



## Signage, Space, and Multilingual Identity: The Linguistic Landscape of Southern Taraba State, Nigeria

Judith Adaku Mgbemena

[judithm@fuwukari.edu.ng](mailto:judithm@fuwukari.edu.ng)

Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Wukari

Azetu Azashi Agyo

[agyo2016@fuwukari.edu.ng](mailto:agyo2016@fuwukari.edu.ng)

Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Wukari

Vika Tensaba Akafa

[vikaakafa@gmail.com](mailto:vikaakafa@gmail.com)

Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Wukari

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v8i4.2664>

**APA Citation:** Mgbemena, J. A., Agyo, A. A., & Akafa, V. T. (2026). Signage, space, and multilingual identity: The linguistic landscape of Southern Taraba State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 8(4).174-192. <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v8i4.2664>

**Received:**

22/03/2026

**Accepted:**

28/04/2026

**Keywords:**

linguistic landscape; Southern Taraba; Wukari; Ibi; multilingualism; public signage; minority languages; language ideology; geosemiotics; postcolonial sociolinguistics; Nigeria; nominal recognition

**Abstract**

*Public signage in multilingual postcolonial societies does more than communicate information: it allocates linguistic prestige, marks institutional authority, and determines whose language counts as a legitimate medium of civic life. This study examines how language choice in public space constructs a stratified semiotic order in Southern Taraba State, Nigeria, drawing on a photographic corpus of signs documented across educational, religious, governmental, health, commercial, developmental, and community domains in Wukari, Ibi, and Ussa Local Government Areas. Rather than treating the linguistic landscape as a passive reflection of multilingual life, the study argues that public signage actively produces a public order of linguistic value — constituting some languages as languages of authority, modernity, and institutional belonging while confining others to oral, ceremonial, and nominally acknowledged domains. The analysis is theorised through four interlocking frameworks: Landry and Bourhis's (1997) account of ethnolinguistic vitality, Ben-Rafael et al.'s (2006) distinction between top-down and bottom-up signage, Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotics, and Blommaert's (2010) orders of indexicality — situated within a broader engagement with postcolonial language ideology (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994; Phillipson, 1992) and the politics of minority-language recognition. African cases such as the Southern Taraba corpus demonstrate that public space operates as a domain where English dominance is not merely imposed from above but co-produced by local actors — churches, community associations, commercial enterprises, and recreational clubs — who have internalised English as the indispensable medium of public credibility (Shohamy, 2006; Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009). The study proposes the concept of nominal recognition — the condition in which minority communities are publicly acknowledged through the inclusion of their proper names within textual structures organised entirely through a*

*dominant language — as a theoretically generative contribution to linguistic landscape studies, postcolonial sociolinguistics, and minority-language policy. It concludes that the linguistic study of Southern Taraba's public semiotic order can enrich African discourse studies, language planning, and the politics of civic recognition by foregrounding the ways in which being publicly named is not equivalent to being publicly empowered — a distinction with significant implications for health communication, development discourse, and the visibility of minority languages in multilingual African societies.*

## 1. Introduction

Language in public space is never passive or neutral; it speaks volumes beyond the signs and symbols. The language displayed on road signs, school boards, church billboards, health-centre posters, development-project plaques, shop fronts, and community-association signs does more than provide information: it allocates prestige, marks authority, indexes belonging, and reveals which languages are considered appropriate for official, religious, commercial, and civic visibility (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Linguistic landscape research proceeds from this foundational insight, treating the visible distribution of languages in public space as evidence of the social values attached to those languages and to the communities associated with them (Backhaus, 2007; Gorter, 2006). To study the linguistic landscape of a given territory is, therefore, to study the public semiotic order that language choice helps to produce and sustain — the visible materialisation of ideological hierarchies that determine whose language counts, whose language governs, and whose language belongs on the surfaces of public life.

Southern Taraba State offers a compelling but still under-analysed site for this inquiry. The region is characterised by deep ethnolinguistic plurality, religious diversity, internal migration, and layered histories of colonial and postcolonial language hierarchy, in which Jukun, Kuteb, Tiv, Chamba, Fulfulde, Hausa, English, Nigerian Pidgin, and Arabic-inflected religious repertoires intersect in everyday communicative life (Blench, 2019). Yet the visibility of these languages in public writing is profoundly uneven. Some languages dominate durable institutional signage; others remain largely absent from the written surfaces of public space, even where they remain central to local identity, cultural memory, oral tradition, and everyday social interaction. This disparity — between what is spoken and what is inscribed — is the central empirical and theoretical problem this article addresses.

The study investigates the linguistic landscape of Southern Taraba through close analysis of signage from Wukari, Ibi, and Ussa Local Government Areas. These three sites are treated as complementary focal windows into the wider semiotic field of the region. Wukari functions as a major educational, religious, commercial, and institutional centre — home to the Federal University Wukari, several secondary schools, government offices, diverse Christian and Islamic institutions, and active civil society formations. Ibi presents a more compact public landscape in which state authority, community identity, religious institutions, health infrastructure, development interventions, and small-scale commerce are visibly concentrated within a bounded spatial environment. Ussa LGA — with its constituent communities of Lissam, Kunkufxang, and Sabon Gida — offers a third and complementary window into a rural-peri-urban semiotic landscape, distinguished by a dense cluster of denominational church signs, a missionary educational institution, community lodges bearing indigenous toponyms, and health signage that extends the patterns identified in Wukari and Ibi into a more dispersed spatial setting. Together, the three LGAs provide a richly differentiated basis for examining how language, space, and identity are publicly organised in a multilingual but structurally unequal sociolinguistic setting.

The study is organised around four research questions. First, which languages achieve visible presence on public signage in Southern Taraba? Second, how are languages distributed across official, religious, educational, health, commercial, developmental, and community domains? Third, what ideological meanings are attached to the presence or absence of particular languages in each domain? Fourth, what does the linguistic landscape of Southern Taraba reveal about multilingual identity and minority-language visibility in a postcolonial Nigerian context?

The article advances three interconnected arguments that distinguish it from descriptive accounts of language distribution. First, Southern Taraba's public space is multilingual in social composition but hierarchical in written representation, with English functioning as the hegemonic language of institutional legitimacy, formal education, health, development, and aspirational modernity. Second, this hierarchy is co-produced by top-down institutions and bottom-up local actors: English is adopted not only by state agencies and international development bodies but also by churches, lodges, schools, financial kiosks, and community associations seeking public credibility, which demonstrates that the postcolonial language order is not merely imposed from above but inhabited and reproduced from below. Third — and most originally — the near-absence of indigenous minority languages from durable signage reveals a phenomenon this article terms nominal recognition: the condition in which communities are publicly acknowledged through proper names while their languages are denied the authority to constitute public text. This distinction between being named and being empowered to name has significant implications for minority-language rights, civic communication, and the politics of postcolonial recognition.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Linguistic Landscape, Ethnolinguistic Vitality, and the Symbolic Production of Space**

Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 23) define the linguistic landscape as “the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings” in a given territory or region. Their foundational contribution is the demonstration that signs perform both informational and symbolic functions. Informationally, signs indicate which languages are operative for engaging with a given space; symbolically, they communicate the relative status, institutional power, and civic legitimacy of linguistic communities. A language that appears systematically on official boards, school signs, health notices, and public project plaques becomes publicly legible as a language of authority and institutional belonging. A language excluded from these domains is rendered publicly peripheral, even where it remains central to spoken interaction, cultural memory, and community identity.

