

Exploring the Linguistic Landscape of Peshawar: Space, Policies and Community's Voice

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Abstract: This study explores the linguistic landscape of Peshawar by focusing on three interrelated dimensions: physical space, language policies, and residents' attitudes towards spatial practices. Theoretically, the study is grounded in Trumper-Hecht's three-dimensional theory of space. A total of 753 signs were collected from three key survey areas in Peshawar—Qissa Khawani Bazaar, Saddar Bazaar, and University Road—and analyzed to determine the visibility and dominance of languages. The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan was examined to understand the state's language policy. Additionally, interviews were conducted with 15 onlookers to gain insights into community attitudes toward language use in public spaces. The findings reveal that English is the most dominant language in Peshawar's public spaces, followed by Urdu and Arabic. These three languages are recognized by state language policies, which in turn influences community preferences for their use in the linguistic landscape. In contrast, local languages remain largely absent from public signage and are not recognized in the Constitution. Nevertheless, some participants expressed a preference for the inclusion of local languages in public spaces. The study recommends incorporating local languages into all three dimensions of the linguistic landscape to promote inclusivity and cultural representation.

Key Words: Linguistic Landscape, Spatial Practices, Language Policies, Language Attitude, Visibility and Invisibility, Code Preference, Ethnic Identity

Introduction

Peshawar is the provincial capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), one of the four provinces of Pakistan. It is also one of the largest metropolitan cities in the country. According to the 2023 census report, Peshawar spans a total area of 1,518 km² and has a population of 10,021,128. A significant majority of the population, 9,595,046 individuals (95.74%), are Pashto speakers. In addition to Pashto, the city is home to a diverse range of linguistic communities, including speakers of Hindko, Urdu, Saraiki, Shina, Gawarbat, and other languages.

This study seeks to explore the linguistic landscape (LL) of Peshawar. The LL reflects the linguistic ecology of a city (Ou, 2023). Landry and Bourhis (1997) were the first to introduce the concept of the linguistic landscape, defining it as: "the languages that appear on public street signs, billboards, street names, place names, store signs, and public signs on government buildings together constitute the linguistic landscape of a territory, region, or urban agglomeration" (p. 25). The formation of the LL is not accidental; rather, it is shaped by various underlying factors such as language policies, power relations, and identity. In other words, the LL of a region demonstrates how language use in public spaces is tied to broader societal issues, including language policy orientations, power dynamics, and identity (Ou, 2023).

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Initially, the LL was considered an emerging subfield within language policy. Over the past few decades, research on the LL has significantly expanded, positioning LL studies at the core of language policy and planning (Yavari, 2012). According to Dal Negro (2009), the LL is a manifestation of language policies, and LL research has convincingly shown that language use in public spaces reflects both explicit and implicit policy orientations. Much of the existing LL research has focused on linking spatial practices to language policies. However, Trumper-Hecht (2010) identified a missing element in this body of work: the community's perception of spatial practices. Introducing the Triad Model for LL studies, Trumper-Hecht emphasizes that three dimensions carry equal significance when examining the LL of a region: physical space (language use in public signage), conceived space (beliefs and ideologies embedded in language policies), and lived space (community perceptions of language use in public spaces). These three dimensions are interconnected and form the foundation of a comprehensive analysis of the LL.

The present study explores the LL of three prominent areas in Peshawar: Saddar Bazaar, University Road, and Qissa Khawani Bazaar. It is grounded in Trumper-Hecht's Triad Model, examining the physical, conceived, and lived spaces of the city. In this study, the physical space was analyzed through photographic documentation; the conceived space was investigated through an analysis of the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan; and the lived space was explored via interviews with community members.

Literature Review

Linguistic landscape (LL) research has gained momentum over the past two decades. In the context of Pakistan, the LLs of various metropolitan cities have been explored from different dimensions. Manan, David, Dumanig, and Channa (2017) studied the LL of Quetta. Their findings revealed that English, Urduized English (Urdu transliteration of English), and Englishized Urdu (English transliteration of Urdu) dominated the LL of the city, while local and indigenous languages were entirely absent. Ali (2020) explored the LL of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and concluded that English and Urdu were the most frequently used languages on shop signs. The study also observed the presence of Chinese in the LL of GB. Similar to the findings of Manan et al., Ali's study noted the absence of local languages, viewing it as an alarming trend and advocating for the inclusion of local languages in the LL of GB.

