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# THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF URBAN VELLORE: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE DISTRIBUTION, CHOICE, AND IMPLICATIONS IN THE COMMERCIAL SPACE THROUGH SHOP SIGNS

**Abstract.** The current study explores the language distribution on commercial shop signs in the linguistic landscape (LL) of urban Vellore, a city in the Tamil Nadu state of India. The study aims to contribute to the understanding of the LL in urban Vellore by focusing on the analysis of shop signs in the commercial space. A previous survey of the linguistic situation of the region highlights the presence of several Indian and foreign languages in the verbal repertoire of the inhabitants, yet the visual representation of the shop signs render prominence to bilingual signs with English and Tamil occupying maximum space. The study utilizes the conceptual frameworks of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Social Representation Theory (SRT) to explore the dynamics of shop signs. The study analyzed the total of 250 shop signs from 5 sample areas and interviewed 25 sign producers and 15 sign readers to understand the motivation and implication of language choices on the name boards of shops. The study found that English enjoys the highest visibility and dominance among all languages, while Tamil is salient next to English on the shop signs. The shop owners' language choices on shop names are driven by a desire to accommodate customers from different linguistic backgrounds, to project their cultural identity, and to align with the values of globalization and modernity. The study concludes that there is a dialectical relationship between the city and the inhabitants, as they develop and accommodate one another in response to the city along with its language policies, identity issues, and expectations. The LL of Vellore's shop signs is a reflection of the cultural, linguistic, and economic landscape of the city, and provides a window into the complexities of language use in multilingual urban environments.

**Keywords:** Communication Accommodation Theory; linguistic landscape; name boards; Social Representation Theory; Vellore.

## Introduction

Linguistic landscape (LL), as defined by Landry and Bourhis (1997), is the "visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region" (p. 23). Such languages as found on display posters, advertising billboards, graphics, signposts, commercial shop signs, street and place names, city walls, and public signs on government institutions,

are associated with people. They are the ones to produce and display them and may choose to either interpret or ignore. Shohamy and Gorter (2009) state that "these displays shape the ecology in local, global, and transnational contexts and in multiple languages" (p. 1). Coulmas (2009) claims that the LL research, which analyses writing on exhibition in the public space, particularly targets "urban environments" (p. 14). Coulmas goes on to say that the art of writing metamorphosed in cities as they offer a conducive environment for interaction of "language and other social attributes" (p. 14).

Considering cities render propitious conditions for societal multilingualism, LL alludes information about the "language choices, hierarchies of languages, contact-phenomenon, regulations, and aspects of literacy" (Gorter, 2013, p. 191). Shohamy and Gorter (2009) believe that visitors to a new location get enticed with the LL as they provide the preliminary information about the culture and practices of the new place. The newcomers to the city try making sense of the new environment through the languages displayed in the LL.

Among several displays that constitute LL, shop signs play a distinct role in making the onlooker passively inclusive in determining the choice of display language on such shop signs. Since shop signs play an informative function, their immediate purpose is to persuade customers to consider the shop in question is worthy of a visit. Therefore, shop signs are usually in such a format that builds an instant connection with the prospective customer.

Eastman and Stein (1993) argue that language display on shop signs "represents symbolic rather than structural or semantic expression" (p. 200). Kelly-Holmes (2014) calls the phenomenon a linguistic fetish as shop signs engage languages with symbolic intention instead of utility purposes. Amara (2018) clarifies this stance by stating that, more than the presenting factual information, shop signs tend to intrigue the potential customers' emotions.

In the Tamil Nadu state of India, urban parts of Vellore project rich societal multilingualism (Mishra, 2022). Consequently, the LL of the region highlights the balance of more than one language in the visual repertoire of its shop signs. Previous studies conducted on the Indian LL analyzed the languages prevalent in commercial and public signs (Meganathan, 2017; Mishra, 2023). Yet, not many studies have explored the Indian LL, and

therefore the current study intends to address this paucity and concentrates on shop signs in the urban Vellore's space.

## Objectives of The Study

The present paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of the linguistic landscape (LL) in urban Vellore by focusing on the analysis of shop signs in the commercial space. To achieve this goal, the study addresses the following objective questions:

(1) What is the language distribution pattern on the shop signs in urban Vellore's commercial space?
(2) What regulates the shop owners' language choice on shop names?
(3) What are the implications of the language codes employed on shop names?

## Limitations

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, which include its sole focus on the analysis of shop signs without considering other forms of linguistic landscape, a relatively small number of interviewed sign producers (25) and sign readers (15), and its primary focus on the representation of English and Tamil without exhaustively covering other languages present in the region.

## Theoretical Frameworks

The study utilizes two conceptual frameworks to explore the dynamics of shop signs in the linguistic landscape of Vellore. First, there is the application of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) to understand how the shop owners present their shop signs to accommodate and maintain their potential customers or remain distinct among competitors. Second, Social Representation Theory (SRT) is applied to explain the broad representation of

Vellore's inhabitants not only among themselves but also in the context of a larger global context.

## Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)

Howard Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) offers a framework to predict and explain the different ways in which the participants in conversation make adjustments to create, sustain or reduce the social distance in communication (Giles & Ogay, 2007). Adaptation strategies primarily include pronunciation, speech rate, pitch, discourse style, language use, and non-verbal elements such as gesture and body language (Bourhis & Giles, 1977; Gallois & Giles, 2015). However, researchers have postulated an array of manners in which interlocutors modify their speech patterns to accommodate their communication partners. According to Toomey et al. (2013), "CAT recognizes two types of orientation: An individual orientation based on personal identity or personalized uniqueness and social identity orientation based on respective social identity or group membership emphasis" (p. 115).

Participants engaged in communication employ communication strategies such as *convergence* and *divergence* to adapt to their communication partner and their social group. Convergence refers to the application of similar communication strategies to express allegiance towards the communication partner. One primary objective of convergence is to indicate homogeneity among the communication partners. This may lead to greater appreciation, approval, and recognition not just among the interlocutors but a follow-up of societal rewards too. Due to convergence, not only the sender is benefitted as it earns approval for them but the receiver also tends to feel more favored when they encounter communication as similar to theirs. This enables the receiver to feel more positive about their identity with greater self-esteem. Nevertheless, convergence may entail the loss of individual or social identity.

Divergence implies the implementation of differentiating strategies to highlight the distinction from the communication partner. According to

Simmons-Mackie (2018), "divergence might accentuate a power differential or reinforce an important identity" (p. 3).

In the current study, CAT is applied in the analyses of LL as found in urban Vellore. As communications partners, the shop owners are the addressers, while the prospective buyers are the addressees or audience in this partnership. The study examines how the addressers either converge or diverge from their audience through the shop signs to indicate their individual orientation as well as social identity orientation.

## Social Representation Theory (SRT)

The Social Representation Theory (SRT) is an essential concept of social psychology that focuses on "common cognitions which produce social bonds uniting societies, organizations, and group, 2011, p. 3). The concept was developed by French social psychologist Serge Moscovici (Moscovici, 1961, 1981) and understood as the concerted expansion "of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communication" (Moscovici, 1963, p. 251).

According to Lu et al. (2015), social representations offer a framework that aids people in rendering sense to any circumstance they encounter and thereby steering their actions around that framework. Moreover, these representations vary from one group to another (Brunel et al., 2017). Dagenais et al. (2009, p. 255) assert that social representations could be somewhat cognate and shared by all or maybe variegated and contended for, whenever group members almost share disparate opinions. Dagenais et al. (2009) further add that in the latter case, individuals prudently identify themselves with a specific representation to express either adherence or antagonism to them.

Abric (1976) claims that the structure of social representation comprises two components:  the central core, which is the stable focal constituent, and the peripheral components, which are flexible elements that are revamped depending on changes in the environment or new information. Therefore, peripheral components aid individuals "adapt their understanding of

a fluctuating situation without drastically changing the core elements of their representation" (Flament, 1994, in Lu et al., 2015, p. 6).

Pertaining to our situation, SRT is suitable for understanding LL where the city or the urban space is the central core around which the inhabitants who are the peripheral elements adapt and organize themselves to reflect themselves. Blackwood (2010) states that "cities are not animate entities … and they do not act of their own volition" (p. 303). Thus, the LL in the urban space is manipulated by the people who inhabit it, and it appears as these inhabitants want these spaces to emerge. This representation of LL in urban Vellore could be accomplished by the inhabitants either "voluntarily, collectively, willingly or reluctantly" (Blackwood, 2010, p. 303) and is realized based on the convergence and divergence strategies of the communication partners.

Thus, in the current study, the SRT highlights the kind of representation the LL of the city projects by combining the tenets of CAT.

## The Linguistic Situation of Vellore

Mishra (2022) renders a useful taxonomy of languages in Vellore. The city of Vellore is located in the north-eastern part of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The city is situated on the banks of the Palar River and has a geographical spread of 5920.18 sq. km with a total population of 3,936,331 according to the 2011 census (https://vellore.nic.in). Tamil is the official language of the state, and English is the additional official language for communication purposes. In Tamil Nadu schools, a two-language formula prevails under which English and one other regional language (Tamil) are mandatory in the curriculum.

Christian Medical College and Hospital (CMCH) and Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT) are the two prominent institutions in the city that attract people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds from across the country and different parts of the world. Other than CMCH and VIT, other noteworthy tourist attractions such as Vellore Fort, Sripuram Golden Temple, and others bring tourists from the neighboring states. Vellore is also known for its leather factories and is the largest exporter of finished leather products in the country.

People visit the city for various reasons, such as employment opportunities, medical treatment, and educational purposes.

Due to substantial immigration, the city projects a situation of societal multilingualism with languages such as Assamese, Bengali, English, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Sindhi, Telugu, Urdu, and some foreign languages are prevalent in its verbal repertoire (Mishra, 2022). However, the linguistic landscape of the city pertaining to shop signs is rarely multilingual. Most shop signs display either monolingual or bilingual scripts, but shop signs showing multilingual scripts are infrequent.

