

KERESA KUMERA CHALI¹ – ANDREA PARAPATICS²

¹University of Pannonia Multilingualism Doctoral School
keresa.kumera@phd.uni-pannon.hu

²University of Pannonia Institute of Hungarian and Applied Linguistics
parapatics.andrea@mftk.uni-pannon.hu
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1711-0885>

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The Linguistic Landscape of Commercial Shop Signs of Nekemte town, Oromiya, Ethiopia

This paper aims to investigate the linguistic landscape of the town of Nekemte in the Oromiya region of Ethiopia. A qualitative research design was used to conduct the study. Data were collected through photographs, for which a digital camera was used. The three language groups expected in the town are categorized as Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, and English. The sample was selected in the main streets leading to and from the busiest commercial center. The data were analysed qualitatively. The results of this study show that most of the commercial signs collected were monolingual and bilingual, while very few were multilingual. With few exceptions, signs written in Afaan Oromoo were translated directly from Amharic and were mostly fragmentary. The reason for this could be the lack of an explicit policy for bottom-up signs. To minimize this problem, the researchers made some recommendations.

Keywords: linguistic landscape, Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, Oromiya, Ethiopia

1. Multilingualism and language policy in Ethiopia – the context of linguistic landscape research

The linguistic landscape is integral to our everyday environment, although most people rarely become aware of it beyond its informative function. However, bi- and multilingual public signs have attracted scientific attention in the last few decades, and as a result, researchers have begun to conduct research in this field area. Public signs in the linguistic landscape are categorized as top-down and bottom-up, where top-down signs are placed by the government or authorities, and bottom-up signs are placed by the community (Pavlenko, 2009 in Bátyi et al., 2019). In this regard, this paper focuses on the latter and examines the linguistic landscape of commercial shop signs in an Ethiopian town, Nekemte, located in the western part of the Oromiya region which is the largest region in the country. There are different reasons for selecting this area which can be explained as follows. As this town is one of the commercial centers, people from different regions of the country (Amhara region, Tigray region, Southern Nation and Nationalities region, Sidama region, Gambella

region, Benishangul Gumuz region and South West Ethiopia Peoples' Region) come here to settle temporarily or permanently (Wirtu et al., 2021). When they come, they not only come physically, but also bring their language and culture. Consequently, the town is inhabited by linguistically and culturally heterogeneous groups.

In this regard, societal multilingualism can be expected in this area where people can “practice three or more languages in organized and unorganized way and handle more than two languages by some or all members of a society” Aronin(2019: 1). However, “The existence of societal multilingualism in a country or region does not mean that the country or region in question is peopled by equally multilingual citizens” (ibid). Consequently, not everyone is multilingual in a multilingual society, as monolinguals can also be found in similar multilingual environments (e.g., in Switzerland). Aronin (2019) labels it as “proximate multilingualism, which means the “coexistence of many languages simply in a territory, without the necessity of all of them being used by all the citizens” (p. 4).

Language policy is a crucial context of the linguistic landscape as it promotes or hinders the existence of different languages on public signs in a given country. In order to discuss the language policy of Ethiopia, it is important to reflect on some relevant historical events. For several centuries, Ethiopia had been under a feudal monarchy. Under these regimes, the ethnic language agenda faced significant problems. The successive imperial regimes (1889-1974) advocated using one national language to maintain the country's integrity and introducing other languages for instructional purposes, for media and advertisements had been conceived as courting national disintegration. In either case, the imperial regime was not long sighted enough to perceive the danger of imposing one national language on the multiethnic nation, which was like “a de facto declaration of war on the others” (Tefera, 1997, p. 2). This ideological environment was not conducive to displaying different languages in the linguistic landscape.

