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Cultural Landscapes and Identity Formation in Multilingual Regions

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Abstract

In the age of globalization and intensified cultural interconnectivity, multilingual regions serve as dynamic spaces where cultural landscapes and identity formation are continuously negotiated. These regions, often located along political borders, postcolonial territories and ethno linguistic enclaves, are not merely defined by linguistic diversity but by how such diversity shapes spatial practices, heritage production and social belonging. This research paper explores the interrelationship between cultural landscapes and identity construction in multilingual contexts by drawing from human geography, sociolinguistics and landscape studies. It analyzes how language policies, place naming, architecture and memory contribute to spatial identity. Case studies from South Asia, Europe and Africa highlight how multilingualism intersects with ethnicity, power and mobility. The paper concludes by advocating for inclusive landscape governance that acknowledges linguistic pluralism and its centrality to identity and place-making.

Keywords: cultural landscape, multilingualism, identity, language policy, spatial belonging, ethno linguistic regions

1. Introduction:

The concept of the **cultural landscape** has long been central to the study of human geography. First articulated by Carl Sauer (1925), it emphasized that landscapes are not merely physical terrains but are continuously shaped by cultural forces—human practices, beliefs and systems of meaning. Sauer's formulation suggested that every cultural group leaves its mark upon the environment, producing a unique cultural signature. Over time, the idea of cultural landscapes has evolved beyond its morphological origins to incorporate symbolic, representational and political dimensions (Mitchell, 2000). Today, landscapes are understood not only as physical entities but as **spaces of meaning-making**, shaped through everyday practices, historical narratives and socio-political contestation.

In regions characterized by **multilingualism**, cultural landscapes take on even greater complexity. Here, language is not just a tool of communication but a key determinant of identity, spatial belonging and group representation. The spatial distribution of languages—reflected in signage, toponyms, monuments, architecture and religious symbols—constitutes what scholars refer to as the **linguistic landscape** (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). In such landscapes, different linguistic groups coexist, interact, or compete for visibility and legitimacy in shared physical spaces. These interactions often reflect broader dynamics of power, marginalization and cultural resilience.

Multilingual regions span a wide geographical spectrum—from **Belgium’s Flemish-Walloon divide** and **India’s linguistically reorganized states**, to **Cameroon’s Anglophone-Francophone tensions**, **South Tyrol in Italy** and **Basque Country in Spain**. In each case, the landscape becomes a canvas upon which linguistic identities are projected and negotiated. The **coexistence of multiple languages** in public and semi-public spaces frequently signals more than mere diversity—it represents historical legacies, cultural aspirations, or political struggles. Language policies enacted by states, the role of colonialism in shaping linguistic hierarchies and the rise of regional autonomy movements are all deeply inscribed into the landscape.

The intersection of language and landscape is critical to understanding **identity formation**. Language is a powerful cultural marker that can affirm belonging or accentuate difference. In multilingual contexts, individuals often navigate between languages—through code-switching, translanguaging, or diglossic practices—developing hybrid identities that defy essentialist categorizations (Garcia & Wei, 2014). These identities are reinforced, challenged, or redefined through spatial practices—naming places, constructing monuments, or using language in public spaces. Thus, language and landscape are **co-constitutive**: the way space is organized and symbolized affects how identity is articulated and vice versa.

This research paper examines the **interrelationship between cultural landscapes and identity formation** in multilingual regions. It investigates how linguistic diversity is embedded in space and how that embedding informs socio-political identities. Drawing from a range of **interdisciplinary perspectives**—including cultural geography, sociolinguistics, postcolonial studies and landscape theory—the study explores how **linguistic practices and spatial configurations** shape individual and collective senses of belonging. Through case studies from South Asia, Europe and Africa, the paper highlights both the **conflicts** and the **creative negotiations** that emerge when multiple linguistic identities inhabit the same landscape. Ultimately, the goal is to provide a nuanced understanding of how **multilingualism** redefines the cultural geography of place and the politics of identity in a globalized world.

2. Theoretical Framework: Cultural Landscapes and Linguistic Spatiality:

The concept of the **cultural landscape** has been a central theme in human geography since

Carl Sauer's seminal formulation in 1925. Initially described as the visible imprint of human activity upon the physical environment, the cultural landscape was primarily understood in morphological terms—as the sum of built environments, cultivated land and settlement patterns shaped by particular cultural groups (Sauer, 1925). However, later scholars such as Denis Cosgrove (1984) and Don Mitchell (2000) reconceptualized cultural landscapes as **symbolic and ideological spaces**, arguing that landscapes are not only shaped by material activities but also by discourses, power relations and historical narratives. In this view, landscapes are active sites of meaning-making and identity formation, embedded in broader social and political processes.

