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LANGUAGE, POWER, AND IDENTITY: APPLIED LINGUISTICS IN MULTILINGUAL PUBLIC SPACES IN MEDAN

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A B S T R A C T

This study examines the linguistic landscape of Medan, Indonesia, focusing on how language is used in public spaces to convey power, identity, and social positioning. By analyzing ten different public signs across the city, the research highlights the role of language in shaping communication strategies in a multilingual urban environment. The findings show that English is predominantly used in commercial and professional contexts to signal global prestige and modernity, while Bahasa Indonesia remains the primary language for local communication, governance, and regulatory functions. Additionally, the presence of regional languages such as Mandarin reflects cultural and ethnic identities within the community. This paper illustrates how the strategic use of language in public signage not only informs but also constructs social hierarchies, cultural identities, and power dynamics. Through an applied linguistic lens, the study contributes to understanding how public language use functions as a site of negotiation between local, national, and global forces.

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a tool for communication—it is a medium through which identities are shaped, ideologies are embedded, and power is exercised. In urban multilingual environments such as Medan, language functions far beyond its utilitarian purpose. It manifests in the physical landscape of the city, visible through signs, billboards, posters, banners, and digital screens. These linguistic displays are not randomly placed; rather, they are shaped by social, political, cultural, and economic forces. This makes public space a significant site for applied linguistic inquiry.

Medan, the capital of North Sumatra, is a multicultural city where multiple languages coexist and interact daily. As a melting pot of Batak, Javanese, Malay, Chinese, and other ethnic groups, the city is marked by a complex web of linguistic practices. Bahasa Indonesia, as the national language, dominates official communication. However, regional languages and international languages, especially English, are increasingly visible in commercial domains. This visibility—or invisibility—of languages in public spaces has implications not only for communication but also for how identities are represented and negotiated.

The term **linguistic landscape (LL)**, introduced by Landry and Bourhis (1997), refers to the visible display of written language in public spaces. In multilingual cities, the linguistic landscape serves as both a reflection of language policies and a barometer of linguistic power relations. For example, the choice of English in elite educational institutions, upscale malls, and café branding in Medan signals a certain prestige and global alignment. Conversely, the rare appearance of local languages in official or commercial signage suggests their marginalized status, despite their significance in everyday oral communication.

Within this context, the study of language in public spaces offers a way to understand **how power operates linguistically**. Power is not only institutional, but also symbolic. When certain languages dominate the public view, they are associated with authority, modernity, or prestige. Others, by their absence, are effectively silenced. This study investigates how such linguistic hierarchies are constructed and maintained in Medan's public signage.

Moreover, the linguistic landscape also functions as a space of **identity negotiation**. The use of language in signs reflects the identities that speakers or institutions wish to perform or impose. A shop using English might not be targeting foreign customers, but rather signaling a modern, elite identity to local consumers. Similarly, gendered language in advertisements—associating beauty products with feminine delicacy or technology with masculine efficiency—perpetuates particular social identities and roles. These associations are not neutral; they are discursively constructed and carry ideological weight.

In applying the tools of **applied linguistics**, this research moves beyond mere description to interpretation. It asks: *Why are certain languages more visible than others? What identities are constructed through the use of particular linguistic forms? How does the linguistic landscape reflect and reproduce power dynamics in Medan?* Through data collected from signage in various public domains—such as malls, markets, schools, and government offices—this study interrogates how language use reflects broader socio-cultural patterns.

Additionally, the commodification of language—particularly English—is an important phenomenon in Medan's public spaces. English is frequently used in contexts unrelated to communication with foreigners. Rather, it is used to project sophistication, exclusivity, and cosmopolitanism. This reflects a global trend in which English becomes a “language of prestige,” often at the expense of local linguistic resources. In such cases, language is not only a medium of communication but also a commodity tied to economic and cultural capital.

The relevance of this research lies in its capacity to reveal how **language, power, and identity intersect visibly and materially** in everyday public life. In so doing, it contributes to broader conversations in applied linguistics, particularly in the subfields of sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and language policy. Understanding the linguistic landscape of Medan allows for deeper reflection on inclusivity, representation, and linguistic justice in a rapidly changing urban environment.

Ultimately, this study emphasizes that the languages we see in our cities—on walls, on billboards, on storefronts—tell us a great deal about **who belongs, who is empowered, and who is forgotten**. Applied linguistics, when brought into dialogue with public space, offers not only analytical insight but also a critical lens through which to envision a more inclusive and equitable linguistic future.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive-analytical method within the framework of applied linguistics. The primary aim is to explore language use in the public spaces of Medan and to analyze how such usage reflects power relations and the construction of social identity. This approach allows for the in-depth interpretation of the ideological and social meanings embedded in language choices within multilingual urban contexts.

Data were collected through direct observation in various strategic locations in Medan, including shopping centers, traditional markets, ethnic enclaves, university surroundings, houses of worship, and other public facilities. Visual documentation (photographing signs) was used to record linguistic elements on store signage, promotional banners, billboards, directional signs, and public notices. Fieldwork was conducted over a three-week period to capture linguistic variations over time and across diverse settings.