The socialist government that assumed the mantle of leadership in 1974 shifted from promoting one language as an instrument for national unity to encouraging the use of other languages per its political orientations. One notable effort during this time was the policy decision to conduct adult literacy programs in fifteen ethnic languages (Ayalew, 1999). The literacy program (campaign) started in 1979 and ended only at the fall of the socialist government in 1991. The other noteworthy policy decision by the socialist regime was transcribing these languages in the Ethiopic script (traditionally used for Semitic languages in the country), most of which were in an unwritten form hitherto. However, the use of these languages was limited to the non-formal education sector, and the government did not push forward to use them as instructional languages, media, and advertisement in the formal system (Ayalew, 1999). Hence, Amharic (a Semitic language) remained the only

national language used as the medium of instruction for formal education at the elementary level, for media, and for different advertisements. The “Derg” regime also did not practically implement the use of nationalities’ languages in education, media, and advertisement.

After the downfall of the “Derg” in 1991, the history of the languages of Ethiopian nations and nationalities changed. The Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) focused, among other things, on the rights of nations and nationalities to use their languages for different purposes, such as education, media, workplace, and advertisements. For example, the fifth article of sub-articles 1, 2, and 3 of the Constitution, ratified in 1995, states that: (1) “all Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal recognition, and (2) Amharic shall be the working language of the federal government. (3) Members of the Federation may by law determine their respective working languages” (FDRE, p. 3). If we consider each sub-article separately, sub-article 1 gives equal recognition to all Ethiopian languages, meaning each language is granted equal recognition at school, in the press, media, and public sphere. Regarding sub-article 2, why only Amharic language is selected as a working language is not clear as there are other languages, for example; Afaan Oromo, which the majority speaks, was not considered as the working language of the federal government. As mentioned earlier, the monarchial and the “Derg” regimes’ language policies prioritized the Amharic language to be used throughout the country. Consequently, the new government might have been convinced to declare Amharic as a working language at the federal level. Under sub-article 3, since each regional government is a member of the federation house, they can decide which language/s to use in their respective regions for different purposes. According to this sub-article, authority is given to regional governors to select language/s that can easily allow their society to get access to education, demonstrate their culture, work in the office, advertise different things, and so on from 85 languages. This sub-article guaranteed all Ethiopian regions the right to decide which languages to use at school, in the office, in media, and in the linguistic landscape.

In addition to indigenous languages, great importance is also attached to English in Ethiopian education and other social spheres. Articles 3.5.5, and 3.5.7, of the 1994 Education and Training Policy are evidence of the emphasis on English. The articles state that (a) English will be the medium of instruction for secondary and higher education, (b) English will be taught as a subject from first grade (FDRE Constitution, 1995: 3). In addition, as different non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) are available in different regions of the country, English, besides indigenous languages, is also used in the linguistic landscape. Even some schools use only English instruction starting from lower grade levels.

Consequently, three languages are expected on the bottom-up signs in the selected town. These are: Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, and English. First, Afaan Oromoo was selected since the study area is located in the Oromiya regional state, and Afaan Oromoo is the working language of the region based on the authority given to the region by the constitution. Secondly, because the study area is the commercial center, Amharic was selected as most people who speak Amharic come to this area from different parts of the country hoping to improve their lives. Third, English is selected as there are public universities (e.g., Wollega University, a governmental university) and other private universities in the town where foreigners from abroad are hired to teach, and scholarship opportunities are given to other African students. For these reasons, these three languages are expected on bottom-up commercial shop signs in Nekemte to provide appropriate information for the population. There is no historical relationship between these languages. Amharic uses the Ge'ez alphabet, while Afaan Oromo and English use the Latin. These three languages are structurally different. As signs are designed to convey appropriate information for the users, it is important to examine the bottom-up commercial shop signs of this town from the perspective of taxonomy for analyzing multilingual information arrangements in signage (Reh, 2004 in Bátyi et al., 2019), diversity reflection on shop signs and the languages written on the shop signs conform to the spelling rules of the respective languages.

2. Literature review

In public areas, people can get visual information that conveys a different message in written or picture form on billboards, advertising signs, traffic signs, street names, commercial shop signs, and so on. These signs can help people to understand and communicate effectively with the meaning they convey. These constitute the so-called “linguistic landscape” (see Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Cenoz & Gorter, 2008).