As stated in the *Tamil Nadu shops and establishments rules* (1948), (http://www.labour.tn.gov.in/): (1) The name board of every establishment shall be in Tamil, and wherever other languages are also used, the version in English shall be in the second place followed by the versions in other languages, if any. (2) The Tamil version shall be written predominantly in the name board by providing more space than for other language (p. 8).

Sivakumar (2020) reports that, as laid out in the government norms, it is "mandatory for all businesses to name their shops and establishments in Tamil." In response to such government policy regarding language choice on Tamil Nadu shops and establishments, shop signs in Vellore could be witnessed having a mixed preference towards language choice in their shop signs. On the one hand, Tamil is the symbol of individual, linguistic, cultural, and regional identity, on the other, English has emerged as a prominent marker of globalization. Although Vellore is characterized by official bilingualism (Tamil and English), it projects cultural heterogenization. Therefore, in the visual display of Vellore, English plays the role of link language between the addresser and addressee belonging to the different linguistic backgrounds.

## Methodology

This study considers one specific constituent of LL, which is the analysis of the shop signs' language configuration in urban Vellore. The results highlighted in this study are constructed on the basis of three months of data collection and analysis comprising photographs, participant observation, interviews with the participating shop owners, and interviews while taking

walking tours with the participating shop sign readers. Studies focusing on LL recognize shop signs as a constituent of the 'bottom-up' landscape (Ben-Rafael, 2009) which is created more freely and independently in contrast to the 'top-down' landscape (Ben-Rafael, 2009), which is government regulated official signs. Due to this, shop signs are autonomous signs and reflect the shop creator's identity.

## Location

For data collection, five sample areas were selected. The areas were as follows: The commercial areas around i) VIT, ii) CMCH, iii) Katpadi railway station. These areas represent the center of the linguistically mixed crowd. Other than the native residents, areas around VIT and CMCH are a hub of outsiders who visit Vellore either for educational purposes, employment intentions, or treatment. In most cases, these outsiders are in the city for four to five years to pursue education or three to six months when seeking medical treatment. People coming for employment purposes may settle in the city for a more extended period. The railway station is a center of constantly moving people who are in a state of transition. iv) The Gandhinagar market area. It is a prominent marketing center in the city. It attracts crowds from all sectors, offering elaborate marketing options to the people of Vellore belonging to different social and economic classes. The market equally charms customers whether they are native dwellers of Vellore or immigrants to the city. v) The Viruthampet market area. The locality is filled with shops available in the vicinity to meet the everyday needs of the customers. However, the locality is not a popular marketing destination due to its sparse marketing options. There is an adjacent residential area surrounding the commercial space, which is home to both the native people of Vellore as well as the outsiders, either living on a temporary or a long-term basis.

## Photographs

During the first month of the study, the researcher was involved in observing the shop signs around the chosen locations. It was noticed that some sample locations projected more bilingual shop signs while others presented

more monolingual signs. A few of the shops also displayed multilingual shop signs.

Photographs of 250 shops were taken (Fifty from each of the five sample locations) for analysis. A variety of shop fronts were photographed, ranging from garment shops, footwear shops, cosmetic shops, general stores, electronics and electrical appliances shops, hardware stores, stationery items shops, daily utility stores, shops offering services such as courier service, trading service, hair-dressing, and eateries.

## Interviewees

The photographs were complemented with interviews of the shop owners. Interviews were conducted in the second month of the study with twenty-five shop owners from all five survey locations who were willing to participate in the interview process. All twenty-five participant shop owners gave consent for their inputs before the interview process started. The shop owners selected for interview were either native Tamil people or from some different ethnic background but settled in Vellore either since their childhood or for more than the past twenty-five years.

Other than shop owners, fifteen random customers who were either native residents or tourists were also interviewed at all five locations. Their consent was taken before interviewing them.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The data were gathered from the shop owners via questionnaires and discussions. The researcher ensured that the participants shared their views, practices, and attitude around the questions specified in the questionnaire in a relaxed setting to warrant well-grounded data. The data were audio-recorded after taking prior permission from the participants. In this study, a set of pre-designed questions were asked to the participants, who were shop-owners, in order to gather data for analysis. The data obtained from their answers to the objective questions of the study were then utilized for further examination.

Some sample questions were as follows:

(1)  What is the historical background of their business establishment?

(2)  How many languages are there in their speech repertoire?

(3)  Which language is representative of their as well as their business' identity?

(4)  What are the usual staff and prospective customers' demography?

(5)  What is their publicity strategy for the business?

(6)  To what extent were they involved in deciding the name and the language display of the shop name?

It is important to note that the questions presented here are only a sample of the questions asked during the study. The questionnaire contained more questions, but these were selected to provide an overview of the types of information that the researcher was looking to gather. The answers to other questions have not been discussed in this summary because they were either not directly relevant to the study's objectives, or they did not provide substantial insights to warrant inclusion.

