

ENGLISH IN THE MALLSCAPE: EXPLORING LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE (LL) OF QUASI-PUBLIC SPACE IN INDIA

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Abstract

India has only recently witnessed LL-based studies, where gaps are still evident. Shopping malls are mushrooming in urban and semi-urban neighborhoods, providing fertile grounds to witness LL-based phenomena from the vantage point of English. An LL-based case study of shopping malls in the city of Siliguri has been attempted with the analysis of 170 photographic data that constitute the “mallscape” of the city. Findings reveal that English dominates the mallscape as a language of symbolic capital while indigenous languages assume an associate role in the mallscape. The prominence of English has negatively impacted the visibility of native languages, whereas the former occupies a more prestigious position. This has not only led to cultural erosion but has also hampered the identity of the indigenous communities.

Keywords

linguistic landscape, mallscape, multilingualism, symbolic capital

1 Introduction

Linguistic symbols have become a common phenomenon in human life, especially in urban and suburban spaces. Such linguistic symbols or written signs form a linguistic landscape (LL). According to Shohamy and Gorter (2009), it has become an integral part of the physical environment. It comprises street signs, advertising billboards, place names, and commercial shop signs in diverse languages visible in urban and sub-urban public spaces. Characterizing multilingual urban public spaces, such signs are the subject of the LL studies. They focus on the articulation of these signs and the influences that shape them (Ben-Rafael 2009). LL studies have gained prominence as a discipline (Gorter & Cenoz 2017) only recently due to a growing interest in urban multilingualism as well as a focus on language policy in relation to public signs (Blommaert 2013: ix). India's encounter with globalization during the 1990s resulted in the emergence of a new middle class and consumerism (Kaur 2017). This led to the development of a modern shopping space in the country called a shopping mall (Voyce 2007). A variety of languages became visible in the LL depending on the socio-spatial contexts. Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), however, argue that the choice of language of signs is determined by countless LL actors

operating for a myriad of motives. Therefore, language choice in relation to signs is not haphazard but rather informed and often political (Esteron 2021) and economical. LL items in urban spaces are mostly emblems of commercial institutions and firms (Ben-Rafael 2009). Shopping malls, one of the emergent urban quasi-public spaces (privately owned but accessible to the public), contain a variety of linguistic symbols to appeal to the target customers. Existing LL studies (see Backhaus 2006, Ben-Rafael et al. 2006, Huebner 2006, Benedicto 2022) revealed that English signs have communicative and symbolic functions to play in today's globalized world compared to any other language. Therefore, it becomes imperative to understand the patterns of language choice in mallscape. Moreover, the predominating signage in the mallscape needs to be comprehended in terms of its functional significance.

2 LL: Operationalizing the concept

The major concern of this rapidly evolving area of LL study is the language(s) exposed to public spaces (see Ben-Rafael et al. 2006). In their seminal work, Landry and Bourhis (1997) introduced the phrase “Linguistic Landscape” for the first time, giving the field a concrete ground. Gorter (2013) expands the scope of LL by incorporating modern signs – digital signages, scrolling banners, and inflatable signs – into the orthodox signs of LL. Landry and Bourhis (1997) explicitly mention the components – government (top-down) signs and private (bottom-up) signs – of LL. The former category includes signs issued by government authorities, whereas signs from individuals, organizations, or businesses working autonomously within the constraints set by government regulations fall under the latter category (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006). The LL of a specific geographical area serves two functions: informational and symbolic (Landry & Bourhis 1997). Informational functions are manifest functions or direct functions. Symbolic functions are latent or hidden functions. Further, public signs as the objects of the LL studies can be classified into top-down (government) and bottom-up (private) signs based on the logic of the authorship of signs (Landry & Bourhis 1997, Ben-Rafael et al. 2006, Ben-Rafael 2009, Gorter 2013).

The shopping mall, technically a quasi-public space (based on ownership criteria), has been considered a public space – publicly accessible – in the current study. Ben-Rafael (2009: 41) makes a remarkable differentiation between prototype “public space” and “public space in practice”, i.e. “central areas”.

