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Gvino, Wine, Vino – The Study of Linguistic Landscape in Tbilisi

Abstract

This study investigates the linguistic landscape of Tbilisi's city centre, with a particular focus on the visibility and spatial distribution of Georgian, English, and Russian across public signage. As a rapidly globalizing urban space with a complex sociolinguistic history, Tbilisi offers a compelling case for examining how language is used in public settings and what this reveals about identity, power relations, and sociopolitical dynamics in contemporary Georgia. The research aims to explore the symbolic and communicative roles of these three languages in the city's central and touristically attractive areas, where commercial and cultural activity is dense and language use is often strategic.

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative analysis with qualitative interpretation. The dataset comprises 45 photographs of business signs, restaurant menus, and graffiti collected through purposive sampling in Tbilisi's urban core. The images were selected based on their diversity of language use, visibility, and relevance to both local and tourist audiences. Each image was analysed using a set of linguistic landscape analytical criteria, including language prominence, script type, placement, and intended audience. Special attention was paid to whether languages appeared monolingually or multilingually, and how language choice might reflect broader economic or political motivations.

Findings indicate that English has become the most prominent language in Tbilisi's city centre signage, often appearing independently or as the primary language in multilingual signs. This dominance reflects English's global status and the growing emphasis on tourism, international business, and modernity. Georgian, despite being the official state language and a central component of national identity, more often appears alongside English rather than as a standalone medium, particularly in commercial contexts. This pattern raises important questions about the symbolic status of the Georgian language in spaces of high visibility and economic activity. Russian, once a dominant language in public and private domains during the Soviet era, now appears less frequently, reflecting both shifts in language policy and demographic changes, including decreased Russian-speaking populations and evolving political relationships.

This research contributes to the growing field of linguistic landscape studies by offering empirical evidence from a post-Soviet, multilingual context. It highlights how language in public spaces is not only a matter of communication but also a reflection of broader sociocultural hierarchies, economic forces, and political ideologies. The study's findings have implications for language policy, urban planning, and debates surrounding cultural identity in Georgia and comparable transitional societies.

Keywords: *linguistic landscape (LL), multilingualism, language policy, language planning*

1. Introduction

The study of Linguistic Landscapes (LL) is a relatively new yet essential field within sociolinguistics and language planning, with the term being officially introduced by Landry and Bourhis in 1997. The research questions in this field have evolved from merely examining signs in public spaces to addressing more complex phenomena, considering which languages are visible on public signage and their social meanings in the effort to establish political or social dominance. In this context, the linguistic landscape of Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, serves as a captivating case study, illustrating the link between local language policies and multilingualism. To date, the linguistic landscape of Tbilisi and Georgia remains less studied overall. Consequently, this research seeks to address this gap. As demonstrated in this paper, the presence and arrangement of Georgian, English, and Russian on Tbilisi's public signage in the city centre reveal significant insights into the community's evolving identities and power relations. By examining the visibility and distribution of these languages, this study aims to understand how well the Tbilisian linguistic landscape reflects the official language policy and the broader social, cultural, and political influences shaping contemporary Georgia.

2. Linguistic Landscape

The term "Linguistic Landscapes" (LL) was first formally used by Landry and Bourhis in 1997 when they discussed multilingual societies (such as Canada or Belgium) and the importance of linguistic planning in urban spaces, particularly in terms of the symbolic role of language and the invisible struggle for power between linguistic communities. This research was groundbreaking because it linked the language used on public signs to broader sociolinguistic issues, such as identity and power dynamics. According to the authors, language planners in Belgium, in 1980, were the first to recognise the significance of marking linguistic boundaries and regulating the visibility of languages on public signs. This marked the start of the unofficial understanding of Linguistic Landscapes.

Linguistic Landscape "refers to the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region" (Landry and Bourhis, 1997, p. 23). As the authors state, despite seeming simple at first glance, this term carries an important and symbolic function, subconsciously conveying a strong message about the vitality of a language within a society. In turn, the vitality of a language influences the status or prestige of a particular speech community and the extent of institutional support it receives from the government. Therefore, the authors argue that the languages most prominently displayed in public spaces tend to have higher status and institutional backing. In contrast, the absence of languages from urban areas may indicate lower prestige or marginalisation of their speakers (1997). Consequently, LL can be crucial in shaping society's identity and reflecting power dynamics. The presence or absence of specific languages in public spaces can signal dominance or coexistence among different speech groups.

A wide range of research analysing linguistic choices in public spaces followed the seminal study by Landry and Bourhis (1997). One notable example is the research conducted by Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), which examined billboards and signs in Israel, Brussels, and Tokyo, demonstrating that the linguistic landscape mirrors societal, political, cultural, or demographic power structures. They argue that signs serve as tools for navigating physical spaces and are also deeply intertwined with power and identity, making each sign significant in analysing ongoing struggles over space. The authors distinguish between two main types of linguistic signs—top-down and bottom-up. The state or institutions regulate top-down signs and typically conform to official language policies. In contrast, bottom-up signs are created by private actors and often exhibit resilience against these policies, more accurately reflecting societal linguistic preferences.