Jamil and Kausar (2021) examined the LL of Lahore and Islamabad through the lens of language policy. They analyzed a corpus of 300 signs along with the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan. Their findings indicated that Urdu was the most frequently used language in the LL of both cities, while English was primarily used for naming government offices. Article 251 of the 1973 Constitution states:

- ▶ **Clause 1:** "The National Language of Pakistan is Urdu, and arrangements shall be made for its being used for official and other purposes within fifteen years from the commencing day."
- ▶ **Clause 2:** "Subject to clause (1), the English language may be used for official purposes until arrangements are made for its replacement by Urdu."

The continued use of English for naming government offices suggests that no effective efforts have been made to replace English with Urdu. Overall, the study concluded that English and Urdu compete for dominance in the LL of Lahore and Islamabad.

LL research in Pakistan has primarily focused on the physical space, i.e., spatial practices and community perceptions of these practices (see Manan et al., 2017; Ali, 2020), as well as language policy perspectives (see Jamil & Kausar, 2021). However, none of the existing LL studies in Pakistan has investigated the LL of a city by integrating both language policy (conceived space) and residents' perceptions (lived space). Based on this background, the current study seeks to explore the LL of Peshawar by examining all three interrelated dimensions—physical space, conceived space, and lived space—to gain deeper insights into the city's linguistic landscape.

Research Design

We collected signs from Saddar Bazar, Qissa Khwani Bazar, and University Road in Peshawar, and conducted interviews with passersby to understand their attitudes toward language use in public spaces. The following research questions were designed for this study:

1. What are the linguistic features of the LL of Peshawar?
2. How are languages represented in Pakistan's 1973 Constitution?
3. What are the onlookers' attitudes toward language use in the public spaces of Peshawar?
4. How do spatial practices, language policy, and residents' perceptions interact to shape the LL of Peshawar?

To address these questions, the study adopts Trumper-Hecht's (2010) Triad Model for LL as its main theoretical framework. This model comprises three interrelated dimensions: physical space (also called the physical dimension), conceived space (also known as the political dimension), and lived space (also referred to as the experiential dimension). The primary methods employed in this study included photography, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Accordingly, data were collected in three forms: photographs (physical space), policy-related documents (conceived space), and interviews (lived space).

A total of 753 signs—including shop names, brand names, graffiti, and political slogans—were collected from all three locations. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 onlookers, comprising 4 business owners, 3 vendors, 5 visitors, and 3 students, during the photography sessions. Additionally, the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan was analyzed to examine the explicit or *de jure* language policy of the country.

Findings and Discussion

Physical Space (Spatial Practice)

We collected a sample of 753 signs: 257 from Saddar Bazar, 204 from Qissa Khwani, and 292 from University Road in Peshawar. Drawing on Long and Camojoan (2012), a 400-meter stretch from each area was designated as the survey area. The variation in the number of signs across these areas was due to differences in the size of signboards. Following Backhaus (2007), multiple signs displayed on the same shop were considered a single sign for statistical purposes, regardless of their size.

To address the research question related to the linguistic features—specifically the (in)visibility of languages and code preferences on signs—the collected data were categorized into three types: monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual. In this study, a monolingual sign is defined as one written in a single language; a bilingual sign displays two languages; and a multilingual sign features more than two languages.

The table below presents the number and percentage of monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual signs:

Table 1

Number of Monolingual, Bilingual and Multilingual Signs

S. No	Cities	Monolingual	Bilingual	Trilingual/ Multilingual	Total
1	Qissa Khwani	47	147	10	204
2	Saddar	139	112	6	257
3	University Road	188	99	5	292
5	Total	374	358	21	753
6	Percentage	49.66	47.54	2.78	100

All three areas exhibited a higher number of monolingual signs, followed by bilingual and multilingual signs. Among them, University Road had the highest number of monolingual signs, followed by Saddar Bazar and Qissa Khwani Bazar. During data collection, it was observed that University Road and Saddar Bazar featured a greater presence of national and international brands compared to Qissa Khwani Bazar. These brand names are predominantly displayed in English. As noted by Manan et al. (2017), branding in Pakistan often favors English, and brand names are typically written in a single language. This preference explains the higher number of monolingual signs observed on University Road and in Saddar Bazar.

Figure 1 presents examples of monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual signs collected from the survey areas.



Figure 1
Instances of Monolingual, Bilingual and Multilingual Signs



All the signs presented in Figure 1 were collected from the three designated survey areas of Peshawar. The first sign features only English. The business name "Global Education Consulting Services" and additional information about the business are written entirely in English. The second sign is bilingual, displaying both Urdu and English. While the shop name "Taj Uniform and Shoes House" is written in English, the supplementary business details are provided in Urdu.