3 English signs: Drives and dynamics

Ben-Rafael et al. (2006: 10) suggest that LL is a “symbolic construction” of public space. The “power and status” relationship between languages is represented by language choices in LL (Landry & Bourhis 1997: 26). There is a plethora of literature on the issue of language choice in LL. Still, very few are available in the Indian context (see Rubdy 2015, Meganathan 2017, Bharadwaj & Shukla 2018, Begum & Sinha 2018, 2019, Bhujel & Sinha 2023). The focus here, however, will be on the use of English on the LL signs in general and in the commercial domain, i.e. shopping malls, in particular. The degree of a language’s existence in LL can be used to gauge its importance, strength, and pertinence (Mansoor et al. 2023). Backhaus (2006), in his study of Tokyo, notes that the presence of certain languages in commercial LL indicates their economic significance, whereas Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) observe that English signage holds significant symbolic importance in Israel. In this vein, Smalley (1994) reveals that the majority of English signs in the LL of Bangkok are directed at international tourists. In a tourist capital such as Bangkok, English is revealed to be a language of commercial communication contrary to public spaces of Israel and Tokyo (see Backhaus 2006, Ben-Rafael et al. 2009), where English was used for prestige and symbolic value. In their study, Mansoor et al. (2023) identify English as a prime language for global connectivity. The study conducted by Jazul and Bernardo (2017) reveals the significance of English in the communicative sphere of Chinatown’s LL.

The language policy of the government vis-a-vis language ideology of individual sign makers also influences the language usage pattern of signs. The language policy of the government, however, is likely to impact top-down signs the most, while bottom-up signs are controlled by the latter. In his study, Backhaus (2006) reveals that the use of English on commercial signs in Tokyo stemmed from sign makers’ desire to integrate into the English-speaking population. Cenoz and Gorter (2006) find the prominence of English in advertising signs reflecting English as a language having “connotational value” rather than “communicative value”. The findings of this study contradict the conclusions of several other studies, such as those by Jazul and Bernardo (2017), Smalley (1994), and Huebner (2006), which have found the significance of the English language in communicative spheres. In their study of the LL of the Manila post office, Eclipse and Tenedero (2018) observe that English is the dominant language used in directive signs. However, Akindele (2011) finds the dominance of English signs in the commercial domain in his study of the LL in Gaborone, Botswana. Colluzi and Kitade (2015), in their exploration of the LL in Kuala Lumpur areas, notice

English as a prestigious language among Malaysians, whereas Ambion (2013) reveals English as a language of international marketing. In their comparative study of LL of shopping malls in southern Jordan and western Jordan, Alomoush and Al-Naimat (2020) observe a strong appearance of English signs as a result of non-linguistic factors: the existence of affluent groups and the presence of an English-speaking population in the area. Syamsurijal and Iswary (2023), in their study of three shopping centers in Makassar City in Indonesia, reveal the primacy of English signs. The study reveals the effectiveness of English as a powerful language of international fame for commercial activities that strengthen brands of different kinds (Syamsurijal & Iswary 2023). Although LL-based studies are still emerging as a discipline in India, a few significant explorations have been carried out in recent years. The work conducted by Itagi and Sing (2002) can be considered the beginning of LL-based studies in the Indian context leading to recent empirical investigations (see Rubdy 2015, Meganathan 2017, Bharadwaj & Shukla 2018, Begum & Sinha 2018, 2019) highlighting Indian multilingualism (Bhujel & Sinha 2023). Nevertheless, these studies do not talk about the mallscape.

Two more important assessments can be drawn from the existing literature. First, the usage of English on the signs implies that it is a language of authority, globalization, commercial/business, fashion, and international repute, as well as a symbol of prestige, upward mobility, and modernity. Second, there is a dearth of research in the field of LL in the Indian context. Many nominal studies on LL of shopping malls have been evident globally (see Rafsanjani 2019, Alomoush & Al-Naimat 2020, Yachsani et al. 2021, Syamsurijal & Iswary 2023). However, in an Indian context, not a single study has been found in the domain. Therefore, this exploratory study focuses on mallscape, aiming to bridge the research gap. The study specifically responds to the following questions:

1. What are the languages used in the mallscape in the context of India?
2. Which language plays a predominant role in the mallscape, and what are its sociolinguistic implications?