In the context of **multilingual regions**, language becomes a crucial aspect of landscape construction. The **linguistic landscape**—defined as the visible display of languages in public space through signs, advertisements, graffiti, inscriptions and toponyms—offers insights into the spatialization of linguistic hierarchies and cultural presence (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Linguistic landscapes are shaped by state language policies, commercial practices and community activism and they reflect both the **inclusion and marginalization** of particular linguistic communities. For instance, when dominant languages are prominently featured on government signage while minority languages are absent or relegated to informal expressions (e.g., handwritten signs or wall murals), this disparity conveys deeper social and political inequalities (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006).

The field draws from **spatial semiotics**, a theoretical approach advanced by Scollon and Scollon (2003), which emphasizes how language in public space conveys meanings that are both linguistic and spatial. According to this perspective, every sign carries not only textual content but also a spatial logic—it interacts with surrounding symbols, buildings and practices to reinforce or challenge social norms. For example, a bilingual street sign in a contested region may symbolize state recognition of linguistic diversity or, conversely, a compromise between competing identity claims.

Closely linked to this is the idea of **place-making**, as discussed by Cresswell (2004). Place-making involves the social construction of meaningful locations, often through repeated practices and symbolic representations. Language plays a key role in this process, as linguistic signs help demarcate who belongs, what is valued and how a place is to be understood. In multilingual spaces, place-making often becomes an arena of negotiation, where competing groups use language to assert claims over urban or rural spaces.

Another vital concept is **language ideology**, which refers to the beliefs and assumptions that people hold about language and its speakers (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). Language ideologies influence what languages are considered legitimate, prestigious, or authentic within a given landscape. These ideologies often shape language policies, media representations and educational systems, all of which contribute to the spatial and symbolic status of different languages in the

cultural landscape.

Altogether, the theoretical nexus of **cultural landscape**, **linguistic spatiality** and **identity formation** provides a rich framework for analyzing multilingual regions. It reveals how landscapes are not just products of cultural diversity but active terrains of power, negotiation and symbolic assertion, where language and space work together to shape how communities define themselves and others.

3. Language, Identity and Place: An Interlinked Triad:

In multilingual regions, identity is not a fixed or singular entity but a fluid, negotiated and multi-scalar process that emerges from interactions between language use, spatial practices and cultural symbolism. The relationship between **language, identity and place** forms a triadic dynamic wherein each element reinforces and reshapes the others. Language acts as a key marker of identity, enabling individuals and communities to signal affiliation, heritage and worldview. At the same time, place provides the material and symbolic context within which identity is articulated and experienced, while identity, in turn, imbues both language and place with meaning and emotional resonance (Cresswell, 2004; Pujolar, 2007).

Place is not just a geographical container—it is a lived space, a site of memory and a performative arena where cultural identities are enacted and reinforced. In multilingual contexts, the visibility of languages in public spaces—on signage, monuments, street names and commercial outlets—serves as a visual cue of group presence and cultural legitimacy. These linguistic inscriptions are more than communicative artifacts; they are **semiotic resources** that help define the character and ownership of space (Backhaus, 2007).

One of the most powerful ways language inscribes identity in space is through **toponymy**—the naming and renaming of places. Toponyms are never neutral; they often reflect political ideologies, collective memories, or struggles over historical narratives (Azaryahu, 1996). The renaming of colonial cities, such as Bombay to Mumbai or Calcutta to Kolkata, demonstrates an assertion of **postcolonial identity and regional linguistic pride**, especially in opposition to hegemonic narratives imposed by colonial or national elites (Prakash, 2002). These changes are not merely administrative but symbolic acts of cultural self-determination, often reflecting tensions between regional identities and national integration.

Furthermore, **linguistic practices in multilingual settings** often produce hybrid forms of identity that defy essentialist notions of culture or belonging. Individuals in such environments routinely engage in **code-switching** or **translanguaging**—the fluid use of multiple languages within a conversation, sentence, or context (Garcia & Wei, 2014). These practices reflect the sociolinguistic complexity of speakers who navigate multiple cultural worlds simultaneously. Rather than indicating linguistic deficiency or instability, such behaviors illustrate **adaptive multilingualism** and the active

construction of flexible identities.

Such hybrid identities are deeply tied to spatial belonging. A Tamil speaker in Chennai, for example, may use Tamil in familial or cultural contexts, English in educational or professional settings and Hindi when traveling outside the state. This **context-dependent linguistic mobility** not only reflects pragmatic choices but also signals shifting performances of identity in different spatial zones (Blommaert, 2010). Similarly, in diasporic communities, language use becomes a key strategy for negotiating belonging both in host societies and in imagined connections to ancestral homelands.

