterns that reveal different identities. Some of the multiple identities indexed by the signs are the following.

- **Local Identity**

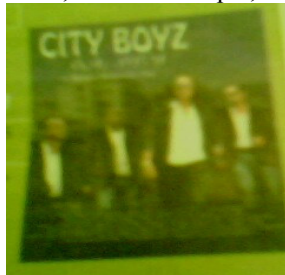


Arat kilo, next to Birhanna Selam Printing press

- **Modernity/Universality Identity**



Paisa, cinema Ethiopia, Arat Kilo at the front gate (the last picture)



Piasa, Cinema Ethiopia

- **Religious Identity**



Arabic is prominent in Merkato area. In the picture, Amharic, Arabic and English are contained. In the second picture, also Amharic, Arabic and English are included. In the first picture, the Amharic appears first and it appeared in bigger font. The Amharic is a combination of Arabic and Amharic. The first name 'nejashi' is Arabic and the second name 'asatami' which means publisher is in Amharic. The characters are Amharic. The Arabic is written second and it is written in smaller font. The Arabic is written in Arabic Characters with Arabic words. The first appearance and bigger font indicate that Amharic is given prestigious position in this signage. The translated version is presented in the Arabic text.

2. Power

- **Prestige**

English has a high prestige and its increasing presence in the visual scenery of the streets of Addis Ababa has become part of everyday life of the people. The growing use of English on signs is a result of a general inclination of the people to modernization (Backhaus, 2007:459).



English is pervasive in linguistic landscapes across the world (Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:47). Though English proficiency of the common people is generally low in Addis Ababa, it is a language widely used on signs throughout the city (Muth, 2008:144).



Ras Mekonen dildiy, Piasa, in front of Cinema Empire

The use of English in commercial signs does not seem to be intended to transmit factual information but is used for its connotational value (Cenoz and Gorter, 2006:70). Inferring from Piller (2001, 2003) Cenoz and Gorter (2006:70) pointed out the audience can recognise that the message is in English and this activates values such as international orientation, future orientation, success, sophistication or fun orientation.

• **Solidarity**

This analysis of the Linguistic Landscape of Addis Ababa has produced a number of interesting findings.



Piasa, around Atikilt Tera, Piasa, around electric house

The foreign languages used in these signage is Chinese and Arabic. These languages were displayed by Chinese contractors and Egypt Exhibition centre in Addis Ababa. For the purpose of solidarity, the languages has been displayed.

The symbolic function of the linguistic landscape relates to its capacity to contribute to a positive social identity of the group whose language is used by affirming the value and status of that language and leading the group to feel included in the society (Chrismi-Rinda. 2010:29).

iv. The prominence and distribution of the languages

It is also significant to analyze the space each language occupies on each sign. This shows the dominance of one code over another on multilingual displays of written language.



Ras Mekonen Dildiy, I stand for my mother, my daughter, my wife, my Arat Kolo University at the front gate sister human dignity and you let's unite to end violence decide now

When we try to summarise the order of dominance of the languages, we see that Amharic is by far the most prominent language in the linguistic landscape of Addis Ababa, followed by English as the second language and in the third place comes the other languages with a very limited and marginal presence.

7. Conclusion

The observation of signs in the respective streets of Addis Ababa led to interesting results. From the languages displayed in the public space, it is possible to identify the function, prestige, status and spread of languages in the multilingual settings of Addis Ababa. The distribution of minority languages on city scope signs can be taken as an indicator of the language situation in an urban area. LL also indicates the existing political and cultural representation and status of the national languages within multilingual societies. From the data collected Addis Ababa exhibit a multilingual situation where Amharic is the primary language of communication and a local lingua franca and English functions as modernity indicator in a wide range of contemporary usage and international lingua franca. It is widely used on formal and informal displays of written language. In the city scope, English has largely symbolic value. Primarily it conveys notions of universality, success, Western orientation and internationality.

Another important finding of this study is the spread of English in the signs analysed in this study. The importance and influence of English as a global language was revealed in the study. This was confirmed by previous researches on shop signs in other areas of the world.

This study shows that the linguistic landscape has both a communicative and a symbolic function. The status of English has improved and it is becoming used almost equally with the local lingua franca Amharic in the linguistic landscape of the city. It seems to have a sound future status to override the use of any local language as modernization is colloquial with it. National and cultural identity are also pursued as it manifest itself in the linguistic landscape. The use of Amharic institutes a local identity, Arabic an Islamic identity and English manifests a universal identity.

LL is used as a tool for legitimizing a national identity. Amharic still functions as a prime marker of national identity. Though the language policy of the country insists that all languages are given equal right to be used, Amharic still dominates the national languages. It seems Amharic will be able to uphold its exposed position in the linguistic landscape of the Ethiopian capital. Given the highly symbolic connotations English has up to now, it seem to replace any local language's position including Amharic in the near future. Taking the spread of English as a world language into account and considering the high number of living and working condition of the people, it will continue to hold its place as an integral part of the city's linguistic landscape.

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