

# The Linguistic Landscape of a Historic Center Commercial Area: Aspects of Foreignness and Multilingualism Practices in Top-Down and Bottom-Up Signs

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**Abstract**—This paper reports aspects of foreignness and multilingualism practices displayed in the linguistic landscape, top-down and bottom-up signs, and shop owners' motivation of the choice of languages, of thirteen streets in the historic center commercial area of São Luís. The results of the analyses indicated that 90.6 percent of the foreign language found was English and all of the top-down signage had translation Portuguese-English. All of the top-down city maps had a logo in its top left sign with three languages, Portuguese, English and French translation stating "World Heritage", a title the city holds. 50 percent of the usage of adding an apostrophe and the letter s in bottom-up signage was done for aesthetic reasons, 40 percent said it indicated plural, and 10 percent said it was to show possession. 70 percent had the perception that foreign language usage is somehow superior to the native language what bestows both the notions of status and trust that are attributed to foreign language usage.

**Index Terms**—Bottom-up, linguistic landscape, multilingualism, top-down

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language, either verbal, visual or verbal-visual is around us all the time even if we are not fully aware of it. It is everywhere in commercial signboards, billboards, traffic signs, and public signs in the most diverse forms, colors and textures [1]. Language builds and creates landscapes in public and open spaces and the linguistic landscape is devoted to the study of this public visual display [2, 3]. When observing the language in the linguistic landscape, the nuances of linguistics practices and politics can be identified.

Society changes have also been transforming, according to [4], most modifications in linguistic landscape and it is understood that linguistic choices are not neutral or arbitrary; however, they are invested in symbolic values and semiotic processes. Furthermore, visual linguistics resources that are inserted in an environment relate directly to people once they chose their use [3]. At this juncture, this paper explores foreignness aspects and multilingualism practices in the linguistic landscape in the most important tourist region, the historic center, of the city of São Luís.

São Luís, the capital of Maranhão, a Northeast state in Brazil, holds a unique aspect once it is the only Brazilian capital that was conquered by the French, in 1612, and its name is after the French King Louis XIII. The city was occupied by the Dutch, in the early 1640s, right before it was

ruled by the Portuguese, in the late 1640s. In this context full of historical singularities, the city is also under the registration on UNESCO's (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage List for its unique and outstanding example of an Iberian colonial town and many downtown buildings are also under the protection of IPHAN (Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional), which is the national artistic and historic heritage institute, responsible for preserving and cataloguing national history and art.

To this paper analysis, thirteen streets have been chosen due to the fact that they are the commercial area in the historic center and have a considerable number of commercial establishments, museums, colleges, inns, government agencies, and restaurants. So, these streets are ordinarily frequented by tourists, students, residents, businesspeople and so on. The corpus of this study includes top-down and bottom-up signs. The streets are the following: *Feira Praia Grande, Estrela, Djalma Dutra, Nazareth, Dom Pedro II, Palma, Giz, Portugal, Ribeirão, Sol, Egito, Afogados, and Godofredo Viana*. With these corpora, this paper aims to answers what languages are displayed in the linguistic landscape, the differences in the languages displayed in top-down and bottom-up signs, if there is any, and the reasons owners chose to use such languages.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Linguistic communication takes place through texts which can be understood as an unfinished structure. Text can be understood as "a communicative event in which social and cognitive linguistic actions converge" [5]. Hence, every single text is an expression of some communicative purpose with functional characteristics once readers set goals when reading. Halliday *et al.* [6] explain that the meaning of texts also depends on contexts which are numerous and varied, "so when we analyze a text, we show the functional organization of its structure; and we show what meaningful choices have been made, each one seen in the context of what might have been meant but was not." This way contexts need to be considered to fulfil texts meanings.

The reader previous knowledge acquires a remarkable place in the reading process once what one brings to the text is often more important than what one finds in it [7] and as it is understood nowadays, reading is an active process of comprehension in texts analyses. In this perspective, social practices and context should be considered in order to read appropriately to circumstances as well as it is understood that characteristics that involve text functionality and its contextualization facilitate the understanding that the

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linguistic landscape components are within a social framework made up of relevant meanings of analyses. These aspects help the understanding of the space and the place roles in relation to language [1]. In relation to language, “it is a set of symbolic representations of the mental and the physical world that is shared by members of a community and serves for interaction and sociocultural integration” [8]. In relation to image, it can have different interpretations depending on the choices of the compositional structures and its characteristic, expressions, colors and format, among other imagery elements that intrinsically compose it.