The spatial dimension of identity is also evident in how people experience **inclusion or exclusion**. In multilingual cities, the absence of one's language from official signage or public institutions can signal marginalization. Conversely, the presence of minority languages can foster a sense of recognition and inclusion. Thus, identity in multilingual regions is continuously shaped by the **visibility, accessibility and status** of languages within specific places.

4. Case Study I: India – Linguistic States and Regional Identity:

India represents one of the most extensive multilingual landscapes in the world. The country officially recognizes 22 scheduled languages and hundreds of regional and tribal languages, making linguistic identity a cornerstone of its federal structure. The reorganization of Indian states along linguistic lines in 1956 was a landmark moment, linking language to administrative and cultural identity.

States such as Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Karnataka have strong regional identities rooted in language. Public spaces are saturated with local languages—on billboards, temples, literature festivals and cinema—which assert regional pride and cultural autonomy. Simultaneously, the imposition or promotion of Hindi as a national language has led to resistance in southern states, especially Tamil Nadu, where anti-Hindi agitations historically linked language to cultural sovereignty (Ramaswamy, 1997).

Urban landscapes further reflect these dynamics. In Bangalore (Bengaluru), signage in Kannada, English and Hindi reflects both multilingual coexistence and contestation. Protests around language representation in metro stations or digital platforms reveal how deeply intertwined language is with place-making and identity (Jaffreot & Verniers, 2020).

5. Case Study II: Belgium – The Flemish-Walloon Divide:

Belgium provides a compelling European example of how linguistic divisions shape cultural and political landscapes. The country is divided into three language communities—Flemish (Dutch-speaking), Walloon (French-speaking) and a small German-speaking minority. This linguistic division is institutionalized in administrative structures, education systems and media, reflecting a deep-seated dualism in Belgian identity.

In cities like Brussels, the coexistence of French and Dutch signage is both a legal

requirement and a visual representation of the country's dual identity. Yet, this balance is fragile. Political disputes over language rights have led to the collapse of governments and periodic constitutional reforms. The linguistic border between Flanders and Wallonia functions as a cultural frontier, with distinct landscape practices, economic patterns and political preferences (Delwit, 2012).

Moreover, the symbolic use of language in cultural events, museums and public monuments perpetuates separate narratives of Belgian history and identity. The landscape, therefore, does not merely reflect bilingualism but embodies competing visions of national identity.

6. Case Study III: Cameroon – Anglophone-Francophone Conflict:

Cameroon is often referred to as “Africa in miniature” due to its ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. With both Anglophone and Francophone regions, Cameroon's colonial history has left a complex legacy of linguistic division. While French dominates as the official language, the Anglophone regions (Northwest and Southwest) have long expressed grievances over marginalization, leading to ongoing conflict since 2016 (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003).

The cultural landscape reflects these divisions. In Anglophone regions, British colonial architecture, English-language schools and Anglophone religious traditions mark a distinct spatial identity. The central government's attempts to “francophonize” these spaces—through language imposition and cultural centralization—have led to resistance and demands for autonomy.

Language is thus at the heart of a geopolitical conflict and the landscape becomes a battleground where cultural identity is defended. Human geographers have highlighted how space in Cameroon is actively politicized through language, making the landscape a site of both memory and contestation (Nkwi, 2015).

7. Multilingual Landscapes in Global Cities:

Beyond nation-states, global cities such as Toronto, Johannesburg and Singapore offer examples of multilingualism within cosmopolitan contexts. In these cities, the cultural landscape is shaped by diasporic communities whose languages and identities are inscribed in urban space. Ethnic enclaves like Chinatown, Little India, or Arab Street are not only commercial hubs but also linguistic and cultural landmarks.

In Toronto, over 160 languages are spoken and public signage in multiple languages reflects Canada's multicultural policy. Similarly, Singapore's official bilingualism policy (English plus a mother tongue) is materialized in school curricula, housing estates and public service announcements. These multilingual landscapes foster inclusive urban identities but also mask underlying hierarchies of linguistic prestige (Tan, 2014).

Such cities show how multilingualism, when managed inclusively, can enhance social cohesion. However, they also highlight tensions between assimilationist pressures and the desire for

cultural preservation.

8. Language Policy and the Production of Cultural Landscapes:

Language policies play a decisive role in shaping cultural landscapes. Official recognition, educational medium and language rights legislation determine which languages are visible and valued in public space. In multilingual regions, inclusive policies can promote coexistence and cultural vitality, while exclusionary policies can lead to erasure and conflict.