This framework connects linguistic landscape analysis to the sociology of space. Lefebvre's (1991) account of the production of space is directly relevant here: space is not a neutral container for social activity but is itself produced through social practices, including the practices of inscription and display. When English is systematically placed on the surfaces of governmental, educational, health, and developmental spaces in Southern Taraba, it does not merely occupy those spaces — it helps constitute them as spaces of a particular kind: spaces of authority, expertise, modernity, and institutional recognition. The linguistic landscape is, in this sense, part of the social production of space and of the spatial production of social hierarchy.

This framework is especially generative for Southern Taraba because the region is multilingual under conditions of asymmetry that are historically produced and institutionally maintained. English carries high institutional capital and historical prestige deriving from colonial and postcolonial administrative establishment. Hausa commands broad regional intelligibility across northern Nigeria and serves as a transethnic medium of market and informal communication. Arabic commands religious prestige and doctrinal authority within

Islamic educational contexts. Indigenous minority languages — Jukun, Kuteb, Tiv, Chamba, and others — carry strong local identity value and are vital in oral, domestic, and ceremonial life, but possess limited inscriptional presence in the formal public sphere. The linguistic landscape thus functions as a concrete empirical site for observing how ethnolinguistic vitality is publicly displayed, strategically restricted, or effectively denied. Hibiya's (2020) comparative work on minority-language regions demonstrates that nominal acknowledgement of minority communities in public signage frequently coexists with the structural absence of those languages as autonomous written codes — a dynamic directly relevant to the Southern Taraba case. The framework of stratified multilingualism developed by Laitinen and Zabrodskaja (2015), drawing on European multilingual landscapes, provides a further comparative basis for understanding how tiered language hierarchies are materialised across institutionally diverse signage contexts.

## **2.2 Top-Down and Bottom-Up Signage: Co-Production of Language Hierarchy**

Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) distinguish between top-down signs produced by state agencies, public institutions, and official authorities, and bottom-up signs produced by private businesses, religious groups, community actors, and individuals. This distinction has been productively applied in linguistic landscape studies to identify moments of contestation — instances where bottom-up, community-produced signs diverge from institutional norms and introduce counter-hegemonic or heteroglossic possibilities into public space (Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009).

In Southern Taraba, however, this pattern does not obtain. Both top-down institutional producers and bottom-up local actors converge on English as the preferred written medium. This convergence is theoretically significant. It demonstrates that English dominance in the public landscape is not merely a function of state policy or bureaucratic convention; it is also reproduced by local actors — church administrators, business owners, community association secretaries, financial kiosk operators — who have internalised English as an indispensable index of professional credibility, public legitimacy, and social aspiration. In Shohamy's (2006) terms, these local actors are enacting hidden language policy from below, reproducing ideological hierarchies through everyday semiotic choices without necessarily recognising those choices as political. The language order of Southern Taraba's public space is, therefore, co-produced by institutions and communities — simultaneously imposed from above and reproduced from below — which makes it more deeply entrenched and more difficult to challenge than a purely top-down imposition would be.

## **2.3 Geosemiotics: Emplacement, Materiality, and the Authority of Place**

Scollon and Scollon (2003) develop a geosemiotic framework that foregrounds the role of physical emplacement in the production of meaning. Their central argument is that the significance of any sign depends not only on its linguistic content but on its placement within a specific spatial environment — its relationship to surrounding signs, its material form, its authorship, and the social activities conducted in its vicinity. The same words carry different social meanings at a police station, a health clinic, a roadside kiosk, a church gate, or a school board; emplacement mediates authority and interpretive force.

This principle is directly applicable in Southern Taraba. English on a federal development-project board places English within the institutional order of the state, donors, contractors, and mechanisms of public accountability. English on a church board indexes religious modernity, denominational legitimacy, and transnational ecclesiastical connection. English on a health poster mediates access to biomedical expertise. Hausa on an informal prohibition notice — “Doka ta hana!” — carries immediate local regulatory force derived not from institutional authority but from regional intelligibility. The social meaning of each language is, in this sense, not merely carried by the language itself but produced through its spatial situation within the public semiotic field of Southern Taraba. Purschke's (2021) framework of spatial linguistics

extends this geosemiotic principle by emphasising how spatial arrangements of signs constitute coherent semiotic environments whose meaning exceeds that of any individual sign component — a perspective of particular relevance to the Ussa LGA analysis, where clusters of denominational signage, health infrastructure boards, and community-associational signs together produce a distinctive spatial semiotic regime.

## **2.4 Orders of Indexicality, Language Ideology, and Nominal Recognition**

Blommaert (2010), building on Silverstein's (2003) foundational semiotics of indexicality, develops the concept of orders of indexicality to explain why languages and linguistic varieties do not carry equal social value across all contexts of use. Languages are embedded in stratified sociohistorical orders of value that assign them differential status, prestige, and communicative legitimacy — orders that are not inherent to the languages themselves but are produced, maintained, and naturalised through institutions, education, commerce, religion, and everyday practice (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). In the Southern Taraba linguistic landscape, English indexes authority, formal education, development, professionalism, and upward social mobility; Hausa indexes regional intelligibility and transethnic communicative reach; Arabic indexes Islamic authenticity and scholarly authority; and indigenous minority languages index deep local belonging — but their absence from durable signage demonstrates that this belonging, however socially central, does not translate into public textual power.

The analysis of Southern Taraba signage reveals a pattern that existing linguistic landscape theory has not yet named with sufficient precision: nominal recognition. This concept designates the condition in which minority communities are publicly acknowledged through the inclusion of their proper names — place names, ethnic group names, community designations — within texts that are otherwise organised entirely through a dominant language. Under nominal recognition, a community is named but not heard; its identity is publicly inscribed, but its language is not publicly authorised. The distinction between being named and being empowered to name is, this article argues, a critical marker of the difference between symbolic acknowledgement and substantive linguistic inclusion. It matters for debates on minority-language rights, for language planning in postcolonial societies, and for the broader question of what genuine multilingual recognition in public space would require.

This theoretical framework is situated within a broader engagement with postcolonial language ideology. Phillipson's (1992) account of linguistic imperialism provides the historical context within which English comes to function, in Southern Taraba and across postcolonial Africa, as the naturalised language of institutional legitimacy — not because of any intrinsic communicative superiority but because colonial language policy, missionary education, and the architecture of postcolonial state formation aligned English with access to social goods, institutional authority, and public recognition. The linguistic landscape of Southern Taraba is, in this perspective, a material archive of that history: a set of surfaces on which the hierarchy of languages established by colonial administration continues to be inscribed, reproduced, and — crucially — lived as natural.