Kress and Van Leeuwen [9] asserts that “meanings belong to culture, rather than to specific semiotic modes. And the way meanings are mapped across different semiotic modes, the way some things can, for instance, be ‘said’ either visually or verbally, others only visually, again others only verbally, is also culturally and historically specific”. This way the use of different colors or different compositional structures can have a change in meaning as well as expressing something verbally or visually creates different meanings. The combination of verbal and visual texts can lead to different reading directions and not only from left to right and top to bottom, like it would basically be the reading in a written text especially concerning western countries. Thus, “the composition of the whole, the way in which the representational and interactive elements are made to relate to each other, the way they are integrated into a meaningful whole” provides meaning to the text and “the placement of the elements (of the participants and of the syntagms that connect them to each other and to the viewer) endows them with specific information values relative to each other” [9].

Supported by the Systemic functional grammar [6, 9] imply that the visual is organized in metafunctions and they can be understood as the way people use language. In terms of the compositional metafunction, that is related to interactive and representational image meanings by three interrelated systems: information value can be identified according to the main image regions like left/ right, center/ margin or top/ down; salience can be identified as the elements that catch the reader’s attention, for instance, like size, color contrasts, tonal contrasts, placement in the visual field, and or perspective; framing is brought about by rhythm and is related to elements that create dividing lines, actual frame lines or not, that connect or disconnect elements in the image and also “by white space between elements, by discontinuities of color, and so on.” In relation to colors, Kress *et al.* [9] also state that “the communicative function of color is not restricted to affect alone. We think that color is used metafunctionally, and that it is therefore a mode in its own right.”

Linguistic Landscape (LL) studies are concerned with language that is visible to all in a specific area and its research is concerned with “the use of language in its written form in public sphere” [1]. According to Landry *et al.* [2], LL is “the language of public road signs, advertising boards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings”. It is also referred as “any sign announcement located outside or inside a public institution or a private business in a given geographical location” [11]. Gorter [10] and Ben-Raphael *et al.* [11] explain that LL can change over time due to changing in signs while others can

stay for years in the same place. Even though there are studies [12, 13] suggesting that LL should consist of more than outside signs, this research considers top-down and bottom-up signs in public space. According to Shohamy [4] top-down signs are the official ones, like government ones, while bottom-up signs are the non-official ones, including those issued by individual social actors like shop owners.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This paper intends to describe and analyze aspects of the LL in the historic center of São Luís by answering what languages are displayed in the linguistic landscape, the differences in the languages displayed in top-down and bottom-up signs, if there is any, and the reason behind those choices. In order to answer these questions, the data collection procedures involve thirteen streets in the historic center of the city; such streets were chosen because they concentrate the commercial area and touristic attractions. Photographs were taken in order to collect the data and whenever it was possible, questions regarding the reason of the foreignness in the signs were asked. This research configures a perspective to understand singular LL aspects and it is understood that “the data are not meant to indicate the linguistic composition of the city as a whole, but simply an illustration of the range of linguistic diversity” [14].

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As already mentioned, this paper’s research area includes thirteen streets, in the historic center of São Luís. The first question concerning this research is about what foreign languages were displayed in the mentioned LL. The Fig. 1 shows the percentage and the languages found.

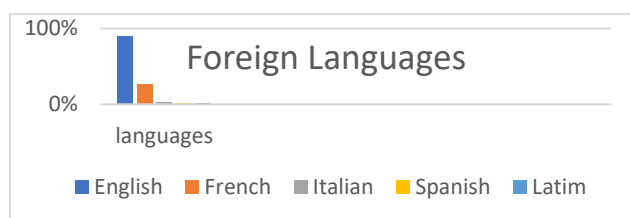


Fig. 1. Foreign languages.

The majority of foreign languages were English, 90.6%, followed by French, 20.3%, Italian, 2.3%, Spanish, 1.6% and Latin 0.8%. Once there are multilingual signs, more than one language could be found in the same signs or maps, for instance. Some of the foreignness examples are from Figs. 2 to 7 as follows:



Fig. 2. Voila—French.



Fig. 3. Mr. Cold—English.



Fig. 4. La Pizzeria—Italian.



Fig. 5. Metropolitan Cathedral – Latin.

Even though there's a specific Brazilian Environmental Crime Law, article 65 Law 9.605/98, concerning graffiti as a crime, once it is the LL, it was included in this research. There were nineteen graffiti in English and one in Spanish, some of the graffiti were found in historical buildings. Figs. 5 and 6 show some of the examples.