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Council of Europe, 1992) provides a framework for protecting linguistic diversity through signage, education and public media. Countries that have ratified it are obligated to preserve and promote minority languages in the landscape.

In contrast, language assimilation policies often lead to cultural homogenization. For instance, the dominance of Mandarin in China has led to the erosion of regional dialects and minority languages like Tibetan and Uighur, with implications for cultural heritage (Dwyer, 2005). Similarly, in Africa, post-independence language policies favoring colonial languages often marginalize indigenous linguistic landscapes.

9. Identity Negotiation in Multilingual Spaces:

Multilingual landscapes are not static; they are constantly negotiated through everyday practices, migration, protest and policy reform. Identity in these regions is thus a product of both **material space** and **discursive practice**. Human geography emphasizes the performative aspect of identity, where individuals and groups actively construct belonging through language use, spatial occupation and symbolic expression.

Grassroots movements, community radio, street art and linguistic festivals are examples of how cultural landscapes are shaped from below. These acts challenge top-down homogenization and assert pluralistic forms of identity. In this sense, landscape becomes a medium of resistance as well as recognition.

Digital landscapes—social media platforms, mobile apps and online forums—also extend the spatiality of language. Migrant and diasporic communities use these platforms to maintain linguistic ties and cultural memory, effectively expanding the landscape beyond physical boundaries.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations:

Cultural landscapes in multilingual regions are far more than physical terrains adorned with diverse linguistic signs; they are **symbolic palimpsests**—layered records of identity, memory and power. These landscapes not only represent the coexistence of multiple languages but also **embody ongoing negotiations over visibility, legitimacy and belonging**. Each layer of signage, toponym, or cultural symbol inscribed in space testifies to the linguistic communities that have inhabited, claimed, or contested the territory. Through case studies from India, Belgium, Cameroon and

multicultural cities like Toronto, this paper has shown that cultural landscapes in multilingual settings are **not passive reflections of diversity** but **active arenas of identity formation and geopolitical expression**.

In multilingual regions, language is intimately tied to **historical legacies and political arrangements**. In India, linguistic states express regional identity and autonomy, while in Belgium, institutionalized bilingualism both manages and magnifies linguistic cleavages. In Cameroon, language becomes a symbol of resistance and exclusion, while in cities like Toronto or Singapore, multilingual signage is often used to showcase multiculturalism and cosmopolitan inclusivity. These examples illustrate that the spatial manifestation of language can either foster **cohesion and cultural affirmation**, or **segregation and marginalization**, depending on how power operates in and through space.

Understanding these dynamics is critical for **urban planners, policymakers, educators and cultural heritage managers** who influence how space is designed, governed and narrated. Recognizing the **spatial dimension of multilingualism** helps ensure that landscapes do not inadvertently reproduce linguistic hierarchies or erase minority voices. Instead, they can be curated as **inclusive, dialogic spaces** that reflect the full range of a society's linguistic and cultural histories. Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Linguistic Representation in Public Spaces:** Governments should ensure that public signage, street names, transit systems and government buildings reflect the languages spoken by the communities they serve. This enhances **linguistic visibility**, fosters **cultural pride** and acknowledges **the right to space and representation**.
- **Inclusive Language Policies:** Language policy must move beyond assimilationist frameworks that prioritize a dominant language. It should instead **protect and promote minority and indigenous languages** through legal recognition, educational access and public funding. Multilingual education systems and media can reinforce linguistic diversity in everyday life.
- **Community Participation:** Cultural landscapes should be co-created with the communities that inhabit them. Participatory planning, community mapping and grassroots initiatives allow residents—especially those from marginalized linguistic backgrounds—to shape their environments and **assert their spatial and linguistic identities**.
- **Digital Preservation of Linguistic Heritage:** In the digital age, online platforms can play a vital role in documenting and disseminating linguistic traditions. Tools such as community-based digital archives, mobile language apps and geotagged oral histories can help **preserve endangered languages** and ensure their continued relevance.
- **Language-Sensitive Urban Design:** Multilingualism should inform the broader design of

urban infrastructure. Public art, way finding systems, cultural centers and architectural motifs can be infused with **multilingual expressions**, making cities not only functionally inclusive but symbolically representative.

In an increasingly mobile and multicultural world, **multilingual landscapes are not exceptions—they are the emerging norm**. Recognizing their complexity is essential for fostering **social justice, cultural sustainability and spatial equity**. By embedding multilingualism into the cultural geography of public life, societies can celebrate diversity while strengthening shared belonging.

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