Interviews with the customers were conducted during walking tours around the sample locations. This enabled the researcher to analyze how these customers interpret the shop signs based on the choice of language on the shop front. They were also given options and enquired about their preference between two shops trading in a similar business but displaying different language on the shop front. There was also a condition that the customers had not visited the shops in question earlier so that their earlier experience does not influence their preferences. The intention behind giving such a choice question to the participants was to determine their first-hand preference about any shop based on the language display and nothing else.

The data were collected in English as this was the language common to both the interviewer and the interviewees. The help of a native Tamil student was taken to translate sentences from Tamil to English or vice versa if the need arose. In the third month of the study, the recorded data were transcribed to obtain answers to the three objective questions. The responses from the owners and customers have been included in the findings section wherever found applicable.

# Findings

## Language Display on the Shop Signs in Vellore

A total of 250 shop signs were photographed at five survey areas across the city. 2.8% of the sample shops are part of retail chains, while 97.2% are independent businesses.

In the area around VIT, monolingual shop signs displaying only English made up 16% of the sample, with 40 out of 250 shop signs. Bilingual signs showcasing both English and Tamil constituted 3.6% of the sample, with 9 out of 250 signs. A small percentage (0.4%) of multilingual signs displayed Tamil, English, Telugu, and Hindi, with just one sign in the sample.

In the CMCH area, monolingual English signs accounted for 2.8% of the sample, or 7 out of 250 signs. Bilingual signs made up a larger portion, 16.8%, with 42 out of 250 signs displaying both English and Tamil. One multilingual sign, representing 0.4% of the total, displayed English, Tamil, and Bengali. The majority of shop signs in the CMCH area were bilingual, with monolingual and multilingual signs making up a smaller percentage of the sample.

Around Katpadi railway station, monolingual English signs constituted 2% of the sample, with 5 out of 250 signs. Bilingual signs were more prevalent, making up 18% of the sample with 45 out of 250 signs featuring both English and Tamil. No multilingual signs were observed in this area. The majority of shop signs in the area around Katpadi railway station were bilingual, while monolingual signs made up a smaller percentage of the sample.

In the Viruthampet area, monolingual signs accounted for 14.8% of the sample, or 37 out of 250 signs. Among these, 11 displayed English and 26 showcased Tamil. Bilingual signs made up a smaller portion of the sample, with 13 out of 250 signs, or 5.2%, featuring both English and Tamil. No multilingual signs were observed in this area. The majority of shop signs in the Viruthampet area were monolingual, with bilingual signs constituting a smaller percentage of the sample.

In the Gandhinagar area, 12 out of 250 shop signs, or 4.8%, were monolingual, displaying either English or Tamil. Bilingual signs, featuring both English and Tamil, accounted for 38, or 15.2%, of the total sample. No multilingual signs were found in the sample. This data suggests that the majority of shop signs in the surveyed areas, approximately 19% (12 + 38), are either monolingual or bilingual, with a preference for the combination of English and Tamil. It is important to note that no multilingual shop signs were found in the sample.

**Figure 1**

*Shop Signs Exhibiting Dominance of English in the Commercial Space Around VIT*



Based on the photographs collected, the distribution of bilingual shop signs with 58.8% comprising both Tamil and English languages are more comprehensive in the commercial space. This is mainly due to the government policy regarding shops (Tamil Nadu Shops and Establishments Rules, 1948). Second to bilingual signs, monolingual signs follow at 40.4%, and multilingual signs at 0.8% are rare, at least in the sample locations. English appears in 67.326% of monolingual signs, followed by Tamil with 32.673%. However, in

aggregate (comprising monolingual, bilingual and multilingual shop signs), English makes up around 86.8% of the total 250 sample shop signs, and Tamil is displayed in 72.8% of shop signs. Despite the evidence of linguistic heterogeneity in the verbal repertoire of the region, the visual display of shop signs, as shown in Figure 1, does not exhibit a significant level of multilingualism. In the image, most shop signs prominently feature English, underscoring its dominance in the commercial landscape of the area. This prevalence of English, whether it appears alone or alongside another language, suggests that the majority of the local population understands this language well, allowing it to reach the broadest customer base. Interestingly, although the interviewees report that more than three languages are common in both the sign producers' and readers' linguistic repertoire, the sign producers predominantly opt for English. This choice reflects an assumption that English serves as a universal medium of communication that can effectively bridge the linguistic diversity of Vellore's natives and outsiders alike.

**Figure 2**

*An Instance of a Tamil Sign Being Placed Above the English Sign on the Name Board*

In the analysis of bilingual signage, particular attention is paid to the placement and arrangement of the language texts. It has been observed that, in some cases, signs written in Tamil are positioned above those in English, as illustrated in Figure 2 of the document. This hierarchical placement might suggest a prioritization or greater accessibility of the Tamil language in these contexts. Conversely, when the signage displays both languages on the same horizontal level, it is typical to find the Tamil text on the left and the English text on the right, as depicted in Figure 3. This left-to-right arrangement reflects a conventional reading pattern, potentially facilitating comprehension among bilingual readers.