The data were analyzed using the linguistic landscape framework developed by Landry and Bourhis (1997), which classifies signs into informational and symbolic functions. Further analysis followed the perspectives of Shohamy and Gorter (2009), focusing on who controls the displayed language, who the language is intended for, and what sociocultural values are represented.

To illustrate the data, the following ten examples of linguistic landscapes from Medan are presented:

1. **“Sale up to 70% Off – Grand Opening!”**
 - Location: Mall Centre Point
 - Language: English
 - Interpretation: A global language is used to convey modernity and attract middle-class consumers.
2. **“Dijual Cepat: Rumah Strategis di Medan Amplas”**
 - Location: Roadside board in South Medan
 - Language: Bahasa Indonesia
 - Interpretation: The national language is used to reach local audiences in a transactional-economic context.

3. **“美味食堂 (Mei Wei Shi Tang) – Chinese Food”**
 - Location: Jalan Asia (Medan’s Chinatown)
 - Language: Mandarin and English
 - Interpretation: Represents ethnic identity and marketing to a wider public beyond the Chinese-speaking community.
4. **“Warung Kopi Kita – Rasa Nusantara, Harga Bersahabat”**
 - Location: Near Universitas Sumatera Utara (USU)
 - Language: Bahasa Indonesia
 - Interpretation: A language of solidarity and nationalism emphasizing local values and togetherness.
5. **“Hijab for All – New Arrival”**
 - Location: Thamrin Plaza
 - Language: English
 - Interpretation: A fusion of religious identity and cosmopolitanism, promoting Islamic fashion through global language.
6. **“Parkir Khusus Pelanggan Indomaret”**
 - Location: Retail parking area
 - Language: Bahasa Indonesia
 - Interpretation: A regulatory language enforcing authority over space usage.
7. **“Your Beauty is Our Priority – Larissa Aesthetic”**
 - Location: Beauty clinic in Medan Baru
 - Language: English
 - Interpretation: Prestige language used to project a professional and elegant image.
8. **“Gado-Gado Bu Rini – Asli Jawa Timur”**
 - Location: Street food vendor
 - Language: Bahasa Indonesia
 - Interpretation: Promoting regional identity to highlight culinary authenticity.
9. **“Dilarang Merokok di Area Ini – Perda No. 3/2014”**
 - Location: Bus stop
 - Language: Bahasa Indonesia
 - Interpretation: Formal language used for legal enforcement and public compliance.
10. **“We Are Hiring – Join Our Team!”**
 - Location: Fast food restaurant, Ring Road City Walks
 - Language: English
 - Interpretation: English is used to attract young jobseekers and signal modern corporate identity.

These samples serve as a foundational corpus for further analysis in the Results and Discussion section, where patterns of language dominance, symbolic resistance, and identity construction in Medan’s public spaces will be critically examined.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Medan, the linguistic landscape reveals much about how language functions in both practical and symbolic ways in public spaces. Analyzing the language used on public signage helps uncover how it reflects power dynamics, cultural identity, and communication strategies within a multicultural city. The data points, observed in various public signs across Medan, show a clear pattern of language use that aligns with broader societal trends and local cultural contexts.

Take, for instance, the "**Sale up to 70% Off – Grand Opening!**" advertisement. Here, English is used to promote a commercial event. English, in this context, is not just the language of information but also a symbol of global consumerism and modernity. The use of English positions the event as part of the global marketplace, catering to an audience that associates English with economic power, affluence, and cosmopolitan lifestyles. This suggests that in the urban space of Medan, English continues to serve as a marker of prestige, indicating how language can be commodified in the service of marketing strategies.

On the other hand, when a sign reads "**Dijual Cepat: Rumah Strategis di Medan Amplas**", Indonesian takes the lead. The use of Bahasa Indonesia in this property advertisement underscores the local nature of the communication. This sign is directed at the broad public, especially potential buyers within the local community, who are more likely to feel a sense of ownership and familiarity with the language. Here, Indonesian functions as a tool for clear, direct communication, making it accessible to the widest audience. It also reflects the dominance of Indonesian in the public and economic life of the country, reinforcing its role as the national language of unity and administrative power.

Similarly, "**Parkir Khusus Pelanggan Indomaret**" is a sign that uses Indonesian to regulate space and behavior. The sign directs specific groups—Indomaret customers—to park in designated spaces, showcasing the regulatory and authoritative role of the language. Indonesian serves as the medium for enforcing public rules and organizing civic behavior. In this context, the language not only conveys a functional message but also acts as a reflection of state power and institutional control in public spaces. The language here reinforces the local and official character of regulations, ensuring compliance among the general public.