## **3. Research Context: Southern Taraba State in Sociolinguistic and Policy Perspective**

Taraba State, located in northeastern Nigeria along the Cameroonian border, is among the most ethnolinguistically diverse states in the country. Blench (2019) documents over fifty language varieties within its territory, placing it among the most linguistically complex administrative units in sub-Saharan Africa. Southern Taraba — encompassing Wukari, Ibi, Donga, Takum, Ussa, and Kurmi Local Government Areas — is distinguished by the historical and contemporary significance of the Jukun kingdom centred at Wukari, as well as by the presence of Kuteb, Tiv, Chamba, and Fulfulde-speaking communities, alongside a significant and institutionally active Muslim population and diverse Christian denominations. Southward Hausa commercial and linguistic influence, federal educational investment, and the

institutional presence of the Federal University Wukari (established 2011) further shape the region's communicative ecology.

Nigeria's national language policy, as codified in the 1999 Constitution and the National Policy on Education, designates English as the official language of government, education, and public administration, while recognising Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo as the three major Nigerian languages with limited constitutional status. Indigenous minority languages — including all the languages of Southern Taraba — receive no formal policy recognition at the national level, and Taraba State has not developed a state-level language policy that would resource minority languages for public institutional use. This policy vacuum is not a neutral background condition; it is a structural determinant of the linguistic landscape. When no policy mandates or resources the inclusion of Jukun or Kuteb in institutional signage, their absence from public space becomes the automatic, unremarkable default — which is precisely how ideological naturalisations operate (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994).

Wukari Local Government Area is the historical capital of the Jukun kingdom and the most urbanised and institutionally dense administrative unit in Southern Taraba. It contains the Federal University Wukari (with its associated teaching hospital), multiple secondary schools, government offices, diverse denominational churches, Islamic educational institutions, a general hospital, primary health-care facilities, and an active commercial sector. Ibi Local Government Area, located along the Benue River corridor approximately thirty kilometres from Wukari, is smaller and less institutionally prominent but possesses a concentrated public semiotic landscape in which governmental, religious, commercial, health, and community signage interact in a compact spatial environment. Ussa Local Government Area constitutes the third site of investigation. Its constituent communities — particularly Lissam, Kunkufxang-Lissam, and Sabon Gida Lissam — are characterised by a notable density of Christian denominational signage, the presence of a missionary Bible institute (Bear Valley Bible Institute Nigeria), a cluster of community and recreational signs, small commercial establishments with locally inflected names, and primary health-care infrastructure. Ussa LGA also hosts several congregations of the Reformed Church of Christ for Nations (RCCN), whose network of Local Congregation Churches (LCC) and District Church Committees (DCC) produces a visible denominational geography on the landscape. The inclusion of Ussa LGA alongside Wukari and Ibi extends the geographic scope of the corpus and allows for cross-site analysis of whether the linguistic landscape patterns documented in a university town and a river-corridor market centres are reproduced in a more rural administrative unit. The complementarity of all three sites — institutionally dense, compact-urban, and rural-dispersed respectively — provides a robust basis for a comparative mapping of the linguistic landscape of Southern Taraba.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Research Design**

The study adopts a qualitative-dominant linguistic landscape design supported by systematic corpus description and close geosemiotic interpretation. This design follows the methodological commitments established in foundational and recent linguistic landscape scholarship (Backhaus, 2007; Blommaert, 2013; Gorter, 2006; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009): it combines the systematic documentation of language distribution across identifiable domains with the interpretive, ethnographically informed analysis of how specific signs produce social meanings in their spatial and institutional contexts. This approach is appropriate because frequency alone cannot explain the ideological work performed by signs, while purely anecdotal close reading risks overlooking the wider structural patterns that give individual signs their social significance.

The corpus was assembled through systematic photographic documentation of publicly visible signage in Wukari, Ibi, and Ussa (specifically the communities of Lissam, Kunkufxang-

Lissam, and Sabon Gida Lissam). Documentation followed a domain-stratified protocol in which sites associated with governmental, educational, religious, health, commercial, developmental, and community functions were each systematically traversed and photographed. All legible, durable signage visible from public thoroughfares was included, encompassing road signs, institutional boards, school signs, church and fellowship signage, Islamic educational signs, health-centre notices, public-health posters, development-project plaques, commercial fascias, community-association boards, recreational-club signs, and informal public notices and popular posters. The three LGAs were selected for the reasons detailed in Section 3: their complementary institutional characters and their combined coverage of the key semiotic domains of the region across a spectrum from urban-institutional to rural-dispersed settings.

## 4.2 Analytical Procedure

The signs were grouped into seven domains: official and governmental signage; educational signage; religious signage; health signage; commercial signage; community and identity signage; and informal notices and popular posters. Each sign was coded for language choice, script, producer category (top-down vs. bottom-up), domain, spatial emplacement, and primary communicative function, following the core analytical concerns of linguistic landscape research with visibility, authorship, and spatial meaning (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Scollon & Scollon, 2003).

Particular analytical attention was paid to the distinction between a language appearing as an autonomous written code — one that organises the textual structure, syntax, and informational content of a sign — and a language appearing solely as part of a proper name embedded within a text otherwise organised in a different language. This distinction, which underpins the concept of nominal recognition developed in Section 2, is critical to the argument of the article. The occurrence of “Jukun Wanu”, “Wapan Nghaku”, “Nyunvo”, “Marmara”, “Ibi”, and “Wukari” on English-medium signs does not constitute evidence that indigenous languages are functioning as written public codes; it indicates that they are being used as identity markers within a textual infrastructure organised by a different language.

From corpus-level description, the analysis moved to close reading of emblematic signs selected for their theoretical density — their capacity to illuminate the ideological work of the broader patterns identified in the corpus. This move from structural mapping to interpretive reading follows the geosemiotic and ethnographic traditions in linguistic landscape scholarship (Blommaert, 2013; Scollon & Scollon, 2003) and is designed to produce an account that is both empirically grounded and theoretically generative.

## 4.3 Ethical Considerations

The study analyses publicly visible signage rather than private communication. Where signs include identifiable personal details — names, phone numbers, event photographs — analysis is restricted to the textual and semiotic properties of the sign rather than the personal identity of individuals depicted or referenced. This approach is consistent with the ethical standards of linguistic landscape and semiotic landscape research, which must balance close observational engagement with public texts with care for the subjects of those texts, particularly in contexts where photographic documentation can inadvertently expose individuals (Blommaert, 2013; Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010).