During the categorization process, proper names assigned to businesses were not evaluated based on their linguistic origin, as proper names generally remain consistent across different languages. The third sign is multilingual, incorporating English, Urdu, and Arabic. The business name "Modern Dry Cleaners" appears in English. The Urdu phrase "Safai nisf iman hai" (translated as "Cleanliness is half of faith") is also included, while the Arabic words "Ya Hayyu" and "Ya Qayyum", names of Allah, appear in Arabic.

Visibility and Invisibility of Languages

As previously noted, the signs were categorized as monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual in order to analyze the visibility and invisibility of different languages. Of the total 753 signs collected, 374 were monolingual, 358 were bilingual, and 21 were multilingual. Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of language visibility across these three categories.

Table 2
Visibility of Languages on Signs

Count of Visibility on Signs and Percentage											
Languages	English		Urdu		Arabic		Chinese		Pashto		Total
Monolingual	no	%age	no	%age	no	%age	no	%age	no	%age	374
	356	95.1	18	4.8	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Bilingual	no	%age	no	%age	no	%age	no	%age	no	%age	358
	337	94.1	321	89.6	16	4.4	2	0.5	4	1.1	
Multilingual	no	%age	no	%age	no	%age	no	%age	no	%age	21
	17	80.9	19	90	17	80.9	0	0	1	4.7	
Total no and % of visibility	no	%age	no	%age	no	%age	no	%age	no	%age	753
	710	94.2	358	47.5	33	4.38	2	0.26	5	0.66	

English predominates the linguistic landscape (LL) across all three survey areas, followed by Urdu, Arabic, and other languages. English appears on 356 (95.1%) of the 374 monolingual signs, 337 (94.1%) of the 358 bilingual signs, and 17 (80.9%) of the 21 multilingual signs. Overall, English features on 710 out of 753 signs, accounting for 94.2% of the total dataset.

Urdu occupies the second position in terms of visibility. It appears on 18 (4.8%) monolingual signs, 321 (89.6%) bilingual signs, and 19 (90%) multilingual signs. In total, Urdu is present on 358 signs, constituting 47.5% of the overall sample.

Aside from English and Urdu, no other languages are used on monolingual signs. Following English and Urdu, Arabic is the third most frequently displayed language in the LL of Peshawar. It appears on 16 (4.4%) bilingual signs and 17 (80.9%) multilingual signs, with a total of 33 occurrences (4.38%) out of 753 signs.

Pashto and Chinese appear in significantly lower proportions. Pashto is featured on 4 (1.1%) bilingual signs and 1 (4.7%) multilingual sign, bringing its total presence to 5 signs (0.66%). Chinese is the least visible, appearing on only 2 signs (0.26%) in the entire dataset.

In conclusion, English dominates the LL of Peshawar, followed by Urdu, Arabic, Pashto, and Chinese.

Code Preference

When two or more languages appear simultaneously on the same signboard, the dominant code is determined by various factors. The language written at the top and center of the sign is considered dominant, while the one positioned on the margins is regarded as marginalized. Likewise, the language rendered in bold and larger font size is treated as dominant, whereas the one in smaller or regular font size is seen as marginalized.

If the languages are placed in the same visual position, the language that appears first in the reading order is considered dominant. The one that follows is treated as subordinate (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). For example, if a sign features both Arabic and Urdu, and both are written from right to left, then the language that appears first (rightmost) is considered dominant. If Arabic appears first and Urdu follows, Arabic is treated as the dominant code and Urdu as the marginalized code.

The figure below illustrates examples of dominant codes on signage from the survey areas.

Figure 2

Instances of Preferred Code Collected from Peshawar



Figure 2 presents an example of code preference observed in the linguistic landscape of Peshawar. The signboard displays the business name “Chinese Chilli Restaurant” in English and the phrase “Tandoori Chai” in Urdu. English appears in the center of the sign using bold and larger font size, whereas Urdu is positioned on the margin in a smaller and regular font. Based on Scollon and Scollon's (2004) framework for analyzing code preference, English is identified as the dominant code, while Urdu is treated as the marginalized code.



This example demonstrates the visual hierarchy of languages, where font size, placement, and prominence contribute to establishing linguistic dominance on public signage.