4 Theoretical framework

Spolsky and Cooper (1991) propose three criteria for determining language choice on signs. Firstly, signs are made in the language the actors (sign producers) know. Secondly, the languages used in signs are convenient to the target group, and lastly, signs are made up of the language of reference groups. This implies that LL is a product of the ‘social action’ of LL actors oriented to goal(s). Weber (1978) describes social action as any meaningful action by actors or individuals as ‘*zweckrational*’ action or goal-oriented action, which is “distinguished by the

fact that the actors conceive their goal clearly and combine means to attain it” (Aron 2017: 186). It means that individuals set a goal and use effective methods or tools to accomplish it. Additionally, Ben-Rafael (2009: 44) expresses the opinion that the formation of LL can be viewed as a structuring of its own. He suggests four structuration principles of LL designing: 1) presentation-of-self, 2) good-reasons, 3) collective identity, and 4) power-relation. The principle of presentation-of-self primarily emphasizes how LL items connect with actors and what they wish to say about themselves. The good-reasons principle is an attempt to trade something with potential clients, respecting their sensibility as well as their values, proclivities, and tastes when designing their LL. Likewise, the LL items conveying meanings in terms of identity markers are the focus of the principle of collective identity (Ben-Rafael 2009) whereas the principle of power relation focuses on the various ways that language resources are used in LL to convey traces of potential dependency relationships between groups of actors. Thus, among various languages, the usage of a particular language on the signs in the mallscape can be explained in light of the above-mentioned theoretical approaches. Moreover, we will try to explain why a language becomes domineering in the mallscape and its sociolinguistic implications in society from the vantage point of the theory of ‘capital’ given by Pierre Bourdieu (1986).

5 Data and methodology

5.1 Siliguri

The development of malls during the past two decades has practically been revolutionary in India (Kaur 2017). The mushrooming shopping malls have transformed cityscapes in an unprecedented way. Numerous types of written signs, billboards, graffiti, and tempting advertisements in malls create LL par excellence. The malls, therefore, can also be considered as a catalyst for meaning-making through signs. Thus, it is imperative to study the LL of shopping malls. The LL in question is located in Siliguri, a (major) faster growing Tier-II or Y-type city (as per the re-classification of Indian cities/towns based on 2011 Census¹) in North Bengal. It is a multilingual city with speakers of various languages, including many ethnic languages (often missed out in census data enumeration). According to the 2011 census of India², people spoke Bengali (60.88%), Hindi (25.24%), Nepali (4.66%), Bhojpuri (2.39%), Marwari (1.58%), and Urdu (1.24%) as their first language in the city. Notably, Bengali is the official language of the Siliguri region as per the West Bengal Language Act of 1961³. According to the 2011 Census (tab-A4)⁴, the city has a population of 0.513 million. This corridor, with a strategic location, is also known as the

Chicken's Neck, linking India's north-eastern states to the rest of the country. It shares international borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. The 2011 census shows the literacy rate of the city stands at 79 per cent⁵. According to the Ministry of Urban Development Report (MUDR) (2015: 50), Siliguri is the largest city in North Bengal and the second largest city in West Bengal. Between the years of 2008 and 2016, a total of five shopping malls have come up in Siliguri, indicating growth in the city's modern infrastructural facilities.



Figure 1: Map indicating the study malls (black arrow) in Siliguri: City Center and Vega Circle (Roy et al. 2023: 2266. Google maps⁶)

Against this background, Siliguri was purposively selected as the research location. Similarly, two shopping malls in the city, namely “City Center” (5,000,00 sq. ft⁷) and “Vega Circle” (3,500,00 sq. ft⁸), were also selected based on the criteria of size, availability of services, and popularity (see Figure 1). The selected malls are the largest shopping malls in the city, providing greater services to customers than other malls and thus are popular among visitors to the city.