## 5. Findings and Analysis

**Table 1**

*Corpus overview: Sign domains, sites, and producer categories across three local government areas*

Sign domain	Wukari	Ibi	Ussa	Representative sign types	Producer category	Dominant language(s)
-------------	--------	-----	------	---------------------------	-------------------	----------------------

Official/governmental	✓	✓	—	Police signs, government-project boards, state-agency notices	Top-down	English
Educational	✓	✓	✓	University boards, secondary-school signs, nursery/primary school signs, Bible institute signs	Top-down / bottom-up	English; Arabic (Islamic schools)
Religious	✓	✓	✓	Church identification boards, worship schedules, fellowship signs, denominational directory signs	Bottom-up	English; Arabic (Islamic); English + Hausa (Ussa, 1 instance) <sup>a</sup>
Health	✓	✓	✓	PHCC identifier signs, WASH education posters, IMCI charts, clinical protocol boards	Top-down	English
Commercial	✓	✓	✓	Lodge signs, kiosk signs, furniture/block industry signs, barbing saloons	Bottom-up	English
Developmental	✓	✓	—	World Bank/IMPACT project boards, WASH infrastructure plaques, construction boards	Top-down	English
Community/civic	✓	✓	✓	Development association boards, community clubs, welfare groups	Bottom-up	English
Informal/popular	✓	✓	—	Wedding/event posters, hand-painted prohibition notices	Bottom-up	English; Hausa (selected notices)

Note. ✓ = sign type documented; — = absent or undocumented at this site. Producer categories follow Ben-Rafael et al. (2006). Dominant language refers to the primary written code organising sign content; indigenous-language proper names embedded within English-medium texts are not counted as separate languages of display (see Section 4.2). <sup>a</sup> The Winners Chapel International sign at Sabon-Gida Lissam (Ussa LGA) is the sole instance of Hausa as a supplementary written code within a Christian religious sign in the entire corpus.

**Table 2**

Language distribution across sign domains: Functional role, institutional position, and indexical value

Language	Domains of visibility	Functional role	Producer category	Institutional position	Indexical value (Blommaert, 2010)
English	All domains across all three LGAs without exception	Autonomous written code; organises full textual structure in every domain	Top-down and bottom-up	Apex; hegemonic; co-produced; naturalised as default	Authority, modernity, institutional legitimacy, aspiration
Hausa	Informal regulatory; selected commercial; supplementary religious (Ussa, 1 instance)	Regulatory address; market communication; time-expression gloss	Bottom-up only	Intermediate; practical reach; no institutional prestige	Regional intelligibility, transethnic communicative reach
Arabic	Islamic educational only (logos, names, Qur’anic inscriptions)	Sacred-doctrinal code; Islamic identity marker	Bottom-up (Islamic institutions)	Bounded sacred domain; absent from civic/commercial signage	Islamic authenticity, scholarly authority, transcendent legitimacy
Indigenous minority languages <sup>a</sup>	None as autonomous code; nominal	Toponyms, ethnonyms, and community names	N/A — not functioning	Structurally absent; nominal recognition only	Deep local belonging; oral vitality not

***Signage, Space, and Multilingual Identity: The Linguistic Landscape of Southern Taraba State, Nigeria***

	presence only across all domains	embedded in English-medium texts	as written code		transferred to written public sphere
--	----------------------------------	----------------------------------	-----------------	--	--------------------------------------

*Note. Indexical values follow Blommaert's (2010) orders of indexicality. "Autonomous written code" designates a language that organises the syntactic, informational, and textual structure of a sign, distinct from a language appearing solely as a proper name (see Section 4.2). <sup>a</sup> Indigenous languages include Jukun, Kuteb, Tiv, Chamba, Fulfulde, and local languages of the Ussa area. Indigenous names documented in corpus: Wapan Nghaku, Jukun Wanu, Nyunvo, Marmara, Azumasam, Kunkufxang, Urenyang, Ayek-Kusku, Rufu, Andeshwo, Kostine.*

**Table 3**

*Instances of nominal recognition in the corpus: Indigenous names embedded in English-medium signs*

<b>Sign / institution</b>	<b>Domain</b>	<b>Site (LGA)</b>	<b>Indigenous name element</b>	<b>Probable linguistic/cultural affiliation</b>	<b>Function within sign</b>
Jukun Wanu Development Association	Community/civic	Wukari	Jukun Wanu	Jukun ethnonym (Benue–Taraba corridor)	Ethnocultural identity marker within English institutional taxonomy
PHCC Wapan Nghaku	Health	Wukari	Wapan Nghaku	Local Jukun-area toponym	Community locator within English health-facility identifier
Development boards (Nyunvo; Marmara)	Developmental	Wukari / Ibi	Nyunvo; Marmara	Local area toponyms (Jukun/Kuteb territory)	Beneficiary-community identifiers in English accountability text
PHCC Kostine Lissam	Health	Ussa	Kostine	Local Ussa-area community toponym	Community locator within English health-facility identifier
Azumasam Legacy Lodge	Commercial	Ussa (Kunkufxang)	Azumasam	Local Ussa-area community/family name	Commercial brand; local identity marker in English commercial text
RCCN LCC Urenyang, Sabon Gida Lissam ULGA	Religious	Ussa	Urenyang	Local community toponym	Congregational locator within English denominational hierarchy
RCCN Ayek-Kusku LCC, Rufu DCC	Religious	Ussa	Ayek-Kusku; Rufu	Local community toponyms	Congregational and district locators in English denominational taxonomy
RCCN Rufu Andeshwo Consistory (Mission Nur./Pri. School)	Educational/religious	Ussa (Rufu)	Rufu; Andeshwo	Local toponyms (likely Kuteb/Ussa-area)	Community and consistory locators within English denominational taxonomy
Glorious Divine Rhema Assembly HQ,	Religious	Ussa	Kunkufxang	Local community toponym	Spatial locator within English church identification sign

Kunkufxang-Lissam					
-------------------	--	--	--	--	--

Note. Nominal recognition designates the condition in which indigenous community names appear within textual structures organised entirely through a dominant language, without the indigenous language functioning as an autonomous written code (Sections 2.4 and 5.8). Linguistic/cultural affiliations are indicative; definitive etymological classification of all toponyms awaits further ethnolinguistic investigation. RCCN = Reformed Church of Christ for Nations; LCC = Local Congregation Church; PHCC = Primary Health Care Centre.

**Table 4**

Analytical summary: The four-tier linguistic hierarchy of Southern Taraba’s public space

Tier	Language	Domains of inscription	Textual function	Top-down presence	Bottom-up presence	Theoretical characterisation
1	English	All domains across all three LGAs	Full structural code; organises institutional, informational, and affective text	✓ Ubiquitous	✓ Ubiquitous	Hegemonic; co-produced top-down and bottom-up; naturalised as default
2	Hausa	Informal regulatory; market; supplementary religious (1 instance, Ussa)	Regulatory address; transethnic communication; time-expression supplement	— Absent	✓ Limited; domain-specific	Intermediate; pragmatically present; institutionally subordinate; no civic prestige
3	Arabic	Islamic educational only	Sacred-doctrinal identifier; indexes global Islamic textual tradition	— Absent	✓ Highly bounded; Islamic institutions only	Domain-specialist; vertical sacred prestige; no civic or commercial reach
4	Indigenous minority languages (Jukun, Kuteb, Tiv, Chamba, Ussa-area)	None as autonomous written code; nominal presence only	Toponyms, ethnonyms, community names embedded in English texts	— Absent	— Absent as code; present as proper names only	Nominally recognised; structurally excluded; oral vitality absent from written public sphere

Note. Tier rankings reflect positional dominance in the written public landscape, not speaker numbers, cultural significance, or oral vitality. The distinction between “present as code” and “present as proper name” is central to the concept of nominal recognition (Section 2.4). The hierarchical structure is consistent across all three LGA sites. The sole partial deviation is the Winners Chapel International sign at Sabon-Gida Lissam (Ussa LGA), which embeds Hausa time-expressions at Tier 2 without displacing English at Tier 1. ✓ = documented presence; — = absent from corpus.