In their study, Cenoz and Gorter (2006) focus on minority languages and their representation in signage. They argue that LL can act as a mirror reflecting the vitality of minority languages and their efforts to maintain identity in a multilingual society. The authors examined the Basque language and Frisian alongside Spanish and Dutch, respectively, and found that while minority languages are visible in public signage and official places, Dutch and Spanish dominate the commercial and private sectors, indicating societal power disparities. Notably, despite the bilingual nature of the Basque Country and Friesland, the Dutch and Spanish still hold dominance, illustrating ongoing power struggles.

Similarly, Totibadze et al. (2018) explore the linguistic landscape of restaurants in several Dutch cities—Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and The Hague. They highlight how the use of languages such as English, Chinese, Italian, and Spanish in restaurant windows or menus often exceeds the use of Dutch. According to them, these linguistic choices are often linked to the identity and ethnicity of the cuisine. They are made intuitively by restaurant owners to attract diverse clientele and evoke cultural perceptions rather than through deliberate marketing strategies. As a result, they suggest that much of the private linguistic landscape in these cities is shaped more by instinct than formal planning, offering valuable insights into multilingual societies and how identity is constructed.

2.1 Geosemiotics

Scollon & Scollon (2003), in their work *Discourses in Place: Language in the Material World*, examine the connection between language, space, and semiotics. They use sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and semiotics to explain how language is presented in physical environments. Language is deeply tied to public signage and spatial surroundings, creating meaning around us, shaping social interactions and power structures, and constructing social realities. The term Scollon coined to describe the relationship between language and the physical world is geosemiotics. It examines how language, whether linguistic or non-linguistic, appears on public signs and how it influences how people interpret and perceive it. The authors also stress the importance of “discourse in place”. They believe that where and how language is placed in public spaces carries meaning and is not an arbitrary system.

2.2 Multilingualism

Gorter (2006) introduces the concept of the linguistic landscape, through which one can analyse multilingualism and the symbolic meanings of languages in various societies. As the author argues, multilingual societies continually grapple with issues of power and dominance, which can be observed in public signage. These signs offer valuable insights into the power dynamics within a region. Furthermore, some countries regulate multilingualism on public signs, with the government mandating and controlling language use in public spaces. In some areas, multilingualism is encouraged; in others, it is discouraged. Gorter (2006) also suggests that informal or commercial signs and the languages used on them can provide a deeper understanding of societal power relations and identity, as they are less regulated and more reflective of community language practices. Commercial signs often aim for economic advantages, such as serving diverse linguistic groups.

English increasingly appears in public spaces, even in regions with no historical or official status. The widespread use of this language is attributed to its role as a global lingua franca, making it a prominent feature on signage and billboards and signalling modernity and prestige by appealing to a broader market of consumers (Blommaert, 2010; Piller, 2003).

2.3 Tbilisian Linguistic Landscape

Government language policies often influence the languages displayed in public spaces. Some countries have explicit rules about which languages can be used in public signage. In contrast, others may adopt more inclusive language policies that do not prohibit using multiple languages in public areas. The Georgian constitution declares Georgian as the official language of the state and requires public signs, especially on government or state buildings, to be written in Georgian. The Law on the State Language (2015) reaffirms Georgian as the primary language in public signage: “Texts of statements, notifications, titles, posters, signboards, placards, advertisements, and other visual information intended to inform the public are prepared in the official language. If necessary, appropriate information may be indicated in a non-official language and in those municipalities where representatives of national minorities reside, appropriate information may also be provided in the language of those minorities” (Article 24). Furthermore, any public signage in a foreign language must include Georgian text, with the size and placement being more prominent (Law of Georgia on official language, 2015).).

3. Methodology

The paper aims to analyse the linguistic landscape of a small tourist street in the centre of Tbilisi. Specifically, the study examines (1) which languages are visible on private signage in the street and (2) the social meanings conveyed through these displays. The analysis was conducted using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Quantitative analysis determines the frequency of each language in the collected data, providing a statistical overview of the linguistic landscape in Tbilisi. In contrast, the qualitative study explores the sociocultural implications of the languages used in the area. Overall, 45 photographs were taken by the author on a small street, reflecting the languages employed in the tourist hotspot. This street was deliberately chosen for its central location; it is in the city's heart and is one of the most frequently visited places. Consequently, it clearly illustrates which languages are prioritised in public signage and reveals the power dynamics, where the arrangement of languages underscores prestige, accessibility, or national identity. The images include small or large private businesses, graffiti, and restaurant menus.

4. Results and Discussion

According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia (2025), the highest number of tourists between 2022 and the first quarter of 2025 came from Russia, followed by visitors from Turkey and Armenia, indicating that their main reasons were holidays, leisure, and recreation (GeoStat, 2025). Moreover, during the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022, Georgia experienced an influx of 100,000 wartime Russians relocating to the country and seeking permanent residence. However, by 2023, more than 30,000 had left due to the “anti-Russian sentiment” in society. While the Russians contributed to some economic growth, they also caused inflation of the Georgian Lari and a spike in rental prices, making life much more challenging for many Georgians (Kucera, 2024). Given these circumstances, it is unsurprising that the Russian language has recently appeared on public signage, especially in tourist areas.