According to a Google search and Google Scholar (January 2022), with 27,400,000 million and 875,000 results, respectively, linguistic landscape (LL) is a growing area. Since the 1990s, when systematic research on LL began, it has become a coherent branch of research (Bátyi et al., 2019). Bátyi and colleagues (2019) add that as linguistic landscape study started only recently, cross-sectional studies are more prevalent than longitudinal studies. Although linguistic landscape study started relatively recently, the number of publications has increased considerably in recent years (see Bátyi et al., 2019; Gorter, 2018; Gorter & Cenoz, 2017; Wolff et al., 2013).

As a result of scientific and technological advancements, the difference is noticeable among scholars. Consequently, scholars did not reach a consensus regarding the definition of linguistic landscape (Bátyi et al., 2019). The most widely used definition is the following:

“The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration” (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25).

Several subfields have been labeled and studied within the framework of the linguistic landscape, such as “soundscape”, “schoolscape,” “cyberscape,” “skinscape,” and “townscape,” as contrasted to “ruralscape” (Scarvaglieri et al., 2013; Brown 2012; Ivkovic & Lotherington 2009; Peck & Stroud 2015; Muth 2015 cited in Gorter, 2018). Accordingly, as this world is dynamic and not stable, these issues should be included in the definition of the linguistic landscape from our standpoint.

In the Ethiopian context, no overt language policy provides clear guidelines for the preservation of languages in the current dynamic global world. However, the constitution guarantees that all languages are “equal” and that all ethnic language groups have the right to develop their own languages (FDRE, Article 5). Among the factors contributing to the preservation of languages in multilingual contexts is the visibility of languages in urban public spaces. Numerous studies in the field of linguistic landscape in urban settings have attempted to explain the impact of languages on signs. These studies found that language maintenance or shift is facilitated by the ideological and psychological messages that languages on public signs convey to audiences (Backhaus, 2007; Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Lanza & Woldemariam, 2014).

Although extensive research has been conducted internationally on the linguistic landscape, there are few studies on this area at the national and regional levels in the Ethiopian context. A study by Amauel Raga (2012) examined the attitudes of inscribers in the Jimma town linguistic landscape toward Afaan Oromoo (Oromoo language) and its impact on Afaan Oromoo writings in the town linguistic landscape.

The town of Jimma is an appropriate area for this type of research due to its proximity to the southern nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia, where more than fifty linguistic groups live. In addition, Jimma, a commercial town, also attracts various ethnic and language groups from all over Ethiopia. According to Ethiopian Central Statistical Agency (2007) (hereafter ECSA), of the total population of 120,960 in the town, 46.7% are Oromoo, 17.1% Amhara, 10% Dawuro, 6.4% Gurage, and the rest comprising smaller ethnic and language groups. This source also confirms that, with few exceptions, almost all Ethiopian language groups live in Jimma, although their numbers vary greatly.

The research showed that most inscribers had a negative attitude toward the language because of their preconceived notions. Consequently, they carelessly wrote Afaan Oromoo based on the help of other people. They also did not care about the accuracy of the information they entered because they believed that using Afaan Oromoo was to fulfill the formalities of the regional government's language policy.

The other study conducted in the region was on three cities and examined the strength of the ethnolinguistic vitality of different languages in the cities of Adama, Jimma, and Sabata (Fekede & Gemechu, 2016). The town of Adama has become a trade center due to its location on the country's main trade route. It has attracted many Ethiopians from different linguistic regions and is home to different linguistic groups. According to ECSA (2007), the total population of the town is 222,212, of which the majority is Oromoo (38.6%), and the other major language groups such as Amhara (34.22%), Gurage (11.8%), and Tigrie (3.3%) live in the town (ECSA, 2007). Therefore, Adama is also a multiethnic and multilingual town suitable for studying ethnolinguistic vitality. Similarly, Sabata, in the central part of the country, was chosen for this study because of its proximity to the capital, Addis Ababa. Sabata is a town in the administrative region of Oromiya and is located 26 kilometres west of Addis Ababa. This town is also home to many language groups, as it is home to many large national and international organisations.

The study by Fekede and Gemechu (2016) found that Amharic scored highest on the ethnolinguistic vitality scale in the three Oromiya cities, followed by English. The ethnolinguistic score for Afaan Oromoo (Oromoo language) is the lowest, although it is the official working language of the regional government.