Figure 3

An Instance of Code Preference



Figure 3 illustrates a bilingual signboard featuring Arabic and Urdu. Both languages are written from the right-hand side, adhering to their native script directionality. The Arabic word ‘AlMakkah’ appears in the initial position, followed by the Urdu phrase ‘Khushbo Mahal’. Based on this sequencing, Arabic is treated as the dominant code and Urdu as the marginalized code. Furthermore, Arabic is rendered in a larger and bolder font compared to the Urdu text, reinforcing its visual dominance. Consequently, Arabic is identified as the preferred code in this instance, while Urdu occupies a subordinate position.

In analyzing code preference, this study focused exclusively on bilingual and multilingual signs, excluding monolingual instances. The analysis was conducted in three phases:

1. Phase one examined the positional placement of languages on the signs.
2. Phase two analyzed font size to determine visual emphasis.
3. Phase three assessed the order of language appearance, identifying which language appeared first (initial position) and which followed (later position).

This third parameter was applied specifically to languages with the same writing direction—namely Urdu, Arabic, and Pashto. It was not applicable in cases where languages with opposite writing directions, such as English and Urdu, co-occurred on the same signboard.

The following table presents a detailed summary of code preference based on the criteria of placement, font size, and initial positioning.

Table 3

Code Preference in the LL of Peshawar

Languages	No of sign displaying codes written on the top and in the center	No of sign displaying codes written in bold and bigger font size	No of sign displaying codes written in the initial position
English	51 (13.4%)	68 (17.9 %)	0 (0%)
Urdu	49 (12.9%)	47 (12.4%)	9 (2.3%)
Arabic	13 (3.4%)	3 (0.8%)	3 (0.79%)
Pashto	1 (0.26%)	1 (0.26%)	0 (0%)
Chinese	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

The total number of bilingual signs was 358, while multilingual signs totaled 21. Most bilingual signs featured a combination of English and Urdu, followed by a combination of Arabic with Urdu and English. English remains the most dominant language in terms of placement; it appears at the top and center on 51 bilingual and multilingual signs. Following English, Urdu is the second most preferred language in the linguistic landscape (LL) of the three surveyed areas. Urdu is placed at the top and center on 49 signs, appears in bold and larger font on 47 signs, and occupies the initial position—preceding Urdu and Pashto—on 9 signs. Arabic ranks third in preference: it is placed at the top and center on 13 signboards, appears in

bold and larger font on 3 signs, and is written in the initial position on another 3 signboards. Pashto, which is scarcely represented in the LL of Peshawar, appears in the center on only one sign and in a larger and bolder font on just one sign. It is concluded that English is the most dominant language, followed by Urdu, Arabic, and Pashto in the LL of Peshawar.

Conceived Space

Conceived space, also known as the political dimension, is the second aspect of the LL (Trumper-Hecht, 2010). This dimension encompasses language policies. Initially, issues related to the LL emerged within the domain of language policy. Much of the early research on LL focused on analyzing linguistic landscapes through the lens of language policies (see Ben-Rafael et al., 2010; Blommaert, 2013; Gorter, 2013; Hult, 2018; Landry and Bourhis, 1997; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009).

To address the representation of languages in Pakistan's language policies, the current study analyzed the Constitution of Pakistan (1973). The document was thoroughly examined for any mention of languages.

Article 251 of the 1973 Constitution states:

1. The National language of Pakistan is Urdu, and arrangements shall be made for its use for official and other purposes within fifteen years from the commencement day.
2. Subject to clause (1), the English language may be used for official purposes until arrangements are made for its replacement by Urdu.
3. Without prejudice to the status of the National language, a Provincial Assembly may by law prescribe measures for the teaching, promotion, and use of a Provincial language in addition to the National language.

The Constitution declared Urdu as the sole national language, associating it with national identity, unity, and integrity. It also urged the adoption of Urdu as the official language within 15 years of the Constitution's enactment. However, this objective has not yet been realized. Notably, the Constitution itself is written in English.

English continues to serve as the de facto official language of Pakistan, despite constitutional provisions aiming to replace it with Urdu. This reliance on English reflects the colonial legacy, wherein English was established as the language of education, judiciary, and governance before independence. The global significance of English in domains such as commerce, IT, and education, combined with institutional limitations, has hindered its replacement by Urdu.

Clause 3 of Article 251 grants provincial assemblies the authority to promote provincial languages, reflecting support for multilingualism. However, this clause also introduces complexity, as it creates tension between national identity (Urdu) and provincial identities (provincial languages). While provincial assemblies have the right to promote regional languages, they are not permitted to do so at the expense of Urdu.

Article 31 of the Constitution emphasizes the teaching of Arabic due to its association with the Quran. Thus, Arabic holds the status of a religious language in Pakistan.