### 5.1 English as the Hegemonic Language of Institutional Authority

The most structurally significant pattern across all three LGAs is the total dominance of English in official and institutional signage. Police signs, school boards, health-centre identifier signs, government project boards, and federal agency notices rely overwhelmingly, and in most cases exclusively, on English. This dominance is not adventitious; it is institutional and ideological. English functions as the language through which state and quasi-state institutions publicly constitute themselves as legitimate, accountable, and officially recognised.

Development signage is especially revealing. Such boards deploy a distinctive bureaucratic lexicon — *project, contractor, consultant, beneficiary community, commission* — that constitutes public infrastructure as an object of institutional accountability. The genre is performative: it enacts the auditability of public works through English. Local communities appear within it as named beneficiaries, not as speaking subjects. They are inside English, not alongside it. This resonates with Mignolo’s (2000) concept of colonial difference: the development board that names a community as beneficiary while recording state agency and contractor credentials exclusively in English reproduces this structure semiotically — the community is a recipient of development, not an author of it.

## **5.2 The Federal University Wukari and the Apex of the Educational Hierarchy**

Within the educational domain, signage reflects a clear institutional hierarchy that maps directly onto the language hierarchy. The Federal University Wukari is exclusively English-medium in all its public signage. Secondary schools — whether government-owned, privately operated, or religiously affiliated — are similarly English-medium, even where their names derive from Hausa, Arabic, or local languages. The At-Taqwa Academy incorporates Arabic script in its logo, but all descriptive and administrative text is organised in English.

This illustrates what Phillipson (1992) identifies as the self-reinforcing dynamic of linguistic imperialism in education: high-prestige institutions signal their prestige through English, which in turn deepens the association between English and educational authority. A school that produced public signage in an indigenous language would, within the current ideological order, risk signalling its marginality rather than its institutional credibility. The language of the educational landscape is inseparable from the language of educational aspiration.

## **5.3 Hausa as Intermediate Lingua Franca: Practical Force Without Institutional Prestige**

Hausa occupies a distinctive and carefully bounded position in the Southern Taraba linguistic landscape. Despite its central role in intergroup communication across northern Nigeria, its written visibility in the corpus is domain-restricted and consistently subordinate to English in the institutional hierarchy.

The Wukari prohibition notice — *Doka ta hana!* — is the most instructive example from the Wukari corpus. Its deployment of Hausa for regulatory communication is not coincidental. Unlike the English project boards that address the abstract audience of state accountability, this notice addresses an immediate pedestrian public for whom Hausa provides more reliable comprehension. Its authority is communicative and social rather than institutional: it carries force because it speaks the language of the street, not the language of the ministry. This positions Hausa in a zone of informal civic legibility — practically effective in selected regulatory and commercial contexts, but institutionally subordinate and absent from formally constituted official signage.

The Ussa corpus introduces a partial but theoretically significant complication. The Winners Chapel International sign at Sabon-Gida Lissam deploys an unusual code-layering strategy: English organises the primary institutional content — church name, location identifier, and service categories — while Hausa time-expressions appear as parenthetical supplements beneath the English service times. Sunday services at 8:00 a.m. are glossed as KARFE TAKWAS DA SAFE; the Wednesday evening service at 5:00 p.m. as KARFE BIYAR NA YANMA. This is, to date, the only instance in the corpus where Hausa functions within a Christian religious sign in a supplementary informational capacity.

The semiotic logic is instructive. The Winners Chapel network carries a transnational English-medium institutional identity; the English structure of the sign is consistent with its global self-presentation. The Hausa glosses address a local practical problem: ensuring service times are comprehensible to community members for whom Hausa time-reckoning is more accessible than clock-face numerals. The addition of Hausa is pragmatically motivated — it mediates access to service information rather than expressing any ideological commitment to bilingual signage. English retains structural authority; Hausa provides a communicative bridge. This is not heteroglossic contestation of English dominance but a conditional, functionally bounded accommodation — which is precisely consistent with Hausa's broader position in the landscape as a language of practical reach rather than institutional prestige. As Blommaert (2010) argues, Hausa's indexical value in Southern Taraba is domain-specific: high in informal intergroup communicative contexts, low in formal institutional address.

## **5.4 Arabic and the Bounded Symbolic Domain of Islamic Education**

Arabic appears in the corpus primarily within Islamic educational signage, functioning as a domain-specific sacred and doctrinal code rather than a general civic language. The At-Taqwa Academy sign combines Arabic script and Islamic identity markers with English descriptors, arranged in a layered code structure in which Arabic signals religious authenticity and English provides the public administrative frame.

This is layered multilingualism, but not balanced multilingualism. Arabic's prestige is vertical and sacred — it connects the local institution to the transcendent authority of the Qur'anic tradition; English's prestige is horizontal and civic — it connects the institution to the administrative systems of the Nigerian state. Their coexistence constitutes a functional partition in which each language governs a distinct sphere of institutional life. Neither language is threatened by the other; nor does their coexistence make any space for the indigenous languages of the surrounding community.

### **5.5 Christian Signage and English as the Language of Religious Modernity**

Christian signage across all three LGAs is overwhelmingly English-medium. Church and fellowship boards deploy English to announce institutional names, worship schedules, service invitations, biblical slogans, and denominational identities. The Wukari and Ibi corpus includes Living Faith Church, Christ the King Parish, CRC-N, and Witnessing Group Fellowship International; the Ussa corpus adds the RCCG Hallelujah Parish at Sabon Gida Lissam, the RCCN congregations at LCC Urenyang and Ayek-Kusku, the Glorious Divine Rhema Assembly at Kunkufxang-Lissam, and the Bear Valley Bible Institute at Lissam. The uniformity of English across Catholic, Pentecostal, Protestant, Reformed, and missionary Bible-school traditions is itself analytically significant: these are independently governed organisations that have independently converged on English as the appropriate medium of public Christian self-presentation.