5.2 Data gathering and interpretation

One hundred and seventy digital photos of (written) private signs⁹ were collected from the two shopping malls. Following Cenoz and Gorter's (2006) method, each anchored shop but not each text/sign was considered to be the unit of analysis. Specifically, the storefront sign was regarded as a unit of analysis because, generally, the storefront sign is considered to be the primary sign or it becomes an identification of a shop. A scheme of coding was developed that included variables and sub-variables in SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software. These include the language used, types of signs, script used on signs, and commercial brand names. Scollon and Scollon's (2003: 2) 'geosemiotics' approach proposes an interpretation of signs based on their social and cultural context as "signs and symbols take a major part of their meaning from how and where they are placed". Since the context or "the contextualized spheres of communication" (Cooper 1967, Clyne 1997: 308, as quoted in Barni & Bagna 2009: 133) of the present study is the commercial domain, profit-oriented actions are essential in the space where signs are the primary means for attracting the target customers. This is what Boudon (1990) termed as "good reasons". Moreover, Scollon and Scollon's (2003) concept of 'place semiotics' has become a useful tool for analyzing the signs. The place semiotics – code preference, inscription¹⁰, and emplacement¹¹ – are components of visual semiotics and geosemiotics (Jazul & Bernardo 2017). It should be noted that, according to Scollon and Scollon (2003), code preference can be seen in the following ways: center-margin, top-bottom, left-right, and earlier-later (Olmstead-Wang 2005). Jazul and Bernardo (2017) mention that the dominant language may be placed at the top, on the left, or in the center while the inferior language could be displayed at the bottom and on the right sides. This is applicable, especially in analyzing bilingual and multilingual signs. Code preference may also be demonstrated by the physical materiality of signs, which includes fonts, materials, and layering (Olmstead-Wang 2005). Size and colors may be considered as added additional inscriptional elements. Thus, in analyzing the photographic data, the present paper employed the concepts of place semiotics as an analytical framework. Likewise, the language of the signs was determined based on vocabulary, words, and phrases in the texts, as suggested by Backhaus (2007: 70).

6 The languages in the mallscape

It is to be mentioned that the brand names were not categorized under any of the languages¹². In this regard, Bade (2006) demonstrates that proper names can be a part of any language, for instance. However, the script used in the brand names was captured in this study (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Commercial brand names (in Roman script) observed in the malls investigated

Out of the total 170 signs, 61 signs (35.9%) featured the names of commercial brands while the remaining 109 signs (64.1%) were unrelated to brand names (see Table 1). Every brand name was presented in the Roman script (see Figure 2). The written signages in the mallscape were displayed in four languages: English, Hindi, Nepali, and Bengali (see Table 2). A sum of 100 signs (91.7%) were identified as monolingual. Among these, monolingual English was observed on 93 signs (85.3%), monolingual Hindi on five signs (4.5%), monolingual Nepali on one sign (0.9%), and monolingual Bengali on one sign (0.9%). Except for one, all monolingual English signs (see Figure 3) are composed in the Roman script.



Figure 3: Monolingual English signs (written in Roman) in the malls

The solitary monolingual English sign in the mall is conspicuously presented in the Eastern Nagari script, which is a Bengali transliteration of an English sign, *SHOPPERS STOP*. Monolingual Hindi signs are composed in either the Roman or Devanagari script. Out of the total five monolingual Hindi signs, four (80%) are presented in the Roman script, while the remaining one (20%) is written in the Devanagari script. The data indicates that monolingual Nepali and monolingual Bengali signs are the least commonly found signage in malls. One monolingual Nepali sign was identified as written in the Roman script. Conversely, a monolingual Bengali sign was discovered inscribed in the Eastern Nagari script.

Likewise, eight bilingual signs were identified in the malls, making up 7.3 per cent of the total 109 signs (excluding brand signs) observed in the surveyed malls. Of the total eight bilingual signs, six (5.5%) are bilingual Hindi-English signs, and only one (0.9%) has been observed as bilingual English-Bengali. In contrast, a single bilingual Nepali-English sign, making up 0.9 per cent of the total bilingual signs, was observed in the mallscape. Surprisingly, a lone multilingual sign featuring English, Hindi, and Bengali was observed in the malls, constituting 0.9 per cent of the total signs in the multilingual city. This supports the assertion made by Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), who argued that LL does not always accurately represent the ethnolinguistic diversity of a geographical area.

Types of signs	Frequency	Percentage
Brands' signs	61	35.8
Signs other than brands	109	64.1
Total	170	100 (approx.)

Table 1: Types of signs (source: field data)

Language used	Frequency	Percentage
Monolingual English	93	85.3
Monolingual Hindi	5	4.5
Monolingual Nepali	1	0.9
Monolingual Bengali	1	0.9
Bilingual Hindi-English	6	5.5
Bilingual English-Bengali	1	0.9
Bilingual Nepali-English	1	0.9
Multilingual English-Hindi-Bengali	1	0.9
Total	109	100 (approx.)