By analysing 45 photos collected for the study, three main language groups—Georgian, English, and Russian—were identified. Below are the number of signs for each language and the order in which the languages were presented.

Only Georgian	0
Only English	19
Only Russian	1
Georgian, English, Russian	8
Georgian, Russian, English	2
English, Georgian, Russian	1
English, Russian, Georgian	1
Russian, English, Georgian	0
Georgian, English	5
English, Georgian	2
English, Russian	5
Russian, English	1
Other*	Chinese 1, Arabic 2

* These languages were not presented alone. They were always in combination with either Georgian, English, Russian or all of the above.

The presented table highlights the linguistic landscape of Tbilisi's city centre and the use of Georgian, English, and Russian on various bottom-up signs. Based on the data, the following observations can be made:

English is the predominant language, standing alone and appearing most frequently in combinations. Specifically, there are 19 cases where signs solely employ English. Additionally, English appears 17 times alongside other languages, such as Georgian and Russian. This results in 36 instances out of 45 where English is used, making it the most prevalent language in the city centre. This trend can be explained by the nature of the language. As mentioned earlier, English is the global language and an obvious choice for businesses targeting tourists, as it facilitates broader communication.

Despite being the country's official language and with the government establishing clear guidelines for public signage, Georgian never appears as the sole language on signs in the city centre; it is only found in multilingual signs. Georgian is used in 18 cases, combined with English and/or Russian (Georgian-English-Russian in 8 cases; Georgian-English in 5 instances; English-Georgian in 2 cases). This is quite surprising, given that Georgian is the official language and that the state requires business owners to display it in their signs and advertisements. Ideally, it should be visible on every sign.

The presence of the Russian language is also notable, owing to the reasons discussed above. However, it appears less frequently than the English language. Interestingly, only one Russian sign was observed in the area under study. The linguistic landscape of the city centre suggests that, although Russian remains popular, it is not as dominant as English.

The most common multilingual signage order features Georgian, English, and Russian. Tbilisi's city centre displays a layered linguistic landscape, where English is central, with Georgian and Russian playing secondary roles. This likely reflects the area's status as a tourist hotspot and the primary source of income for many small businesses. Consequently, owners choose English as the primary language to communicate their message efficiently and attract customers. The status of Georgian as the secondary language is concerning, particularly given that the country's language policy mandates the inclusion of the state language on public signs. These findings emphasise the need for more sensitive language planning aligned with the country's official language. At the same time, they acknowledge the practical realities of language use in Tbilisi's evolving linguistic landscape.

5. Conclusions

The study of the linguistic landscape has progressed over recent decades from merely documenting signs in cities to analysing the deeper socio-cultural meanings behind language choices in public spaces. Many sociolinguists aim to understand the ongoing struggle for dominance and political power. The linguistic landscape of Tbilisi vividly reflects the intricate relationship between local language policies, global linguistic trends, and the country's socio-political realities. Through a small study of the visibility and distribution of Georgian, English, and Russian on public signage in a representative part of Tbilisi's city centre, this research highlights the crucial role language choices play in shaping identity and signalling power dynamics in Georgia's capital.

The results reveal a surprising prevalence of English in the city centre, despite it having no official status or historical significance in Georgia. The visibility of English on public signs indicates its globalised character. It underscores the city's focus on tourism and economic integration, as it is predominantly used by businesses seeking to attract diverse clientele. This emphasises the commercial motivations of private owners who prioritise accessibility over adherence to local language policies. Conversely, Georgian, the official language of the country and a legal requirement for public signage, often occupies a secondary position in multilingual displays and rarely appears as the sole language in tourist areas. The findings suggest a discrepancy between the official linguistic policy that mandates the prominence of Georgian and the informal practices of business owners, who respond to market demands and customer preferences. This demonstrates that language visibility negotiates social, economic, and cultural realities. The increasing presence of Russian is largely context-dependent and partly attributable to recent demographic shifts, including the influx of Russian-speaking residents and tourists due to regional conflicts. The limited study results show just one instance of Russian appearing as the sole language, which is neither thoroughly dominant nor entirely invisible, and its usage remains politically sensitive.

The linguistic landscape of Tbilisi is a complex, layered phenomenon embodying multiple, sometimes conflicting, identities and power structures. For policymakers and language planners, these findings indicate the need for a more rigorous or flexible approach to language planning in urban environments, considering the realities of multilingual practices in public spaces.

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Sopio Totibadze is an associate professor at TSU. Her research focuses on discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, gender, and the study of linguistic landscapes. Some of her work explores language, identity, and power relations in modern societies. Sopio has expertise in corpus-based methodologies and combines critical discourse analysis with qualitative approaches to examine language use in digital and public domains.