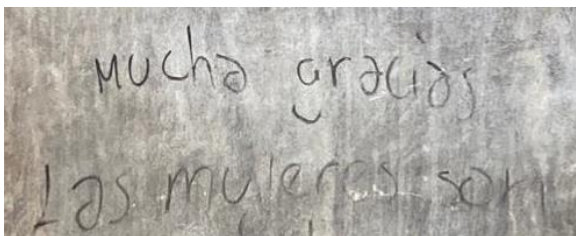


Fig. 6. Graffiti in Spanish.



Fig. 7. Graffiti in English.

There was a closer look at the bilingual and multilingual signs. All of the top-down tourist attractions signs were bilingual with the native language, Portuguese, and English; an example is on Fig. 7. There was only one top-down plaque in a historic building built by the French that was all translated Portuguese-English (Fig. 8). All the top-down maps included the title in Portuguese and its English translation: *Centro Histórico de São Luís* – Historic Centre of São Luís, like the one on Fig. 9; they also included a logo on the top left that had three languages: Portuguese, English and French. An example of these three languages is on figure 10. Even though English and French languages were in the map, nothing else was found in the map in those non-native languages besides what was written in the logo. Even the quick response code (QR code) found on the bottom of the map by *Ribeirão Street*, that had Portuguese, French and English names related do information, shown in Fig. 11, only had Portuguese information about the fountain when read. Related to information value [9] the QR code was centralized above three languages and by that information alone, even if only the Portuguese word is the first one used, centralized, in bold, making salience color contrast [9], it could be understood that there would be information in the other languages as well. That was the only QR code found in this research.



Fig. 8. Bilingual top-down sign.

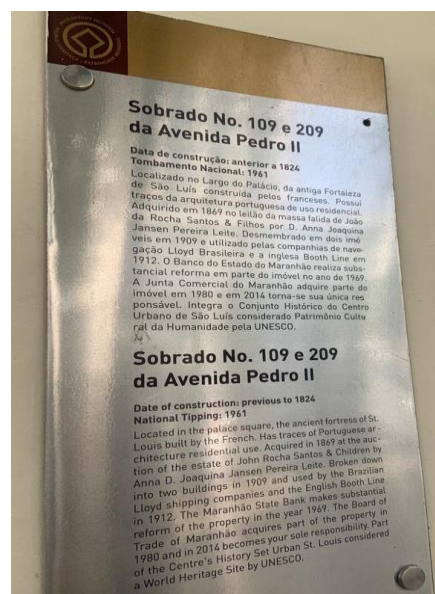


Fig. 9. Sobrado translation.

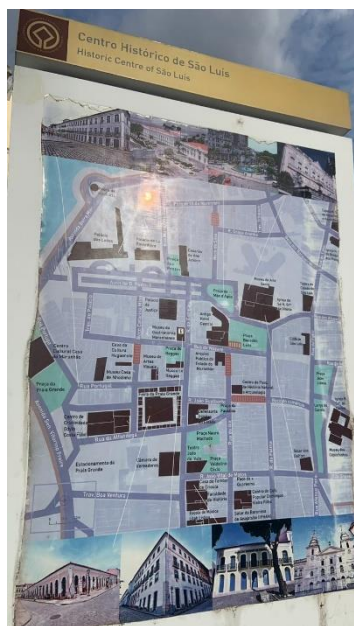


Fig. 10 Map.



Fig. 11 Portuguese, English, and French logo.



Fig. 12 QR code.

Most foreign languages found in this research belong to food business places, 38.3%, followed by top-down maps and tourist direction signs, 17.2%, print shops, 6.3%, followed by clothes/ craftsmanship business, 4.7 percent, hostels and inns, 3.2%, museums, 1.6%, and tourism agency, 1.6%. Other places like, churches, clinics, jewelry stores or parking lots, had less than 1 percent each. Most of the businesses that used foreign languages, used at least a word, about eighty-eight percent of them, like the word “live” on Fig. 12. The other businesses establishments, twelve percent of them, used only a foreign language in the signs, like the one on Fig. 13.



Fig. 13. Live.



Fig. 14. Melody mix.