Several Ussa signs merit specific attention. The RCCG Hallelujah Parish sign deploys a fully itemised weekly activities schedule — Sunday Prayer (7–8 a.m.), Sunday School (8–9 a.m.), Main Worship (9–10:30 a.m.), Tuesday Bible Study, Thursday Prayer, and a monthly Night Vigil (10 p.m.–5 a.m.) — entirely in English, notwithstanding that the congregation is embedded in a rural community where English literacy is uneven. The sign functions less as a practical guide for the uninitiated than as a public institutional performance of organisational seriousness, whose language is inseparable from its credibility claim.

The RCCN signs present a distinctive semiotic layering of indigenous place names within English institutional frameworks. Both the Urenyang sign (LCC Urenyang, Sabon Gida Lissam ULGA, DCC Lissam) and the Ayek-Kusku sign embed local community names within the English administrative hierarchy of the denomination (LCC = Local Congregation Church; DCC = District Church Committee). The RCCN Mission Nursery and Primary School sign at Rufu extends this pattern through the RCCN Rufu Andeshwo Consistory — where Andeshwo is a local Kuteb- or Ussa-area name integrated into the English denominational label Consistory. The geography of the church is locally named; the institutional language is entirely English.

The Bear Valley Bible Institute Nigeria sign introduces a further dimension: a foreign missionary educational institution, American Church of Christ-affiliated, operating in Lissam with a co-located Christian Children School and the motto THE TRUTH SHALL SET YOU FREE — JOHN [8:32]. Its English-medium presentation exemplifies how global missionary educational enterprise penetrates even the most geographically peripheral communities of the region, carrying the indexical associations of English with religious legitimacy and transnational affiliation into the Ussa rural hinterland.

The convergence of all these denominations on English confirms Pennycook and Makoni's (2005) argument that Christianity in postcolonial Africa has operated as a powerful vector of English linguistic imperialism, associating English with institutional legitimacy and the prestige economy of religious modernity.

## 5.6 Health Signage, Language Accessibility, and the Architecture of Communicative Inequality

The health-signage domain yields some of the most analytically consequential evidence in the corpus, because health signs are not merely symbolic — they are practical mediators of knowledge with direct implications for wellbeing. PHCC identifier signs, WASH education materials, IMCI case management charts, malaria treatment protocols, and vitamin A supplementation posters are all English-medium, consistently across top-down state and donor-funded materials and bottom-up private health-facility signs, and replicated across all three LGAs. It is important to acknowledge that the deployment of English in health communication is not necessarily arbitrary or simply exclusionary: in contexts of high ethnolinguistic diversity such as Southern Taraba, where Jukun, Kuteb, Tiv, Chamba, Fulfulde, and other varieties coexist within a single service-delivery catchment area, English may function as a practical lingua franca that avoids privileging any single indigenous community over others. Producing health materials in every locally spoken language would pose significant logistical and resource challenges for state agencies, a constraint that Nigerian health communication research has documented (Ogunyemi, 2015; Adegoke, 2018). The analytical point, therefore, is not that English is invariably a tool of deliberate exclusion but rather that its exclusive use constitutes a potential barrier to health knowledge for community members with limited English literacy — a population that research in comparable multilingual Nigerian settings suggests is substantial, particularly among women, elderly persons, and rural residents (Ogunyemi, 2015). The PHCC Kostine Lissam sign in Ussa — OPEN: 24 HOURS, 7 DAYS A WEEK — follows the identical institutional template as the PHCC Wapan Nghaku sign in Wukari, confirming that health infrastructure language practices are standardised region-wide regardless of local linguistic ecology. The inclusion of Kostine — the indigenous community toponym — instantiates nominal recognition: the community is named but addressed exclusively in English.

The WASH materials produced by the Taraba State Primary Health Care Development Agency in collaboration with the World Bank IMPACT project deploy a global health development register — rights-based, normative, and technically detailed — that renders health education in the language of international public-health discourse. The community addressed is the named subject of health improvement; it is not the linguistic community in whose language health knowledge is communicated. The IMCI case management flowchart and clinical protocol chart displayed at PHCC Wapan Nghaku require not merely English literacy but clinical English literacy — familiarity with pharmaceutical nomenclature, diagnostic classification, and algorithmic decision logic. For community members with limited English literacy, these materials represent a potential barrier to health knowledge rather than merely an absence of accessible information; they constitute what Adegoke (2018) identifies as a communicative gap between the language of biomedical provision and the language repertoires of the communities served.

## 5.7 Commercial Signage and the Domestication of English

Commercial signage across all three LGAs demonstrates that English dominance permeates the everyday economy of small-scale enterprise. Lodges, kiosks, furniture businesses, barbing saloons, and diagnostic laboratories all use English as their primary written medium, though in locally adapted registers that diverge from the standard English of official institutional signage. This pattern resonates with findings from comparable commercial linguistic landscape analyses in postcolonial urban settings: Kasanga (2012), in a study of commercial signage in a multilingual Southeast Asian neighbourhood, similarly documents how English functions as the default written code of commercial aspiration, even in contexts where other languages dominate oral interaction.

The Azumasam Legacy Lodge sign at Kunkufxang, Lissam — *MOTTO: YOUR COMFORT IS OUR CONCERN! / HAVE A COMFORTABLE DAY* — is particularly illuminating. Azumasam is an indigenous toponym deployed as a commercial brand, illustrating nominal recognition in the commercial domain: the indigenous name marks local identity and distinctiveness while all commercial content is communicated in English. The Akusho Ventures financial-service kiosk sign — *Banking at Ease / Deposit Money to UR Bank ACCT. / Buy JAMB / WAEC Pin* — illustrates the domestication of English in bottom-up commercial signage: the compressions UR and ACCT. draw on digital communication conventions; the service vocabulary is specific to Nigerian urban commercial culture. This is English appropriated for speed and market visibility, inflected by the communicative ecology of the market — but it remains English. The domestication of English does not challenge English dominance; it demonstrates how thoroughly English has been internalised as the necessary medium of market participation across the full spectrum from formal professional to casually vernacular registers.

### 5.8 Nominal Recognition: Named Communities, Absent Languages

The most theoretically consequential finding of this study is the systematic pattern this article terms *nominal recognition*: the condition in which indigenous minority communities are publicly acknowledged through the inclusion of their proper names within textual structures otherwise organised entirely through English. The Jukun Wanu Development Association sign is paradigmatic: it inscribes Jukun Wanu — a historically and politically resonant identity marker — while organising that identity through English institutional categories (Development Association of Nigeria, Local Government Area, Taraba State). The community is named, but it is not authorised to name itself in its own language.

The same pattern operates across health signage (PHCC Wapan Nghaku, PHCC Kostine Lissam), development boards, and the entire Ussa corpus: Azumasam, Kunkufxang, Urenyang, Ayek-Kusku, Rufu, Andeshwo all function as identity diacritics within English-medium institutional frames — specifying which community is being referred to while the surrounding English text organises the relational and institutional content. Nominal recognition acknowledges locality without granting local languages the authority to structure public text. It produces inclusion in appearance and exclusion in substance: the community is visible as a name; its language is absent as a medium of public knowledge production.