The roles of English, Urdu, and Arabic create a clear linguistic hierarchy: English is associated with global connectivity, power, and privilege; Urdu with national identity, unity, and integrity; and Arabic with Islam and religious identity. The symbolic status of these languages supports their use in education and other domains, often marginalizing regional languages. State language policies continue to favor English, Urdu, and Arabic, while local languages receive minimal attention and are generally ignored in all domains (Rahman, 2007). The linguistic norms and patterns established during British colonial rule remain largely unchanged.

Lived Space (Experiential Dimension)

The third dimension of the study is lived space, or the experiential aspect of the LL. Trumper-Hecht (2010) asserts that community voice is one of the interconnected domains of the LL. To gain deeper insight into the LL of the region, the experiential dimension must be considered. We interviewed 15 passersby to understand their attitudes towards spatial linguistic practices in Peshawar. The analysis of interviews



revealed that five participants preferred English on signboards, four preferred Urdu, one preferred Arabic, two preferred Pashto, and three preferred multilingual signs.

Attitudes towards English

Five participants expressed a preference for English, citing its global importance. It was described as the language of commerce and branding. One participant noted that English signage is more effective in attracting customers compared to signs in Urdu or local languages. Another stated that most international brands use English on their signs. A third participant mentioned that metropolitan cities host foreign visitors, making English signage more functional. Additionally, the literacy rate was cited as a factor—many community members understand English better than local languages. Other participants emphasized that English is widely used in education, especially in private schools, colleges, and universities. Thus, its dominance in LL mirrors its broader presence in Pakistani society. Using English on signs was also linked to its role in education, particularly in private institutions that attract more students due to English-medium instruction.

Attitudes towards Urdu

Four participants favored Urdu for LL use, highlighting its role as the national language and lingua franca of Pakistan. They stated that Urdu serves the communicative needs of a diverse population in metropolitan cities like Peshawar. Moreover, Urdu is commonly used by local brands for signage and advertisements, further justifying its prominence in the LL.

Attitudes towards Arabic

Only one participant, a vendor, preferred Arabic in the LL, viewing it as a sacred language. He suggested that Arabic should be used alongside other languages, particularly to display Quranic verses and sayings of Allah. This preference was rooted in religious identity rather than practical communication needs.

Attitudes towards Local Languages

A small number of participants expressed a preference for Pashto in the LL. Pashto was associated with ethnic identity, and participants emphasized that Peshawar, being the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), is home to Pashtuns. The inclusion of Pashto in the LL was seen as a reflection of cultural pride. Participants stressed that Pashto should also be included in the curriculum, media, and other domains. Apart from Pashto, no other local languages were favored, largely due to a lack of proficiency among the community.

Multilingualism

Three participants preferred multilingual signage, advocating for the inclusion of English, Urdu, and provincial languages. English was valued for its international importance, Urdu for its national identity, and regional languages for ethnic representation and cultural diversity.

Overall, English and Urdu were the most preferred languages, followed by Pashto and multilingual signs. The dominance of English and Urdu in the LL aligns with community preferences, indicating that the current landscape reflects the needs of a significant portion of the population.

Recommendations

The findings reveal a near-total absence of local languages across all domains of the LL. In a highly multilingual society like Pakistan, promoting local languages is essential for fostering cultural identity, enhancing social cohesion, and strengthening community bonds. This study emphasizes the importance of representing local languages visually in public spaces to foster a sense of belonging and encourage linguistic diversity.

There is a need to revise existing language policies to support local languages and promote their integration in various domains, including education, judiciary, media, and public spaces. Public awareness campaigns should be launched to highlight the value of local languages and motivate communities to preserve their linguistic heritage.

In conclusion, the study recommends a holistic approach that includes regional languages in all aspects of society. This would lead to a more inclusive and representative linguistic landscape and policies that celebrate Pakistan's multilingual identities.

Conclusion

Linguistic landscape refers to the visibility and presence of languages in public spaces. This study examined the LL of Peshawar, the provincial capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), using Trumper-Hecht's (2010) Triad Model. The study analyzed three interrelated dimensions of the LL: physical space, conceived space, and lived space.

The results show that English is the most dominant language in the LL, followed by Urdu and Arabic. The conceived space—reflected in language policies—favors these three languages. The lived space, based on community preferences, also supports the use of English and Urdu, with limited preference for Pashto. All three dimensions align in favoring English and Urdu, with Arabic trailing behind and local languages largely excluded.

The study concludes with a call to promote local languages across all three dimensions of the LL to foster a more inclusive and linguistically representative society.



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