In order to understand the reasons behind those language choices, businesses owners or employees were asked about an explanation and the main focus was on the motivation for choosing the foreign name or names that were in the signs. This research did not get answers in all of the places and the reasons vary from owners not wanting to answer or none of the employees knowing how to explain. One of the places that answered was an ice-cream parlor named Mr. Cold and it was said it is so because one of the owner’s last name is Frias, a Portuguese word that can mean “cold”. About the imagery of this place’s commercial sign, Fig. 2, the name is in the center of the sign and there’s a drawing of a blue scoop almost circulating it, alluding the offered product and the blue color referring to “cold” as well [9].

In a jewelry store sign, three languages were used to translate the word “silver”: Portuguese, English and French. It was informed by the owner that: the sign has those languages so that it draws attention from all foreign tourists so they can understand it, once English is the international communication language; and French also appears because most tourists who visit the place are from France. There was a multilingual sign in a café with Italian, French, English and Portuguese and it was informed that it draws foreign tourists’ attention. About the English in Fig. 14, the owner said that that’s what they call that kind of establishment in Europe and so European tourists can be his clients.



Fig. 15. Guest house.

At a pub called the “Black Cat Pub”, the owner said that he wanted a strong name for his witch themed bar and that the Portuguese version would not sound as good as the chosen English version. At the “Voila” it was said that the owner is French, with no further explanation, and at “La Pizzeria” it was said that the owner is Italian and that’s how he chose it. Seventy percent of the businesspeople somehow

stated that foreign language usage is somehow superior to native language, bestowing notions of status and trust that are attributed to foreign language.

In the places that added an apostrophe and the letter “s” after a noun, the explanations were: 40% of the owners said it was a way to indicate plural and it was in Portuguese (even though there is no such rule in Brazilian Portuguese normative grammar); 40% said that they saw it somewhere else and they copied the idea to make the sign more beautiful, for aesthetic reasons (as in Fig. 15); 10 percent didn’t know why it was like that; ten percent said that it showed possession, as a grammatical loan function from English and they wanted something not in Portuguese to bring attention as a sophistication. Similar results were found in [15–17] when the majority of business owners explain that it is not English, but, according to them, the apostrophe plus the letter s after a proper name is either to look sophisticated and or for aesthetic reasons. According to Canagarajah [18] translanguaging practices can be under sedimentation processes because “form and meaning get sedimented, as language resources get used repeatedly and habitually in specific local contexts”.



Fig. 16. Nilo's

At the Huguenot Museum (Fig. 16), the sign is in Portuguese, English and French and it was said that they used Portuguese because it is the native language, English because it is the international communication language and French because that museum is mainly about French culture. At another museum there was a multilingual sign (Figs. 17 and 18) with Portuguese, English, French and Spanish. The reception desk informed that the reasons behind those language choices were: Portuguese because it is the native language, English because it is the international language for communication, and French and Spanish because most of the foreign tourists that visit the museum can communicate in those languages.



Fig. 17. Huguenot museum.



Fig. 18. Multilingual museum.

After these explanations, there is a reflection involving sociolinguistics and globalization when [19] explains that “people make different investments and to which they attribute different values and degrees of usefulness. In the context of globalization, where language forms are perhaps more mobile than before, patterns of value and use become less predictable and presupposable.” At this juncture, linguistic choices—such as language choices, even if thoughtless—hold ideologies, representativity and even power relations.

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper research has illustrated aspects of foreignness and multilingualism in the historic center of São Luís. One of the questions that motivated this research concerned what foreign languages were displayed in the LL, which were English, French, Italian, Spanish, and Latin. All of the top-down signs had Portuguese-English translation, at least concerning the title of the sign, and all the signs, but the tourist direction ones, had a logo with Portuguese, French and English translation. Most of the foreign languages found, almost 90.6% of them, were in English, and since the researched place is a tourist destination, it could be explained since English is recognized as the *lingua franca*. Furthermore, all of the top-down signs had English in them. The bottom-up ones were 82.8% of the signs and they differed drastically from the top-down ones once the only cases with only foreign language(s) in the signs were the bottom-up ones and there was no translation rule in them. The other research question concerned the reason businesspeople chose such languages and, besides this paper limitation once it was not possible to have interviews in all the establishments, it was evident that tourism contributes to certain foreign choices, as some businesspeople explanations said so. Also, the perception from most businesspeople that the foreign language usage is somehow superior to the native language for any of the mentioned reasons, bestows both the notions of status and trust that are attributed to foreign language in that context.

There’s also an indication for further research considering the limitations of this research considering LL is not fixed but mutable over time, including both top-down and bottom-up. Marcuschi [5] explains that “there’s no meaningful use of language outside personal and social interrelated relations”. For instance, LL always deserves further study.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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