### 5.9 Popular Posters and the Affective Extension of English

Wedding posters and social-celebration notices introduce the most ephemeral but affectively significant layer of the linguistic landscape. Combining photographs, English phrases, dates, and decorative design, they show that English is not only the language of bureaucracy and commerce but the naturalised medium through which young people and families participate in public visibility and affective self-presentation. When young people in Wukari choose English to announce their weddings, they are not merely complying with a language norm; they are expressing their aspirations in the language those aspirations have been taught to take — which is precisely how ideological naturalisations are most effectively sustained (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994).

### 5.10 Community, Recreational, and Civic Signage in Ussa LGA

The Ussa corpus yields a category of signage not extensively represented in the Wukari and Ibi data: community recreational and civic-associational signs. The Club 70-70 sign at Sabon Gida, Lissam — heavily weathered and rust-stained, yet sustained in public space — exemplifies what Blommaert (2013) calls the truncated sign: a sign that persists beyond active maintenance, its material decay producing its own semiotic effects of temporal depth and historical rootedness. What is analytically significant is not merely that the sign is English-medium, but that even this most local and voluntary category of community self-expression is

organised through English, without any institutional pressure or bureaucratic convention compelling that choice. The language hierarchy of Southern Taraba's public space has been internalised at the level of community agency itself.

## **6. Discussion**

### **6.1 A Stratified Semiotic Order: Multilingualism Below, English Prestige Above**

The evidence from Wukari, Ibi, and Ussa establishes that Southern Taraba is multilingual in social composition but hierarchical in written representation, confirming a foundational insight of linguistic landscape scholarship — that the visibility of a language in public space is determined not by speaker numbers or cultural significance but by power, policy, history, and institutional access (Backhaus, 2007; Gorter, 2006; Landry & Bourhis, 1997) — and extending it to a non-metropolitan Nigerian context. The extension of the corpus to Ussa LGA is especially significant: it confirms that the patterns documented in the urbanised and institutionally dense setting of Wukari and the compact market environment of Ibi are reproduced in rural and peri-urban settings, demonstrating that the linguistic landscape hierarchy is a region-wide structural feature rather than an artefact of urban concentration. The Winners Chapel exception confirms rather than challenges this conclusion: Hausa is admitted within an English-structured religious sign only where it performs a specific pragmatic function, leaving the institutional authority of English entirely undisturbed.

The four-tier hierarchy — English at the apex, Hausa in an intermediate zone of practical intelligibility, Arabic in a bounded sacred domain, indigenous minority languages confined to nominal presence — is the materialised form of a sociohistorical order of indexical value (Blommaert, 2010) produced by colonial language policy, postcolonial administrative continuity, the structural alignment of formal education with English, and the absence of minority-language planning frameworks. Comparison with comparable studies sharpens this interpretation: Stroud and Mpendukana (2009) identify a similarly stratified South African township landscape; Makalela (2015) demonstrates the direct consequences of African language exclusion from educational environments for learner agency. The nominal recognition dynamic documented here resonates with Hibiya's (2020) findings from minority-language regions, where community names serve as identity placeholders within dominant-language textual structures without conferring linguistic authority on minority communities. The comparative framework of stratified multilingualism developed by Laitinen and Zabrodskaia (2015) offers a productive analytical lens for contextualising the Southern Taraba four-tier hierarchy within wider cross-contextual patterns of linguistic landscape stratification. Purschke's (2021) spatial-linguistic approach further enriches the geosemiotic dimension of the analysis, particularly in accounting for how the spatial clustering of signs in Ussa LGA produces a coherent semiotic environment in which English authority is confirmed across denominational, health, and civic domains simultaneously. Postcolonial language hierarchies, once institutionally and ideologically established, are remarkably durable.

### **6.2 The Co-Production of Hegemony: Top-Down and Bottom-Up Alignment**

The Southern Taraba data significantly complicate the top-down/bottom-up distinction as applied in the linguistic landscape literature. The expectation in a context of linguistic inequality would be that institutional signage enforces English monolingualism while community-produced signage diversifies the public language repertoire. This prediction is not borne out. Churches, barbing saloons, community associations, financial kiosks, and recreational clubs are all English-medium. This convergence implies that the linguistic hierarchy is not merely a structural imposition from above but a genuinely hegemonic order in the Gramscian sense — one that operates through the voluntary participation of subordinated actors and is reproduced through the embedding of dominant values within the practical consciousness and everyday semiotic choices of local communities (Shohamy, 2006). To

challenge English dominance in Southern Taraba's public space is to challenge an internalised value order constructed over generations through colonial education, missionary activity, and the structural alignment of social mobility with English-language competence.

### **6.3 Nominal Recognition and the Limits of Symbolic Inclusion**

The concept of nominal recognition has implications beyond the Southern Taraba case for debates on linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) and minority-language policy in Africa (Bamgbose, 2000). Those debates often frame recognition in binary terms: languages are either visible or not, included or excluded. The Southern Taraba evidence reveals a more insidious intermediate condition. Communities are publicly acknowledged — their names appear on development boards, health identifiers, community association signs — but their languages are not public codes. They appear as names, not as media. This is not invisibility; it is a form of marginalisation in which recognition is granted in a form that does not empower. For language planning, this matters practically: a community named in official signage may register in policy assessments as represented in public space, when in fact its language has no authority to organise institutional text, deliver health information, or structure civic communication.

### **6.4 Development Discourse, Global Health Governance, and the Language of the Benefactor**

Development signage in the corpus — World Bank IMPACT boards, WASH posters, IMCI charts, clinical protocol materials — reveals a global-to-local transmission of English-medium knowledge that bypasses indigenous languages at every link in the chain: design, production, distribution, and display. This is a structural feature of what Escobar (1995) calls the discursive formation of development: the knowledge-power regime through which international organisations produce their subjects as passive recipients of expert knowledge articulated in the language of the global North. The WASH poster that communicates in English to a Jukun-speaking community enacts the developmental relationship semiotically — development speaks; the community listens. It should be acknowledged that the use of English in health communication materials is not simply reducible to negligence or exclusionary intent: in a setting as linguistically diverse as Southern Taraba, English may genuinely serve as the most logistically feasible medium for state agencies managing materials across communities speaking mutually unintelligible languages. Nigerian health communication research has documented this practical rationale (Ogunyemi, 2015; Adegoke, 2018). Nevertheless, that same body of research demonstrates that communities with limited English literacy face demonstrably higher barriers to health knowledge uptake, and that the availability of materials in local languages significantly improves health-seeking behaviour and treatment adherence (Adegoke, 2018). The issue, therefore, is not that English should be displaced from health materials but that its exclusive use, in the absence of even supplementary indigenous-language versions, constitutes a potential and documentable barrier to communicative access — particularly for the rural, elderly, and less formally educated populations who constitute a substantial proportion of primary health-care users in communities such as those of Southern Taraba. Where health equity and communicative justice are genuine goals of development intervention, the production of supplementary health-communication materials in community languages must be considered a programme standard rather than an optional addition.