The above-mentioned studies focused on attitudes and ethnolinguistic vitality and did not investigate the language of public signs, which is the aim of the present study. LL Research clearly distinguishes between top-down (official) and bottom-up (non-official) signs (Pavlenko, 2009, cited by Bátyi et al., 2019). Top-down signs (street and official building names, road signs, warning and prohibition signs) are government signs that may reflect a country's language policy. Bottom-up signs (signs on stores and private businesses, advertisements) are posted by the community or owners of private organizations and reflect non-official language preferences (Cenoz & Gorter, 2008). The objective of this study was to examine the linguistic landscape of the bottom-up commercial shop signs in Nekemte town in Oromiya Regional State. The following research questions will be answered in the study: How is diversity reflected on shop signs? Do the languages written on the shop signs conform to the spelling rules of the respective languages? What do commercial shop signs look like from the perspective of the taxonomy for analysing multilingual information arrangements in signage?

3. Data and method

3.1. On Nekemte town of Oromiya region in Ethiopia

This study was conducted in Nekemte town (see Picture 1), located in West Oromiya of East Wollega Zone, 331 kilometers from the national capital, Addis Ababa (see Picture 2). The town is the capital of the Eastern Wollega Zone and has a total population of 138,127, of which 69,400 (50.24%) are male, and 68,727 (49.76%) are female (Wirtu et al., 2021). Ethnically, 122,467 (88.66 %) are Oromoo, 7888 (5.71%) are Amhara, 1920 (1.4%) are Tigre, 4349 (3.15%) are Gurage, and 1503 (1.08%) are others (ibid).

Picture 1. View of Nekemte town



Picture 2. The map showing the study area connecting different Oromiya Zones in western Ethiopia (Source: Tafese et al., 2012, p. 2)



Currently, there are six sub-cities in the town of Nekemte. These include Cheleleki, Burka Jato, Bakanisa Kase, Kaso, Derge and Bake Jama. Most residents are Protestant at 49.48%, 39.64% belong to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, and 10.88% are Muslims. The town is home to various ethnic groups (Oromoo, Amhara, Tigre, Gurage, and others).

3.2. Data sources and data analysis

The primary data for this study were the photographs of language signs on facades, billboards, banners, graffiti, and posters collected in an ethnographic manner (in this case, a material ethnography). Visual data consisting of photographs of languages on commercial shop signs were collected in the main streets leading to/from the busiest commercial centers in the town of Nekemte.

The sample selection is an important factor in describing the linguistic composition of an area. In this study, the decision on the geographical areas of the survey, the type of items to be surveyed, and the linguistic characteristics of the signs was made according to the suggestion of Backhaus (2007), that is, through purposive sampling. Since the town selected for this study was not very complex per se (medium-sized regional town), the main streets leading to/from the busiest commercial centers were selected. Data collection focused on the signs to the right and left of the streets and signs placed or erected for different businesses on different materials that were visible from a reasonable distance to take a photo.

Data were collected through photographs using a digital camera to take pictures. The photographed language signs were then classified according to their characteristics into monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual concepts for the town of Nekemte. These were grouped for analysis according to the town's three expected language categories: Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, and English.

Bátyi et al. (2019, p. 5), quoting Reh (2004), distinguish four kinds of “multilingual information arrangement” on signs. The first one is duplicating, and it presents all information in all the languages on a sign in a relatively balanced way. The second type of multilingual language used on a sign is fragmentary, whereby the information presented in one language is only partially presented in some other language or languages. The third is overlapping multilingualism which presents similar information in at least two languages, but only partial content is presented in another language/s. Furthermore, the fourth arrangement is complementary, where the information content of two or more languages is entirely different. These “multilingual information arrangements” on signs were considered to study the problem of bottom-up commercial shop signs in Nekemte. In addition, the data were analysed from the point of view of how the signs in the stores include diversity and

where the languages are written on the signs in the stores according to the spelling rules of the languages.

4. Results

The following sections report the results of a study conducted in the town of Nekemte in Oromiya, Ethiopia, the commercial center of the western part of the Oromiya region. The researchers focused on the bottom-up signs (commercial store signs) of Nekemte town and analysed the linguistic landscape according to the above taxonomy.

