



Analysis of Language Policy and Language Ideology in Medan City Public Spaces: A Study of Linguistic Landscape

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Abstract

This study investigates the realization of language policy and language ideology reflected in the linguistic landscape of Medan City's public space. Using a mixed methods approach and an explanatory sequential design, this study integrates quantitative data from the documentation of 300 written texts in five sub-districts and qualitative data from interviews with stakeholders and analysis of policy documents. The results show the dominance of Indonesian (42.7%), followed by multilingual texts (34.7%) and texts in foreign languages such as English and Mandarin (18.3%). There is a discrepancy between the national language policy and linguistic practices in the public sphere, especially in the commercial sector where many foreign languages are used for pragmatic economic reasons. Three dominant language ideologies were found, namely language nationalism, economic pragmatism, and ethnic identity, which compete with each other in influencing language practices. This research demonstrates the dialectical relationship between language policy, language ideology and linguistic practice, and emphasizes the importance of an inclusive and adaptive policy approach to the linguistic diversity of multiethnic societies. The findings contribute to the development of a more contextualized and effective theory of linguistic landscapes and language policy practices.

Keywords: *language ideology; language policy; linguistic landscape; Medan City; multilingualism*

Introduction

Medan City as one of the largest metropolitan cities in Indonesia has the characteristics of a multiethnic and multilingual society. Ethnic diversity such as Malay, Batak, Javanese, Chinese, Minangkabau, and other ethnicities have created a complex linguistic situation in the urban public space (Damanik, 2024). This phenomenon is reflected in the use of language on signboards, billboards, traffic signs, and various other forms of written text scattered throughout the city. However, in recent years, there has been a tendency for the dominance of certain languages as well as inconsistencies in the implementation of language policies set by the government. (Dalimunte, 2017; Hoerudin, 2021). This raises questions about the dynamic relationship between language policy, language ideology, and actual linguistic practices in Medan City's public space.

There are three main regulatory instruments governing the use of language in public spaces, particularly in the city of Medan: (1) Law Number 24 of 2009 concerning the Flag, Language, State Emblem, and National Anthem; (2) Government Regulation Number 57 of 2014 on the Development, Fostering, and Protection of Language and Literature, as well as the Enhancement of the Function of the Indonesian Language; and (3) Regional Regulation of North Sumatra Province Number 8 of 2017 on the Preservation of Regional Languages and Literature.

The linguistic situation in the public spaces of Medan has become increasingly complex due to the influence of globalization and high population mobility. Studies have identified the dominance of foreign languages in public spaces, which challenges the singular authority of the Indonesian language (Sahril et al., 2019; Simanjuntak, 2020). The use of foreign languages, particularly English and Mandarin, has been on the rise alongside the growth of the business and tourism sectors (Candrawati, 2019; Putri Ananda, 2023). On the other hand, efforts to preserve regional languages as part of local cultural identity continue to be promoted (Juriana et al., 2023; Saragih et al., 2024). This phenomenon creates a tension between national language policies that emphasize the use of Indonesian as the official language, regional language preservation policies, and practical demands in a globalized context. This condition calls for an in-depth examination of language policy implementation and the underlying language ideologies within the linguistic landscape of Medan.

A recent study of the linguistic landscape in Indonesia revealed an imbalance in language use in major cities, with a tendency for Indonesian and English to dominate over local languages. In public spaces such as universities, commercial areas and government offices, bilingual and multilingual signage is common, especially in Indonesian and English (Sartini, 2022; Vesya, 2022). While Indonesian

remains the primary language, reflecting national identity and complying with government regulations, English is increasingly used to meet internationalization and modernization efforts (Mahmudah & Radin, 2023; Sumilih et al., 2024). Regional languages, such as Javanese, appear less frequently, and are often used in conjunction with Indonesian or English (Winarti et al., 2024; Yoniartini, 2021). Linguistic landscapes serve a variety of functions, including providing information, giving directions, and conveying social identity (Hilaliyah et al., 2024). This trend reflects the ongoing negotiation between preserving local culture and adapting to globalization in Indonesia's urban linguistic landscape.

In the specific context of Medan City, Harahap & Nirmawan (2023) have conducted an initial study on the use of language on shop signboards and billboards on several main roads. Furthermore, Fahriaty & Niswa (2023) analyzed the linguistic characteristics of the landscape in Malls in Medan City to seek clarity on the reasons why linguistic items are displayed. This study revealed the use of multilingualism which reflects the ethnic diversity of the city's population. Sahril et al. (2019) found that foreign languages dominate public signage in Medan, and Indonesian is no longer the only dominant language.