Table 2: Language used in signs of mallscape (source: field data)

LL represents languages with economic utility and symbolic capital in commercial spaces. The result, in contrast, challenges the argument of Landry and Bourhis (1997), who contended that LL represents the ethnolinguistic diversity of a geographical area. Significantly, not all languages possess equal market competitiveness to secure a position in the mallscape. The flow of LL in the malls is undoubtedly determined by the private (autonomous) actors (shop owners) who are oriented to the economic interests/profits or, in the Weberian sense, they are involved in a rational action-oriented to (economic) goal. The findings suggest that monolingual English signs outnumbered all other prevailing signs of the mallscape, followed by monolingual Hindi, Nepali, and Bengali, respectively.

The prevalence of English signs in malls indicates their significance within the business institution or commercial domain. Hence, monolingual English signs in shopping malls are identified as powerful signs, serving primarily symbolic functions in addition to communicative functions, compared to signs in native languages. The emergence of English in the mallscape can be attributed to its utilization for commercial purposes. The discovery in this research corresponds with Rafsanjani's study (2019), which highlighted that English signs play a functional role, serving as an international and globalized language, particularly in commercial spaces.

Likewise, this study observes that English signs symbolize the socio-linguistic profile of mall users. However, it does not imply that all mall users can necessarily understand English signs or speak English more than their native languages (Bengali, Hindi, Nepali, etc.). The dominant signs symbolize something but do not necessarily index a specific group (Olmstead-Wang 2005). Nevertheless, the socio-economic profile of mall users greatly plays a role in determining signs of the mall. In essence, this suggests that the signs are primarily made accessible and convenient for the majority of mall users. This reminisces the second condition of sign production, as proposed by Spolsky and Cooper (1991). Notably, Alomoush and Al-Naimat (2020) discovered a comparable result in their investigation of a shopping mall, suggesting that non-linguistic factors such as the affluent class and the presence of an English-speaking population could also influence the LL of a specific domain. Furthermore, according to Yachsen et al. (2021), English signs hold functional significance, both commercial and non-commercial, in mall environments. It can be argued that signs of the malls are determined by the socio-linguistic profile of the target clients. Based on this rationale, one could assert that the language selection on signs made by shop owners is driven by economic considerations or "good reasons" as advocated by Ben-Rafael et al. (2009). In the given context, Syamsurijal and Iswary (2023) view English signs as influential and globally recognized tools utilized by owners of anchored shops to advertise their products within the commercial domain. Hence, English signs serve as a means to draw in the desired mall audience, highlighting the influential role of the English language in commercial endeavors. The finding of this study aligns with Benedicto (2022), who demonstrates that the choice of English language on signs targets specific clients. Hence, it mirrors the rationale of the sign creators (shop owners) as they are aware of their target audience.



Figure 4: Monolingual Hindi sign in Roman script

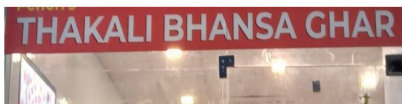


Figure 5: Monolingual Nepali sign in Roman script



Figure 6: Monolingual Bengali sign in Eastern Nagari script



Figure 7: Monolingual Hindi sign in Devanagari script

Monolingual Hindi, monolingual Nepali, and monolingual Bengali signs (see Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7) of the malls reflect both the structuration principles of “presentation-of-self” and “collective identity” advocated by Ben-Rafael (2009: 45). According to Esteron (2021), the former principle equates more with communicative function and the latter principle highlights symbolic function given by Landry and Bourhis (1997). These signs of native languages in the malls assert owners’ particularistic identities about who they are and who they are not. Owners of the shops exhibit a commitment to the mall users through such signs on the one hand and bring ‘localness’ on the other hand. The findings revealed that the owners of the shops used a strategy to attract potent customers by displaying a sense of belonging and likeness in the signs. Thus, these signs of native languages were used to depict a sense of legitimacy of the shops and the products. This is similar to observations made by De Los Reyes (2014), Jazul and Bernardo (2017), and Dixson (2015) that the presence of native languages on commercial signs indicates the legitimacy of the establishment or shop. Contextually, Ambion (2013) demonstrates the regional identity in the LL through signs of native languages, which also affirms the findings of this study. According to Barni and Bagna (2009), shop owners conjure a special impression that would appeal to potential clients through such signs. Moreover, signs of native languages can also be signs of modern commercial domains, i.e. malls, which aligns with the study of Jazul and Bernardo (2017). They observed the importance of (Chinese) native languages in commercial activities in their study. It is to be mentioned here that the finding, however, stands contrary to Rafsanjani (2019) as, according to his study, an appropriate place for signs of native languages is the traditional

shopping market rather than a modern shopping mall. Notably, monolingual Hindi (see Figure 4) and monolingual Nepali (see Figure 5) signs were written in Roman script, indicating a prerequisite of English in the malls. In other words, knowledge of the English language seemed to require comprehending the signs even though they were written in native Hindi and Nepali languages. This gives strength to the English language compared to the native languages. Thus, the signs of native languages seemed to be significant in the malls more in terms of symbolic value (not capital) than communicative value.