**Figure 3**

*Shop Sign Showcasing Both Tamil and English Placed at the Same Level*



However, such configurations are not universally applied, indicating variability in the design practices of bilingual signs. Additionally, the textual content on these signs may either be transliterations, where words are

phonetically converted from one script to another, or translations, where the text is rendered in another language conveying the same meaning. An example of this can be seen in a shop sign (Figure 3) where both Tamil and English are used; here, the name of the shop is displayed in Tamil on the left side of the sign, while the English transliteration occupies the right side. This dual-language presentation serves both to accommodate linguistic diversity and to enhance the sign's visibility and utility to a broader audience.

## Motivation and Implication of Language Choice on Shop Signs

Beyond the discussion on the quantitative distribution of languages on shop signs, the researcher highlights the motivation for such preferences, and their implication for the shop sign readers based on the interviews and walking tours conducted with the interviewees.

### *Motivation*

**Government Policy***.* According to Sundar (2018), "the Government Order making Tamil a compulsory language on name boards was issued in 1982." Sundar further highlights that, according to the order, Tamil on name boards is not just mandatory but should also be projected in letters larger than those of other languages. Sundar (2018) reports that in some districts of Tamil Nadu, the size of displaying letters in Tamil, English, and any other language should be in the ratio 5:3:2. In order to ensure effective implementation of the government order, inspections are carried out by the government officials, and a penalty is also imposed on the violators. The government orders do not forbid English or other languages from being showcased on the name boards but insist on the compulsory presence of Tamil.

Since the government policy (*Tamil Nadu Shops and Establishments Rules*, 1948) makes businesses display their establishments in Tamil, most shop owners comply with this regulation. This is evident via sample photographs of the shop signs and the participants' responses. The government associates the use of the Tamil language with the Tamil identity. Therefore,

the shop owners adhere to this significant marker of their ethnic identity and either project shop signs in the monolingual Tamil script or with one other language, mainly English, in a bilingual shop sign.

**Broader Resonance**. Resonance related to shop signs could be apprehended as the extent to which either the shop name, language used in the shop sign connects on a profound level to the prospective customer. Indeed, the overall popularity of a business depends on the quality of products or services meeting the consumers' needs and context. Nonetheless, the attention-grasping function starts the moment customers lay their eyes on the shop sign either casually or to seek information about the shops' trade, which is conveyed through the shop sign.

Bilingual shop signs are the most preferred choice among the shop owners of Vellore. Such shop signs are a form of the strategy employed by the shop owners to customize their mode of address in such a format that it becomes more personal to the sign readers. This premise ensures that sign readers are attracted to such shops due to the similarity quotient, causing the shop to resonate more with all sectors of customers in the region.

*Our main motto is to establish an emotional connection with our customers, and this begins with the deed of putting up a suitable shop sign on our establishment along with the choice of languages in it so that maximum people may feel addressed*. This statement was made by a participant shop owner running a supermarket in the city with the bilingual shop sign. Another participant states: *We showcase Tamil sign to depict our native Tamil identity while simultaneously attracting customers from any ethnicity or linguistic background through the English language*.

The transcripts highlight that the shop owners who erect bilingual or multilingual shop signs are aiming to accommodate prospective customers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. They strategically use signs that feature multiple languages—such as Tamil, English, Hindi, and Telugu—to minimize language barriers between themselves and the readers of the signs. This approach is exemplified in a shop sign for "Hi-Tech Men's Parlour," as depicted in Figure 4, where the name board displays the shop's name in all four languages. These instances of linguistic convergence allow shop owners

to bridge their differences with a broad customer base, thereby enhancing their business prospects. Such practices foster a positive impact by reducing interpersonal anxiety and unreliability in business relationships, ultimately promoting a more inclusive atmosphere for commerce.

**Figure 4**

*Shop Sign Making an Attempt for Broader Resonance Through a Multilingual Name Board*



**Projection of Modernity Through the English Language.** Pandey (2020) states "Today's Indian elites speak incessantly in English – in shops and elevators, offices and homes, in-person and online. They use Indian languages only for functional conversations with service workers and tradespeople. And parents occasionally reprimand their children for speaking in the 'vernacular'- even in their own homes, at their own dining tables." Pandey's statement explicitly highlights the preference given to English over other languages in most of the upper class and upper-middle-class families in an Indian household. Pandey discusses how families subconsciously intersect power and prestige with the English language.

According to Venkataramanan (2019), English is seen as the "language of empowerment and knowledge" in the state of Tamil Nadu. It is the additional

official language for communication purposes in the state. Therefore, the priority rendered to the English language commences in the family and extends to the social and professional domains. In the LL of specific commercial areas of Vellore, such as around VIT and CMCH, the use of English on the shop signs accentuates the perception of English as a status marker and symbol of globalization. Since English is considered as a "language of progress and upward mobility" (Meganathan, 2015, p. 236), the shop owners believe that the use of English in their shop signs is empowering and fashionable.