Picture 3. Home appliances, baby and women’s shoes at great discount



The store sign in Picture 3 is written in two languages: Afaan Oromoo and Amharic. However, the part written in Afaan Oromoo violates the writing rule of the language. The writing rule of the Afaan Oromoo allows for the tightening and loosening of consonants and the lengthening and shortening of vowels. However, the writing on this character nullifies this rule and is unclear, even to the speakers of the language, what meaning it has for the users. In the Amharic version, the sign is very expressive. Thus, we can conclude that the authors failed to translate the Amharic version into Afaan Oromoo. From the point of view of the taxonomy for analysing multilingual information arrangements in signage, it can be classified as a fragmentary (or partial) translation, where the complete information is given in only one language. However, selected parts have been translated into another language(s). The Afaan Oromoo version should be written as “Meeshaalee Manaaf Oolan, Kophee Shamarraniifi Huccuu Daa’immanii Gatii Gadi Bu’aa Guddaadhaan” to convey complete information to users.

Picture 4. Bona home and office furniture store



The above shop sign in Picture 4 is written in three languages: Afaan Oromoo, English, and Amharic, respectively. However, the messages they convey are quite different. The Afaan Oromoo version does not fit the rule of lengthening and shortening the vowels when writing the language. Thus, it does not convey the meaning it intends. The English version has the same problem since it is a direct translation. The Amharic version is far different from the Afaan Oromoo and the English version. It only lists the articles. It does not contain complete information for users. From the perspective of the taxonomy for analysing multilingual information arrangements in signage, it can be classified as complementary, with two or more languages conveying completely different content. Therefore, to convey complete information to users, the African and English text should be written as “Mana Gurgurtaa Meeshaalee Biiroofi Manaa Boonaa” and “Bona Home and Office Furniture Store,” respectively.

Picture 5. Wollega Photo Studio



The above shop sign in Picture 5 is written in three languages: Afaan Oromoo, English, and Amharic, respectively. The Afaan Oromoo version has the problem that

the consonants are written too close together. It, therefore, violates the rules of the Afaan Oromoo script. For this reason, it does not convey the desired information to users. It should be corrected as “Mana Suuraa Maxxansaa Wallaggaa” to provide complete information to users. In addition, the Amharic version is more prominent so that it can be seen from a distance, while Afaan Oromoo and English are written in lowercase. From this, it can be concluded that much importance is given to Amharic.

Picture 6. Lealem beauty salon training



The above shop sign in Picture 6 is written in two languages: Afaan Oromoo and Amharic. The purpose of this sign is to direct users to the beauty salon for women. However, the Afaan Oromoo version violates the basic rules of the Afaan Oromoo writing systems. Also, the Amharic version does not convey all the information to users. In addition, an attempt was made to translate some parts of the Amharic version into Afaan Oromoo. All the information written in Amharic is not written in Afaan Oromoo. If we look at this sign from the perspective of Reh’s (2004) taxonomy for analysing multilingual information arrangements in signage, it falls under fragmentary (or partial) translation, where the complete information is rendered in only one language. However, selected parts have been translated into additional languages. To make the text in Afaan Oromoo on this sign ambiguous and to convey complete information to the society, it should be corrected as “Dhaabbata Leenjii Oogummaafi Bareedina Dubaraa Lee’alem.”

Picture 7. Walin general motor vehicles spare parts



This shop sign in Picture 7 is written in three languages: Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, and English. In these three languages, the services offered are clearly stated. Therefore, owners of cars or automobiles can get the spare parts they need. Consequently, from the perspectives of Reh's (2004) taxonomy for analysing multilingual information arrangements in signage, this shop falls under duplication, where all the information is presented in both languages.

Picture 8. Itsegenet bakery



The above shop sign in Picture 8 is written in two languages: Afaan Oromoo and Amharic. Upon closer analysis, we see that it does not convey adequate information to users. However, if we consider the Afaan Oromoo version, it is purple and does not conform to the basic rules of the Afaan Oromoo writing system. It is difficult to read the word *itsehiuuoot*. If we look at the word *daabbo*, it looks like we are shouting it. However, the goal of this shop sign is to point to a bakery. To convey a

meaningful message to users, the Afaan Oromoo version should be corrected to read “Mana Gurgurtaa Daabboo Itsehiiwoot.”

