

## THE LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF LANGUAGE USAGE IN PUBLIC SPACES

**Davronova Nigina Axmedjon qizi,**

English teacher at 2nd school in Yangiyul region 2nd year Master's degree student of University of Exact and Social Sciences

[D.Nigina12@mail.com](mailto:D.Nigina12@mail.com)

+998943241204

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**Annotation:** In this article, we examine the role of linguistic landscapes—language displayed in public spaces—in language teaching and fostering language awareness. Signage, as a pedagogical tool, can aid language learners in acquiring new languages and understanding issues related to multilingualism. Our focus is specifically on the multilingual education context of the Basque Country in Spain, where Basque, Spanish, and English are the primary languages of instruction. The analysis is based on data collected from various public spaces, including signage in a local covered market and on school walls, as well as insights gathered from primary school students and master's-level university students. The data also include learning tasks in which students investigated the signage around them. We conclude that the languages displayed in public spaces are a valuable resource for both language learning and teaching. They not only support language acquisition but also serve as a tool for raising awareness of linguistic diversity.

**Key words:** linguistic landscapes, language in public spaces, multilingualism, code-switching, sociolinguistics, public signage, language and identity, language policy, social interaction.

**Аннотация:** В этой статье мы рассматриваем роль лингвистических ландшафтов — языка, отображаемого в общественных местах — в преподавании языка и развитии языковой осведомленности. Вывески как педагогический инструмент могут помочь изучающим язык в освоении новых языков и понимании проблем, связанных с многоязычием. Мы уделяем особое внимание многоязычному образовательному контексту Страны Басков в Испании, где основными языками обучения являются баскский, испанский и английский. Анализ основан на данных, собранных из различных общественных мест, включая вывески на местном крытом рынке и на стенах школ, а также на информации, полученной от учеников начальной школы и студентов магистратуры. Данные также включают учебные задания, в которых ученики исследовали вывески вокруг них. Мы приходим к выводу, что языки, отображаемые в общественных местах, являются ценным ресурсом как для изучения языка, так и для его преподавания. Они не только способствуют освоению языка, но и служат инструментом для повышения осведомленности о языковом разнообразии.

**Ключевые слова:** языковые ландшафты, язык в общественных пространствах, многоязычие, переключение кодов, социолингвистика, общественные вывески, язык и идентичность, языковая политика, социальное взаимодействие.

The theoretical foundation of this study is based on the concept of linguistic landscape, which primarily focuses on analyzing the languages used in a particular

area. This concept is relatively recent, and like many emerging ideas, it lacks a fixed, universally accepted definition. The most widely cited definition, however, comes from Landry and Bourhis, who define linguistic landscape as “the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region” (Landry & Bourhis, 1997: 23). More specifically, studies in linguistic landscape are marked by several defining features:

(a) It is visual in nature, rather than auditory. This includes visible elements such as signboards and large print on product packaging but excludes auditory information, like subway announcements.

(b) It takes place in public spaces, not private ones. For instance, a sign in a store window qualifies, but a personal sign in a home, such as “God bless our mess”, does not.

(c) It is directed at a broad and unspecified audience. A sign in a shop that says “back after lunch” would be included, whereas a sign on a private home door would not.

(d) It involves passively acquired information. This includes things like newsstand headlines but not full articles in magazines.

(e) It contributes to shaping our sense of place and can influence how we perceive a given area (Long & Nakai, 2014: 229).

The first scholarly study in this field was conducted in the 1960s by Japanese geographer Masai Yasuo, who examined the multilingual signage in a district of Tokyo (Masai, 1972). Over the years, Masai’s research significantly influenced the direction of linguistic landscape studies, especially regarding the use of English in commercial signage as a symbol of modernity, internationalism, and prestige (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010: 14). Japan became a key focus for linguistic landscape research, and the first book on the topic, *Linguistic Landscapes: A Comparative Study of Urban Multilingualism in Tokyo* (Backhaus, 2007), was based on studies conducted there.

Linguistic landscape research is currently a rapidly growing field, with increasing interest in exploring multilingual relationships through visual space in various locations. As the field expands, new methodologies and best practices are being developed and shared at conferences focused on linguistic landscape studies. Major global cities, such as Jerusalem (Rosenbaum et al., 1977), Brussels (Wenzel, 1998), Montreal (Monnier, 1989), and Gent (Collins & Slembrouck, 2007), have

become central sources of research material. The diversity found in these cities, which attract people from different backgrounds due to their size and opportunities, is reflected in their linguistic landscapes. Technological advancements have played a significant role in the field's growth, making research more accessible and enabling the sharing of findings on a broader scale (Gorter, 2019).

The term "linguistic landscape" refers to the written languages that are visible in public spaces (Gorter, 2006). In recent decades, linguistic landscape studies have rapidly expanded globally, including in Spanish-speaking regions. Castillo Lluch and Sáez Rivera (2013) describe this field as "a new sociolinguistic discipline" in their introduction to a special issue on linguistic landscapes in the Hispanic world. Ma (2018) further emphasizes that the linguistic landscape has become a valuable tool in teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language (E/LE). The growing scholarly interest in this area is evident in the publication of recent edited volumes that explore the relationship between linguistic landscapes and language learning outside the classroom (Malinowski, Maxim, & Dubreil, 2020; Krompák, Fernández, & Meyer, 2021; Niedt & Seals, 2020). These works collectively underscore the pedagogical value of public signage in language acquisition and the study of languages.

In this contribution, we focus on our own research conducted within the multilingual context of Spain's Autonomous Community of the Basque Country. In this region, both Basque and Spanish are co-official languages, and both are widely taught at all levels of education, with English also introduced at an early age. Additionally, the region's increasing migration patterns have led to a growing presence of students who bring a variety of home languages into the classroom, including Arabic, Berber, Bulgarian, Chinese, Romanian, and Turkish, as well as different varieties of Spanish, particularly from Latin American countries.

In conclusion, it is worth emphasizing that linguistic landscape research has become an important and growing field that allows for a deeper understanding of the relationship between language and space, especially in multilingual contexts. The growing interest in this area, especially in Spanish-speaking countries, demonstrates the pedagogical potential of public signs for language learning and cultural awareness. In the Basque Country, where Basque and Spanish are spoken, as well as various migrant languages, linguistic landscapes provide valuable opportunities to analyze the interaction of languages in public spaces and to map the sociolinguistic diversity of the region. Given the changes in migration flows that affect the linguistic

composition of school classrooms, the study of linguistic landscapes becomes even more important for ensuring inclusive and effective language teaching.

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