Figure 8: Monolingual English sign



Figure 9: Bengali transliteration
of monolingual English sign
“Shoppers Stop”

Meanwhile, Bengali transliteration (see Figure 9) of an English sign, e.g. *SHOPPERS STOP* (see Figure 8) in the mall, presents a phonetic representation. Transliteration is widely used in rendering brand names, place names, and technical and philosophical terminologies having no equivalent expression in other languages (Gu & Almann 2023). Furthermore, a direct transliteration from English into native languages occurs to show a sense of “coolness” and “modernity” (ibid.: 14). Strikingly, Bengali transliterated sign in the mall is noticeably neither proper name (brand name, place name, etc.) nor any of technical and philosophical terminologies as such. Moreover, clear equivalents are available in the Bengali language for the English sign *SHOPPERS STOP*. Similarly, if it had been to showcase the coolness and modernity of the mall, the transliterated Bengali sign needed to convey the vested idea to the mall users. The Bengali transliterated sign in this regard makes no sense to Bengali native speakers with no or less knowledge of English as it is merely a phonetic representation of the information in English. Thus, this evinces the dominance of English in the malls behind the “facade of multilingualism” (ibid.: 18).



Figure 10: Bilingual Hindi-English sign in Roman



Figure 11: Bilingual Hindi-English sign in Roman codemixing



Figure 12: Bilingual Hindi-English sign in Roman



Figure 13: Bilingual Hindi-English sign in Roman codemixing

The analysis indicates that bilingual Hindi-English signs (see Figures 10, 11, 12, and 13) are the most frequent in the malls. Generally, the shop owners use a bilingual sign to serve customers of both languages used on the sign (Jazul & Bernardo 2017). Of all the Hindi-English bilingual signs observed in the malls, Hindi was mostly expressed in the Roman script. Noticeably, Romanized Hindi was used only to express shop names such as *MAKHAN BHOG*; *SANSKRITI*; *CHAI CHUN* (see Figures 10, 11, and 12). Meanwhile, descriptions of the shops, such as *THE WORLD OF SWEETNESS*, *JEWELLERS*, and *TEA STORE*, were provided in Romanized English. Similarly, it was also the same with the bilingual Nepali-English sign.



Figure 14: Bilingual Nepali-English Sign in Roman

The Romanized Nepali was used only for the shop name *CHINARI* (see Figure 14). Whereas the shop description was written in Romanized English, i.e. *TRADITIONAL DRESS & PHOTO STUDIO*. Thus, informational descriptions of the shops were entirely written in Romanized English, while Romanized Hindi/Nepali was used solely for the storefront. There were no further clues except the names of the stores, which showed that they intended to serve the Hindi/Nepali-speaking clients of the malls. It indicates that the

target audience is those who know English, if not proficient. In most cases, until one could read the description of the shops written in English, one could not understand what the services were that the shops were offering by reading only the shop names. For instance, from the shop name *SANSKRITI*, no one could comprehend the service it offered without its informational description, i.e. *JEWELLERS*. In this case, Hindi/Nepali seemed to be used symbolically, not primarily to communicate with Hindi/Nepali speakers. This reinforces the notion that Hindi/Nepali holds more symbolic significance than communicative utility, akin to the role English plays in malls.