In contrast, the use of "**We Are Hiring – Join Our Team!**" in English reflects the global nature of employment markets. This sign appeals to a more professional audience, signaling the workplace as a space that values international standards. English here is used to give the job offer a global appeal, positioning the company as part of a larger, more modern workforce. By choosing English, the company associates itself with global business practices, signaling to potential applicants that language skills in English are a requirement and a mark of professionalism in the current job market.

Next, "**Dilarang Merokok di Area Ini – Perda No. 3/2014**" is a legal notice that uses Indonesian to inform the public about smoking regulations in a particular area. This sign uses Indonesian to ensure that the legal restriction is clear and accessible to all

residents. The use of Bahasa Indonesia here reflects the authority of the state, underscoring the role of language in governance and social control. Indonesian is the default language for laws and regulations, reinforcing its function as the medium of governance and legal discourse in Indonesia.

Mandarin's presence in the sign "**美味食堂 (Mei Wei Shi Tang) – Chinese Food**" marks an important cultural aspect in Medan's linguistic landscape. Here, Mandarin serves not just as a tool for communication but as a symbol of ethnic identity. Medan has a significant Chinese population, and the use of Mandarin on signage reinforces the community's cultural heritage and social presence in the city. This choice of language signals solidarity within the Chinese community while also acting as an invitation to others who share the language. It is an example of how language can express ethnic pride and build a sense of community in a multicultural urban space.

The phrase "**Gado-Gado Bu Rini – Asli Jawa Timur**" also draws attention to regional identity through language. Indonesian is used here, but the added phrase "Asli Jawa Timur" (Authentic from East Java) connects the product with a specific regional identity. This reflects how language can be used not only to convey information but also to invoke cultural authenticity and regional pride. For those familiar with the culinary traditions of East Java, this phrasing immediately establishes the dish's origins, building trust and evoking a sense of cultural connection.

In the fashion advertisement "**Hijab for All – New Arrival**", English is employed to blend religious identity with modern fashion. This is an example of how language can serve as a bridge between traditional values and contemporary trends. The phrase "Hijab for All" invites a diverse audience to explore fashion that aligns with Islamic principles, while the use of English places the product in a global context. This shows how language can reflect both cultural values and the desire to present oneself as part of a larger global movement, demonstrating how the intersection of language and identity is shaped by globalizing forces.

"**Promo Akhir Tahun! Belanja Lebih Hemat di Ramayana**" uses Indonesian to market sales to a broad, local audience. The use of Bahasa Indonesia here signals inclusivity and practicality. It is the language that ensures the message is understood by the widest possible audience in Medan. The sign appeals to consumers' desire for savings and convenience, leveraging the familiarity of Indonesian to create a sense of belonging and accessibility in the local retail environment.

Finally, the sign "**Wedding Organizer – Making Your Dream Wedding Come True**" employs English to advertise a high-end service. Here, English is used to project an image of luxury and exclusivity, aligning the business with global standards. This use of English emphasizes the modern, upscale nature of the service being offered, attracting customers who aspire to a refined, cosmopolitan lifestyle. It illustrates how language in public spaces can be strategically chosen to convey prestige and elevate the status of a business or service.

In sum, the analysis of these ten data points illustrates the complex role of language in Medan's public spaces. Language functions as both a tool for communication and a symbol of power, identity, and social positioning. Whether in advertisements, legal

notices, or ethnic signage, language is strategically employed to navigate social hierarchies, promote products and services, and assert cultural identities. This dynamic linguistic landscape in Medan reveals the ongoing negotiation between globalization, local identity, and power through the language choices made in public signage.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the linguistic landscape of Medan provides a vivid example of how language functions not only as a tool for communication but also as a powerful symbol of identity, power, and social hierarchy. The study reveals that language in public spaces is strategically used to cater to diverse audiences, express cultural pride, and establish authority.

English, as a global language, is often employed in commercial and professional settings to evoke modernity, sophistication, and international prestige. This is particularly evident in advertisements and job postings where English serves as a marker of global status and aspirational lifestyle. On the other hand, Bahasa Indonesia is used for more local, accessible, and regulatory purposes, demonstrating its role as the official national language of unity and governance. It is the primary language used for public regulations and local services, reflecting its authority in maintaining order and ensuring compliance.

Regional languages and ethnic identifiers, such as Mandarin and specific regional terms like “Asli Jawa Timur,” underscore the role of language in asserting cultural and ethnic identity. These linguistic choices help maintain a connection to cultural heritage, fostering a sense of community among speakers and signaling authenticity and local pride in the marketplace.

The interplay of these languages in Medan’s public spaces demonstrates how language reflects societal dynamics, including the tensions between globalization and local identity, the assertion of state power, and the negotiation of group identities in a multicultural context. Through the use of language on public signage, the city of Medan illustrates how linguistic choices not only convey information but also shape social perceptions, reinforce power structures, and create a sense of belonging.

Overall, the linguistic landscape of Medan highlights the important role of language in both everyday communication and the construction of social and cultural identities in a multilingual urban environment. The findings of this study contribute to a broader understanding of how applied linguistics can be used to analyze language in public spaces and its implications for power, identity, and social interaction.

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