Concerning the participants who are shop owners from the sample survey area of CMCH and VIT, a shopkeeper with monolingual English shop signage believes that the English language projects an image of modernity to prospective customers. The situation is illustrated by the following transcript.

> Shopkeeper: This is a regular mindset that the English language is seen as a marker of modernity. Therefore, employing shop signage in the English language represents the modern outlook of the shopkeeper and conveys a gentle message to the sign readers that we can cater latest and trending products. Another participant highlights, I find projecting my shop's name in English a convenient practice because the message gets communicated effectively in English. Despite Tamil being my first language, I believe that shop descriptions for certain services are better expressed in English. At times, we may not even realize the actual vocabulary in our first language.

This phenomenon could be interpreted as upward convergence, where the shop owners adopt the prestigious linguistic patterns of the sign readers. Upward convergence implies the addresser's adoption of their addressee's prestige patterns. In the context of Vellore's LL, sign producers use the English language on their shop fronts to converge with the elite linguistic practices of the outsiders since any form of communication in English has become an index of modernity and prestige not just on a local level, but also on a global scale.

**Representation of Cultural Identity**. Haarmann (1986) asserts that language is "the immediate element which projects the ethnic identity for

regular people" (p. 14). In the context of Vellore, as reported by respondents, since there is a surge in the use of English in the local context, there are shop owners who strategically construct ethnic identities for their establishment to attract customers looking for products associated with ethnic and cultural practices or regional food items.

> Shopkeeper: We express our strong belief in ethnic and cultural values through our native language. It plays a crucial social function by invoking feelings of solidarity and group identity. It is a small way in which one's culture, along with traditions and shared values, can be conveyed and preserved.

**Figure 5**

*Display of Monolingual Tamil Shop Sign Representing Cultural Identity*



The scenario above is expressed mainly by the participating owners displaying monolingual Tamil shop signs as depicted in Figure 5 and sometimes by owners who project their shop name in their native language more prominently than in the official languages Tamil and English as displayed in Figure 6. Such a situation highlights the mechanism of divergence where

the addresser (the shop owner) is trying to affirm the distinctness or uniqueness among its competitors. They are attempting to exhibit their authenticity and ethnic identity in the context of other languages and cultures by rendering prominence to their native language.

**Figure 6**

*Name Board Showcasing the Shop Name in Bengali More Prominently Than in the State's Official Languages Tamil and English*



## *Implication*

In order to understand the implication of language preference on the name boards of shops, the participant customers were taken on walking tours around the survey areas. They were asked two focused questions: What perspective do they develop when they first see a shop sign in a particular language? Does language choice on the shop signs affect their shop preference?

Out of fifteen customer interviewees, three participants answered that the choice of language on the shop signs does not affect their shop preferences as long as they provide them with the required products and services. The researcher realized that this non-preference for language choice on shop signs could be because two of the interviewees are local people who could have already read the monolingual Tamil signs and do not find any difficulty in figuring out the trade of the shops. Besides, one interviewee, who is an outsider, usually depends on some local persons who guide him with

the shop selection. Yet, this outsider confesses that it becomes convenient for him if shop signs are displayed in English, which is understood by a large portion of the population. Apart from these three participants who were neutral towards any language choice on shop signs, eleven participants emphasized that language choice on shop signs does influence their shop selection as it conveys information about the shop's style of operation, such as traditional or contemporary.

Depending on the sign reader's observation of the shop signs, mainly three perspectives were highlighted as these customer participants observe different languages on the shops' name boards.

The first perspective, as highlighted by the participants, is that of audience connectedness. Audience connectedness implies the amount of association and bond that individuals discern as they determine their connectedness with other individuals in the community. It renders them a feeling that they are a part of something (Russell & Puto, 1999; Sinclair & Grieve, 2017). Marketing strategies target audience connectedness in order to prevent customers belonging to any affiliation from feeling alienated or ostracized (Oakenfull et al., 2008; Akestam et al., 2017; Burges et al., 2020).

In the current study, respondents highlight three different implications on audience connectedness due to LL on the shop names in urban Vellore. As a first implication, when the shop names are bilingual, it appeals to all sections of the customers, from native Tamil buyers to an outsider to the region. According to the respondents who are native of the region, when LL is presented in Tamil or in a bilingual script it gives them a sense of identity. This could be interpreted from the following transcript:

A native Tamil customer: *When I see LL in Tamil script, it gently prompts my Tamil identity, and it also nudges me that I will experience an authentic and personalized treatment in the shop as a customer.*

Second to this, respondents who are outsiders state that when they witness either a bilingual or monolingual English shop name, it renders a sense of inclusion to them. They can conveniently comprehend the meaning of the LL, which instills feelings of positivity, confidence, making them feel at ease in a new place. However, these outsiders feel a lesser degree of connectedness

when witnessing a monolingual Tamil LL as they do not understand the local language. On several occasions, such customers report that they back out from visiting these shops unless they are absolutely sure about the authenticity of the shops' service and products.