However, the study has not linked the empirical findings with the prevailing language policy. A more comprehensive study was conducted by Gapur et al. (2024) and Kharisma et al. (2023) which mapped the language distribution in Medan City, especially in schools in Medan City, with the finding that language use in the school environment, taking into account its social and cultural aspects. The study aims to analyze the linguistic forms, uses, and functions that exist in the linguistic landscape of schools so that there are significant variations in language use patterns based on the demographic and economic characteristics of the region.

Furthermore, in relation to the use of local languages, Marlina & Pasaribu (2020) observed a decline in the use of local languages among ethnic groups in Medan, which has the potential to impact on cultural identity. However, the study has not specifically analyzed how stakeholders' language ideologies affect the implementation of language policies in public spaces.

Recent literature on linguistic landscapes and language policy in Indonesia also shows that studies integrating sociolinguistic perspectives and policy analysis are still relatively limited. Azyyati (2023) on the linguistic landscape in tourist areas in Indonesia points out the importance of considering social, economic, and political contexts in analyzing language use in public spaces. This opinion is corroborated by Abdullah & Wulung, (2023); Sholikhah et al., (2020) hat this study emphasizes that the linguistic landscape not only reflects linguistic reality, but also functions as a tool to construct the prevailing reality within it. This integrative approach opens a new space in the study of linguistic landscapes that is more comprehensive and

contextual.

Although there have been several studies on linguistic landscapes in various Indonesian cities, there are gaps between these studies and current empirical and theoretical realities. First, the majority of existing studies tend to be descriptive in nature and have not critically analyzed the dialectical relationship between language policies, linguistic practices, and underlying language ideologies. These studies generally focus on mapping language use without further exploring the factors that influence language choice and its implications for social and political dynamics. In the context of the multiethnic Medan City, the analysis of power relations and identity construction through language practices is very relevant but has not been explored much.

The second gap is related to the research methodology used. Previous studies have tended to rely on quantitative approaches in analyzing linguistic landscapes, focusing on calculating the frequency and distribution of language use. This approach, while providing an overview of the linguistic situation, has not been able to uncover the complexity of decision-making processes and negotiations of meaning that occur in the construction of linguistic landscapes. A more in-depth integration of qualitative methods, such as interviews with stakeholders and analysis of policy documents, is needed to comprehensively understand these dynamics, especially in the context of Medan City with high ethnic and linguistic diversity.

Based on the gap analysis above, this research asks the questions: How is the realization of language policy in the public space of Medan City and what language ideologies are reflected in the linguistic landscape? This research aims to analyse the implementation of language policy in the linguistic landscape of Medan City, identify the language ideology underlying linguistic practices in the public sphere, and explore the dialectical relationship between language policy, language ideology, and linguistic practices in the context of a multiethnic society. The novelty of this research lies in the integration of sociolinguistic and policy analysis perspectives in studying the linguistic landscape, with a mixed methodological approach that combines quantitative and qualitative analysis to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the language dynamics in the public sphere of Medan City.

Method

This research uses a mixed methods approach with an explanatory sequential design that integrates quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, J. W., & Clark, 2018). his research design was chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic landscape of Medan City, where the quantitative phase was used to map the distribution and frequency of language use in public spaces, while the

qualitative phase served to explore language ideologies and factors that influence language policy implementation. This approach is in line with Blommaert (2013) view that emphasizes the importance of understanding linguistic landscapes not only as static representations of language use, but also as dynamic processes that reflect social and political relations in multilingual societies.

The population in this study is all written texts found in public spaces in Medan City, including street signboards, shop signboards, billboards, banners, traffic signs, and other forms of written texts that can be accessed by the general public. Sampling was conducted using purposive sampling technique focusing on five sub-districts in Medan City selected based on different demographic and economic characteristics (Medan Kota, Medan Baru, Medan Petisah, Medan Timur, and Medan Helvetia). The selection of these locations considered the representation of areas with diverse ethnic concentrations, in line with the importance of geographical stratification in linguistic landscape research. From each sub-district, two main roads and two secondary roads were selected as data collection points, with a total of 20 roads being the research sites.

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques. First, visual documentation of all written texts in public spaces at predetermined locations using a high-resolution digital camera. Each text was documented along with contextual information such as geographical location and text type (Hu, 2022). Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 key informants consisting of business owners, government officials related to language policy, and community leaders from various ethnic groups.