Figure 15: Bilingual English-Bengali sign

Similarly, in the bilingual English-Bengali sign, i.e. *ONLY FISH* (see Figure 15), English was used to disseminate information about what food item it offered. Whereas the welcoming greeting was written in Bengali. This suggests that the owner aimed to attract clients, especially from Bengali-speaking communities, while English was employed for communication with broader customer bases. It makes English more of a communicative language, while Bengali is a language that carries a symbolic value. It is to be mentioned that Hindi and Nepali inscriptions of the bilingual Hindi-English and Nepali-English shop signs were placed on the top. These inscriptions were written in larger fonts compared to the bottom-placed informational descriptions of the signs written in English inscriptions. Notably, the Nepali inscription of the Nepali-English bilingual sign was displayed on the top in neon and brighter than the smaller (font) sized English description on the bottom. Similarly, the Hindi inscription of the Hindi-English bilingual sign was also displayed on the top in red with a larger font size, a brighter color than the English inscription of the bilingual sign. It indicates that the native languages were in the power position or dominant position as per the place semiotics. In other words, Hindi, Nepali and Bengali appear to be the dominant languages in terms of their placement. On the contrary, English serves as an accessory language in most of the bilingual signs examined. Barni and Bagna (2009), however, expanded the idea of the “dominant language”,

making the point that the presence of another language alongside the dominant language has symbolic value and performs a specific function. In this sense, one can argue that the dominant language in the mallscape is English, and all other languages like Hindi, Bengali, and Nepali in relation to it carry a symbolic value that plays a significant function in ‘authenticating’ the space. Furthermore, it was noticed that the English inscription of the bilingual English-Bengali shop sign was placed on the top in a bright red color. While Bengali inscription of the sign was presented in a small font size with less bright blue color than the former. English also appears to be the dominant language in terms of its placement. Bengali, on the other hand, serves as a supplementary language.

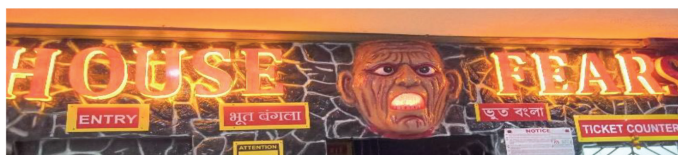


Figure 16: Multilingual English-Hindi-Bengali sign

Paradoxically, a single multilingual English-Hindi-Bengali sign (see Figure 16) was noticed in the malls of a multilingual city. The English inscription of the sign, *HOUSE FEARS*, was placed on the top. It was written in neon and larger font than Hindi and Bengali inscriptions. The Hindi inscription was a translation of the English inscription, positioned on the left bottom side, and Bengali inscription was also a translation of English inscription, placed on the right bottom side. Hindi and Bengali inscriptions were written in the same font size and color. However, both were smaller and duller than bright English inscriptions. It indicates that English is the dominant language compared to Hindi and Bengali. It also shows Hindi as more dominant than Bengali. Thus, the multilingual sign reflects the hierarchy of languages, with English at the top, Hindi in the middle, and Bengali at the bottom of the language ladder based on spatial organization and place semiotics principles.

As already mentioned, the language of brand names was not analyzed. It was observed that all of the brand names were written in Roman script. This stands contrary to the study of Jazul and Bernardo (2017), who observed Chinese translations of brand names alongside the brand. Neither translation nor transliteration of the brand names was noticed in the malls examined. These are “decontextualized” semiotics, according to Scollon and Scollon (2003: 4).

Thus, it was noticed that English was the most preferred language in the malls in Siliguri. This demonstrates how important English is in the commercial domain. The chosen language must draw in potential clients for businesses to be profitable. Therefore, it may be summarized that English and native languages could be instrumentalized for business purposes. However, wider communication is frequently accomplished in English, while native languages could be utilized to conjure up an impression of originality or authenticity for specific customers. English appeared to serve a more effective communicative purpose, whereas native languages conveyed a greater symbolic significance in the malls.