The second perspective, as highlighted by the participants, is that of the exhibition of style. Koll-Stobbe (2015) discusses two kinds of function of shop signs – *identifier* and *ideofier.* The identifier is the informational function of the sign, which informs the customer of the type of products sold in the shop or the services provided. The ideofier implies the intended relationship between the shopkeeper and the customer as a symbolic commodity, and it guides in building the shop image in the minds of the prospective buyer (Zhang & Chan, 2016).

Shop signs in Vellore either offer a contemporary vibe or exhibit traditional overtones. As Papen (2012) states "Shop signs, ( … ) by their choice of language ( … ) signal to passerby what sort of person is expected to shop here" (p. 57). Hence, the choice of language in Vellore's shop signs highlights the ideofier function by either exuding modernity with flexibility through the English language or cultural spirit and tenacity through Tamil. The participants interpret an English sign as an enticement to accommodate outsiders. Such shops are cooperative in arranging products after taking orders from non-native customers. For example, grocery shops around CMCH procure "Sattu" (a kind of flour typical of North Indian cuisine) for their North Indian customers. However, a grocery shop in the Viruthampet area, which has maximum Tamil shop signs, does not commit to arranging such exotic food items for their customers. Nevertheless, they supply an array of endemic products that may not be available in other supermarkets, such as local sweets or homemade spices.

Two interviewees highlight memorability as the third perspective due to language choice in shop signs. When shop signs are projected in languages customers can understand, it helps them simply retain the shop's information and recall in the future. This perception could be understood from the following transcript.

Interviewee: Since I can read the shop name on its front, I retain it in my memory, which in future I may recommend to a friend or ask the rickshaw driver to take me there directly. Remembering a shop name just by hearing it is not easy to recall in the future. For me, I should be able to read and process the information to recall it next time.

## Conclusion

The study examined the display of different languages in the shop signs from five different sample locations in the urban region of Vellore. A previous survey of the linguistic situation of the region highlighted the presence of several Indian and foreign languages in the verbal repertoire of the inhabitants. However, the visual representation of the shop signs renders prominence to bilingual signs with English and Tamil occupying maximum space. English enjoys the highest visibility and dominance among all languages, and Tamil is the next most salient language after English on shop signs. The CAT's parameters have been employed to understand the motivation behind shop owners' language choices on shop names. Participants share views on their convergence strategies to assimilate customers from different linguistic backgrounds. Simultaneously, other participants project their divergence strategies to render distinction to their cultural identity. The shop owners also practice upward convergence to attune practices considered prestigious and global, such as widespread presentation in the English language.

To conclude this analysis of Vellore's LL, it is helpful to consider the application of Moscovici's SRT. Augoustinos et al. (2006) state that SRT "does not separate the individual and society, but, rather, sees both in a dialectical relationship, in which the individual is both a product of society (its conventions, norms, and values) and an active participant who can effect change in society" (p. 36). Therefore, in Vellore's case, there is a dialectical relationship between the city and the inhabitants (shop owners, customers) as they develop and accommodate one another in response to the city's language policies, identity issues, and expectations. Synchronously, these dwellers

utilize the shop signs in Vellore's LL to manifest themselves or affect reforms in that space. The LL of the city appears as the inhabitants want it to appear, be that "voluntarily, collectively, willingly or reluctantly" (Blackwood, 2010, p. 303). The government policy of the region requires Tamil to be compulsorily projected on its shops and establishments. The inhabitants adhere to this policy under the aegis of explicit government ideology and cultural identity. Augoustinos et al. (2006) also believe that such a representation format is governed by convention and tradition. Undoubtedly, the use of Tamil on shop signs strengthens people's sense of association with their culture. Yet, these same dwellers advocate for globalization and prestige, endorsing English on their shop signs. According to Tang (2018), the English language is broadly associated with Western culture, sophistication, internationalization, elitism, and modernity, thereby ensuring economic prosperity. However, in the case of Vellore, English has been employed to facilitate both inter-ethnic communication and the maintenance of racial harmony.

Shop signs in Vellore's LL are configured not only to align with government policies that aim to preserve the identity of the native population, accommodate newcomers, and uphold the values of globalization and modernity, but also to provoke discussion and eliminate confusion. The study, therefore, enlightens us on the representation of the assimilating ideologies that are constantly being negotiated and accommodated by both the city and the inhabitants of the space.