### **6.5 Toward More Inclusive Linguistic Landscape Practices**

The findings point toward concrete directions for language planning intervention. In the educational domain, even supplementary indigenous language text on school signage would signal to learners that their languages belong in educational space. In the health domain, patient-facing information in community languages would expand communicative access to biomedical knowledge beyond the English-literate population. In the development domain,

including community languages on project boards would shift local communities from passive beneficiaries to recognised stakeholders. None of these interventions requires displacing English from its functional roles in institutional administration or clinical documentation; they require only the addition of community languages to a public landscape from which they are currently entirely absent.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study has examined signage, space, and multilingual identity in Southern Taraba State through a theoretically integrated linguistic landscape analysis of sign corpora from Wukari, Ibi, and Ussa Local Government Areas. Southern Taraba's public space is multilingual in social composition but hierarchical in written visibility. English dominates all signage domains across all three sites — consistently so across urban-institutional, compact-market, and rural-dispersed spatial settings. Hausa functions in selected informal and regulatory domains, with the Winners Chapel sign at Sabon-Gida Lissam confirming rather than challenging the structural hierarchy. Arabic carries bounded symbolic authority within Islamic educational space. Indigenous minority languages are structurally absent from durable public writing, appearing exclusively as toponyms and community identifiers embedded within English textual structures.

Three arguments have been advanced. First, the linguistic landscape of Southern Taraba is constitutive rather than merely reflective: it actively produces a semiotic order in which some languages accrue authority and civic legibility while others are confined to oral, intimate, and ceremonial domains. Second, this order is hegemonic rather than merely institutional: co-produced by local actors who have internalised English as the necessary medium of public credibility, it is resistant to change through policy alone and requires engagement with the language ideologies that sustain it from below. Third, nominal recognition — developed here as a contribution to the theoretical vocabulary of linguistic landscape studies — identifies a form of minority-language marginalisation more subtle and more insidious than simple exclusion: communities are named but not heard, acknowledged but not empowered, included in appearance but excluded in substance.

The study contributes to linguistic landscape scholarship by providing the first systematic three-LGA analysis of Southern Taraba, extending African linguistic landscape research beyond metropolitan centres into rural and peri-urban settings, and generating the concept of nominal recognition as a theoretically applicable construct. It contributes to postcolonial sociolinguistics by demonstrating, through concrete empirical evidence from three complementary sites, how colonial language hierarchies continue to organise the surfaces of public life in postcolonial Nigerian society. It contributes to applied language policy by identifying education, health, development, and community governance as the domains in which indigenous language inclusion would yield the most direct communicative and civic benefits.

Future research should extend the analysis through sociolinguistic interviews with sign producers and community members, examining how local actors understand and negotiate the language choices of their public signage. Comparative analysis across other Nigerian regions and non-metropolitan African settings would assess the generalisability of the nominal recognition pattern. Longitudinal study would track change over time, particularly given growing advocacy for Nigerian language rights and the potential influence of digital literacy on younger sign producers. The surfaces of Southern Taraba's public space remain a site of ongoing semiotic politics: the question of whose language appears on them is, as this article has argued, inseparable from the question of whose knowledge, authority, and belonging is publicly recognised.

## **References**

- Adegoke, B. A. (2018). Language, health communication, and patient outcomes in Nigerian clinical settings. *Journal of African Health Sciences*, 18(3), 652–661. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ahs.v18i3.22>
- Backhaus, P. (2007). *Linguistic landscapes: A comparative study of urban multilingualism in Tokyo*. Multilingual Matters.
- Bamgbose, A. (2000). *Language and exclusion: The consequences of language policies in Africa*. LIT Verlag.
- Ben-Rafael, E., Shohamy, E., Amara, M. H., & Trumper-Hecht, N. (2006). Linguistic landscape as symbolic construction of the public space: The case of Israel. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 3(1), 7–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790710608668383>
- Blench, R. (2019). *An atlas of Nigerian languages* (4th ed.). Kay Williamson Educational Foundation.
- Blommaert, J. (2005). *Discourse: A critical introduction*. Cambridge University Press.
- Blommaert, J. (2010). *The sociolinguistics of globalization*. Cambridge University Press.
- Blommaert, J. (2013). *Ethnography, superdiversity and linguistic landscapes: Chronicles of complexity*. Multilingual Matters.
- Escobar, A. (1995). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press.
- Gorter, D. (Ed.). (2006). *Linguistic landscape: A new approach to multilingualism*. Multilingual Matters.
- Hibiya, J. (2020). Linguistic landscape of a minority region: Visibility and recognition in multilingual public space. *Journal of Multilingualism and Multicultural Development*, 41(4), 291–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2019.1596149>
- Jaworski, A., & Thurlow, C. (Eds.). (2010). *Semiotic landscapes: Language, image, space*. Continuum.
- Kasanga, L. A. (2012). Mapping the linguistic landscape of a commercial neighbourhood in Central Phnom Penh. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 33(6), 553–567. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2012.706301>
- Laitinen, M., & Zabrodska, A. (Eds.). (2015). *Dimensions of sociolinguistic landscapes in Europe: Materials and methodological solutions*. Peter Lang.
- Landry, R., & Bourhis, R. Y. (1997). Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality: An empirical study. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 16(1), 23–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X970161002>
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Blackwell. (Original work published 1974)
- Makalela, L. (2015). Moving out of linguistic boxes: The effects of translanguaging strategies for multilingual classrooms. *Language and Education*, 29(3), 200–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2014.994524>
- Mignolo, W. D. (2000). *Local histories/global designs: Coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking*. Princeton University Press.
- Ogunyemi, O. (2015). Language preferences and health information access in multilingual Nigerian communities. *African Journal of Medicine and Medical Sciences*, 44(2), 115–124.
- Pennycook, A., & Makoni, S. (2005). The modern mission: The language effects of Christianity. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 4(2), 137–155. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327701jlie0402\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327701jlie0402_4)
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford University Press.
- Purschke, C. (2021). *Spatial linguistics: Place, language, and signs*. De Gruyter.
- Scollon, R., & Scollon, S. W. (2003). *Discourses in place: Language in the material world*. Routledge.
- Shohamy, E. (2006). *Language policy: Hidden agendas and new approaches*. Routledge.

**Signage, Space, and Multilingual Identity: The Linguistic Landscape of Southern Taraba State, Nigeria**

- Shohamy, E., & Gorter, D. (Eds.). (2009). *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery*. Routledge.
- Silverstein, M. (2003). Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life. *Language & Communication*, 23(3–4), 193–229. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309\(03\)00013-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309(03)00013-2)
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2000). *Linguistic genocide in education — or worldwide diversity and human rights?* Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Stroud, C., & Mpendukana, S. (2009). Towards a material ethnography of linguistic landscape: Multilingualism, mobility and space in a South African township. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 13(3), 363–386. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9841.2009.00410.x>
- Woolard, K. A., & Schieffelin, B. B. (1994). Language ideology. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23, 55–82. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.23.100194.000415>

*International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*