Picture 9. Tsehay baby clothing store



A shop sign should be written according to the correct rules that apply to any language. Otherwise, it will have a different meaning for the users or society. In a diverse society like Ethiopia, it may even lead to conflicts. For this reason, it must be written carefully. The above shop sign in Picture 9 is written in two languages: Afaan Oromoo and Amharic, and conveys a meaning that contradicts the desired one. If we look at the words like *gurgurta*, *Daa'imanii*, and *Tsahay* in the Afaan Oromoo version, they are not written according to Afaan Oromoo writing rules. Letters are omitted. Therefore, this shop sign does not convey the intended meaning to users. In order to convey complete information to users, it should be written as ‘Mana Gurgurtaa Huccuu Daa'immanii Tsahaay’.

Most of the photographically recorded shop signs in the town of Nekemte are not clear enough to convey complete information to users. With few exceptions, they are translated directly from Amharic. As a result, the Afaan Oromoo versions of the commercial shop signs in Nekemte town deviate from the rules of the Afaan Oromoo script. Consequently, some lack lengthening and shortening of vowels, while others struggle to write consonants tighter and looser.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to examine the linguistic landscape of commercial shop signs in the town of Nekemte in the Oromiya regional state. To this end, the study aimed to answer three questions. The first question was: How is diversity reflected in shop signs? The second question was: Do the written languages on the shop signs conform to the spelling rules of the respective languages? Finally, how do the shop signs look

from the perspective of the taxonomy for analysing multilingual information arrangements in signage? Since the town selected for this study was not very large (medium-sized regional town), the main streets leading to/from the busiest commercial centers were selected, thus ensuring that the signs in the sample were representative of the town.

Data collection focused on signs to the right and left of the streets and signs posted for different businesses on different materials in Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, and English as informative and visible from a reasonable distance to take a photo. Most of the photographically recorded shop signs in the town of Nekemte are written in Afaan Oromoo and Amharic. However, with few exceptions, the shop signs in Afaan Oromoo are translated directly from Amharic. To confirm this, some lack lengthening and shortening of vowels, while others have the problem of tightening and loosening of consonants. Therefore, we can conclude that the bottom-up commercial shop signs of Nekemte town were written carelessly without knowing the language structure of the language when it comes to bottom-up commercial shop signs written in Afaan Oromoo. The bottom-up commercial shop signs in Nekemte did not consider diversity. From the perspective of Reh's (2004) taxonomy for analysing multilingual information arrangements in signage, the bottom-up commercial shop signs in Nekemte mostly fall under the fragmentary category.

Comparing this study with other research conducted by Amanuel Raga (2012) in the town of Jimma, another town in the region, the Afaan Oromoo version of the linguistic landscape was also written carelessly. This phenomenon, in turn, shows that Amharic is dominant in Jimma even though different ethnic groups live in this town. Moreover, the research by Fekede and Gemechu (2016) in three towns of the Oromiya region, Adama, Jimma, and Sebeta, also revealed that Amharic scores highest on the scale of ethnic linguistic vitality in the three Oromiya towns, followed by English. The ethno-linguistic score for Afaan Oromoo (Oromoo language) is the lowest, although it is the official working language of the regional government. Therefore, it can be concluded that although the Ethiopian constitution gave equal rights for each region to preserve and develop its language, the owner of the bottom-up commercial shop signs is violating the constitutional rights given to the Afaan Oromoo language in this region. In order to solve the existing problem based on the recommendations of various researchers, the tourism and heritage office of the region should follow up.

As the results of this study show, the bottom-up commercial shop signs in Nekemte, which are directly translated from Amharic into Afaan Oromoo, cannot provide complete information to the users. For this reason, the researchers would like to make the following recommendations to address these problems: 1) The Oromiya Regional State should develop a clear guideline for writing bottom-up

signage in the town. 2) Bottom-up signs should represent diversity. 3) The signs in Nekemte town stores should be brought to the attention of their owners.

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