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## LINGVISTINIS VELORO MIESTO KRAŠTOVAIZDIS: IŠSAMI KALBOS PAPLITIMO, PASIRINKIMO IR PASEKMIŲ KOMERCINĖJE ERDVĖJE ANALIZĖ, NAGRINĖJANT PARDUOTUVIŲ IŠKABAS

**Anotacija.** Šiame tyrime nagrinėjamas kalbų pasiskirstymas komercinių parduotuvių iškabose Indijos Tamil Nadu valstijos Veloro mieste. Tyrimu siekiama atskleisti Veloro miesto lingvistinį kraštovaizdį bei komercinių parduotuvių iškabas. Ankstesnis regiono kalbinės situacijos tyrimas atskleidė, kad gyventojai kalba keliomis Indijos ir užsienio kalbomis, tačiau daugiausia yra dvikalbių parduotuvių iškabų – anglų ir tamilų kalbomis. Parduotuvių iškabų dinamikai tirti pasitelktos komunikacinės akomodacijos ir socialinės reprezentacijos teorijų koncepcinės sistemos. Aiškinantis parduotuvių pavadinimų kalbos pasirinkimo motyvaciją ir reikšmę, išanalizuota 250 parduotuvių iškabų iš 5 pasirinktų vietovių ir apklausti 25 iškabų gamintojai bei 15 iškabų skaitytojų. Tyrimas parodė, kad anglų kalba matoma labiausiai ir dominuoja tarp visų kalbų, o tamilų kalba vartojama šalia anglų kalbos. Parduotuvių savininkai savo įstaigoms pavadinimus rinko norėdami prisitaikyti prie klientų iš skirtingų kalbinių aplinkų, parodyti savo kultūrinį identitetą ir atitikti globalizacijos bei modernumo vertybes. Daroma išvada, kad tarp miesto ir gyventojų egzistuoja dialektinis santykis, nes abi pusės keičiasi bei derinasi viena prie kitos reaguodamos į miestą ir jo kalbos politiką, tapatybės klausimus ir lūkesčius. Veloro parduotuvių iškabų lingvistinis kraštovaizdis atspindi miesto kultūrinį, kalbinį ir ekonominį kraštovaizdį ir leidžia pažvelgti į kalbos vartojimo daugiakalbėje miesto aplinkoje sudėtingumą.

**Pagrindinės sąvokos:** komunikacinės akomodacijos teorija; socialinės reprezentacijos teorija; kalbinis kraštovaizdis; pavadinimų lentos; Veloras.

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## शहरी वेल्लोर का भाषाई परिदृश्य: दुकान के संकेतों के माध्यम से भाषा वितरण, चयन और व्यावसायिक क्षेत्र में इसके प्रभावों का व्यापक विश्लेषण

वर्तमान अध्ययन नगरीय वेल्लोर के भाषिक परिदृश्य (एलएल) में वाणिज्यिक दुकानों की संक्षिप्त बोर्डों पर भाषा वितरण की खोज करता है, जो भारत के तमिलनाडु राज्य के एक शहर वेल्लोर के भाषिक परिदृश्य में होता है। यह अध्ययन नगरीय वेल्लोर में एलएल की समझ में योगदान करने का उद्देश्य रखता है, वाणिज्यिक क्षेत्र में दुकानों की संक्षिप्त बोर्डों की विश्लेषण पर मुख्य ध्यान केंद्रित करके। पिछले कुछ समय में इस क्षेत्र के भाषिक परिदृश्य के सर्वेक्षण ने निवासियों के मौखिक भंडार में कई भारतीय और विदेशी भाषाओं की उपस्थिति को उजागर किया है, हालांकि दुकानों की संक्षिप्त बोर्डों की दृश्य प्रतिनिधित्व को द्विभाषी बोर्डों को महत्व देने में आम्बा होता है, जिनमें अंग्रेजी और तमिल ने अधिकतम स्थान लिया है। यह अध्ययन संचार समानुयोजना थियरी (सीएटी) और सामाजिक प्रतिनिधिता थियरी (एसआरटी) के भावनात्मक ढांचे का उपयोग दुकानों की गतिविधियों की खोज करने के लिए करता है। अध्ययन ने कुल मिलाकर 5 नमूना क्षेत्रों से 250 दुकानों की बोर्डों का विश्लेषण किया और 25 बोर्डों के निर्माताओं और 15 बोर्डों के पाठकों से बातचीत की ताकि व्यवसायों के नामों की बोर्डों पर भाषा चयन के प्रेरणा और परिणाम को समझ सकें। अध्ययन ने पाया कि अंग्रेजी सभी भाषाओं में सबसे ज्यादा दिखाई देती है और शृंगार में अधिकार रखती है, जबकि तमिल अंग्रेजी के बाद शृंगार पर आकर्षक होती है। दुकान मालिकों के द्वारा दुकानों के नामों पर की जाने वाली भाषाओं की चुनौतियों की मोटिवेशन और प्रसार को बढ़ाने के लिए विभिन्न भाषाई पृष्ठभूमियों से, अपनी सांस्कृतिक पहचान प्रकट करने के इच्छाशक्ति से और वैश्विकीकरण और आधुनिकता के मूल्यों के साथ मेल करने की इच्छा से प्रेरित होते हैं। अध्ययन निष्कर्षित करता है कि शहर और निवासियों के बीच एक परस्पर संवादात्मक संबंध है.

**कुंजीशब्द:** संचार समायोजन सिद्धांत; भाषाई परिदृश्य; नाम पट्टिकाएँ; सामाजिक प्रतिनिधित्व सिद्धांत; वेल्लोर.