7 Discussion

Since the major concern of this paper has been the signs of individual anchored mall shops, the primary actors or stakeholders of the LL items are considered to be the individual shop owners. The choice of language on signs is a constituent part of economic consideration in mind as signs play a significant economic role in the trade of goods (Cenoz & Gorter 2006). Thus, the usage of a particular language on a sign is associated with the business strategy of shop owners who know the rules of the game. The findings of this study indicate a predominant use of English signs in malls, serving a variety of communicative purposes in India (*ibid.*), thereby acting as a bridge (Costa 2019: 17). English supposedly represents classes of economic, cultural, and social capital. In other words, English represents a class of “better culture, better education, and higher intellect” (Vijayalakshmi & Babu 2014: 1). It is considered to be a route to power, prestige, and wealth (Costa 2019: 17). In Bourdieusian sense, English carries enormous “symbolic capital” (Islam 2018) in India, which also promises easy access to economic, cultural, and social capitals. Its expansion and rising significance worldwide have also added to its symbolic capital in the country. In this context, Bourdieu (1991) contends that language should be seen as a tool of power and a means of communication. When people use a language in certain ways, they make use of their accumulated linguistic resources and subtly modify their words to meet the needs of the social field or market that their audience belongs to (*ibid.*). Thus, this research explores the sociolinguistic impact of English in the context of shopping malls in India. Data were collected and analyzed from the two shopping malls in Siliguri. However, it must be mentioned here that adding more malls to the current study would have enhanced the robustness of the findings. Nonetheless, since the social situation post-colonization is similar throughout India, the findings provide a credible lens to understand the role of English in the mallscape. Future research in this domain could also incorporate some analysis demonstrating the emic perspective in addition to the findings of the current study.

8 Conclusion

The study investigated the LL of a commercial space in a multilingual city. It examined the language used in the mallscape and the sociolinguistic implications of the dominating language. The study explored the use of four languages: English, Hindi, Bengali, and Nepali, in the mallscape. English, a predominant language in the mallscape, reflects both communicative and symbolic values. On the contrary, native languages perform only symbolic purposes in commercial space. Arguably, English has always been at the top of the linguistic hierarchy, pushing other Indian languages to the lower rank. This situation also seemed to be evident in the domain of shopping malls. Although the shopping mall is an emerging “new public space” for urbanities, it is not a classless public space. It has become “a part of everyday life of the Indian middle classes” (Kaur 2017: 116). The shop owners – sign makers – purposely produce English signs to serve the mall users with economic, cultural, and social capital. The prominence of English has negatively impacted the visibility of native languages, whereas the former occupies a more prestigious position. The native languages have been curtailed only for symbolic purposes to attract customers of particular kinds without any prestige attached to them. English symbolizes higher prestige and class character in India as an associate official language of symbolic capital. Notably, using a powerful language does not necessarily mean undermining the native languages. Native languages are the carriers of cultural heritages. Once the language loses its visibility in public spaces, it not only leads to cultural erosion but also hampers the identity of the indigenous communities.

Notes

- ¹ <https://doe.gov.in/sites/default/files/21-07-2015.pdf>
- ² Population by mother tongue, table: C-16 (<https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/10191>), Census of India, 2011.
- ³ https://wbja.nic.in/wbja_admin/files/The%20Bengal%20Official%20Language%20Act,%201961_1.pdf
- ⁴ <https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/data/census-tables>
- ⁵ Final Report – Siliguri City Development Plan, Ministry of Urban Development, April 2015, <http://siligurismc.in/userfiles/file/siliguri-CDP-final-report-29April15.pdf> p.41
- ⁶ <https://www.google.com/maps/search/siliguri+shopping+malls/@26.7410326,88.3805374,13z/data=!3m1!4b1?authuser=0&entry=ttu>
- ⁷ https://www.ambujaneotia.com/business_vertical/city-centre-siliguri/
- ⁸ [https://www.brickworkratings.com/Admin/PressRelease/Tirupati-Plaza-BL-8May2018%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.brickworkratings.com/Admin/PressRelease/Tirupati-Plaza-BL-8May2018%20(1).pdf)
- ⁹ As per the ownership of the space shopping mall is privately owned in a publicly accessible space. As a result, the mallscape is determined by the owners of the anchored shops rather than the government agencies.
- ¹⁰ It refers to the material components of the sign. The material from which signs are made.

- ¹¹ The third component of place semiotics, the emplacement, is thought to be the focus of geosemiotics which is further divided into three subcomponents: decontextualized, transgressive, and situated (Scollon & Scollon 2003). Decontextualized, always appears in the same form regardless of the context, for instance, commercial brand names. Transgressive signs are unauthorized signs and “situated semiotics” deals with signs, the meaning which changes depending on where they are placed (Olmstead-Wang: 4).
- ¹² Since it is a proper name, and the brand names remain the same in any language, they are either deonyms or eponyms. The former are generally generic terms originating from the name of a place (proper name). The latter, on the other hand, refer to the terms that originate after the name of a person. Samsung is the name of the mobile phone brand in South Korea. Samsung reads as it is in any of the languages be it in Hindi, English, Bengali, or other languages.

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