The interview instrument was developed based on the language ideology analysis framework proposed by Woolard (2016) which includes aspects of authenticity, anonymity, and language commodification. Third, the analysis of language policy documents applicable at the national and regional levels, including Law No. 24/2009 on the State Flag, Language, and Emblem, as well as the National Hymn, the North Sumatra Provincial Regulation on regional language preservation, and other related policies. The validity of the data collection instruments was ensured through expert validation and limited trials, while the reliability of the visual documentation data was ensured through double coding procedures by two independent researchers (Landry & Bourhis, 1997).

Results

Distribution and Patterns of Language Use in the Linguistic Landscape of Medan City
This study successfully documented a total of 300 written texts in public spaces from 20 roads in five sub-districts in Medan City. The results of the quantitative analysis of language distribution showed that 42.7% (128 texts) used Indonesian monolingually, 18.3% (55 texts) used foreign languages (mainly English)

monolingually, 4.3% (13 texts) used local languages monolingually, and 34.7% (104 texts) used a combination of two or more languages (multilingual). The complete distribution of language use in the linguistic landscape of Medan City is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Language Use in the Linguistic Landscape of Medan City

Language Use Category	Total	Percentage (%)
Monolingual Indonesian	128	42,7
Monolingual Inggris	44	14,7
Monolingual Mandarin	8	2,7
Monolingual Regional Languages	13	4,3
Monolingual Other Foreign Languages	3	1,0
Bilingual Indonesian-English	69	23,0
Bilingual Indonesian-Mandarin	11	3,7
Bilingual Indonesian-Regional Languages	11	3,7
Multilingual (≥ 3 languages)	13	4,3
Total	300	100,0

Table 2: Distribution of Language Use by Text Type

Text Type	Indonesian Monolingual (%)	Foreign Monolingual (%)	Regional Monolingual (%)	Bilingual/Multilingual (%)	Total
Shop Signs	36,7	28,6	0,0	34,7	98
Commercial Billboards	32,5	26,3	1,3	40,0	80
Street Signs	92,0	0,0	0,0	8,0	25
Banners	51,3	10,3	7,7	30,8	39
Traffic Signs	95,7	0,0	0,0	4,3	23
Official Government Text	85,2	0,0	0,0	14,8	27
Graffiti/Informal Texts	37,5	12,5	25,0	25,0	8

Implementation of Language Policy in Public Spaces

An analysis of the implementation of language policy in public spaces in Medan City reveals a gap between formal regulations and actual practices. Based on the analysis of policy documents, there are three main regulatory instruments that regulate the use of language in public spaces: (1) Law Number 24 of 2009 on Flags, Language, and State Emblems, as well as National Hymns; (2) Government Regulation Number 57 of 2014 on the Development, Guidance, and Protection of Language and Literature, as well as the Improvement of the Function of Indonesian Language; and (3) Regional Regulation of North Sumatra Province Number 8 of 2017 on the Preservation of Regional Language and Literature.

An evaluation of compliance with the language policy shows that 74.1% of

official government texts fully comply with the language provisions as stipulated in Law No. 24/2009, while another 25.9% show varying degrees of non-compliance, mainly related to the use of non-standard Indonesian structures and interference from foreign languages. For non-government texts such as shop signboards and commercial billboards, the level of compliance is much lower, with only 28.1% fully complying with the provisions on the use of Indonesian in public facilities. Further analysis revealed that compliance rates varied by business sector, with the banking and telecommunications sectors showing higher compliance rates (63.2%) compared to the retail and culinary sectors (19.6%)

Another important finding is the inconsistency in language policy enforcement. Interviews with government officials revealed that although there is a mechanism for administrative sanctions for violations of language use provisions, its implementation is very limited and inconsistent. Of the 25 key informants, 18 (72%) stated that they had never received formal socialization of the policy on language use in public spaces, and 21 (84%) stated that they were unaware of administrative sanctions related to violations of language use provisions. This condition reflects the weak monitoring and evaluation system for language policy implementation at the regional level.

Language Ideology in the Linguistic Landscape

An analysis of language ideology reflected in the linguistic landscape of Medan City identifies three dominant ideologies that influence language choice in the public sphere: (1) the ideology of language nationalism, (2) the ideology of economic pragmatism, and (3) the ideology of ethnic identity. The ideology of language nationalism is reflected in the use of Indonesian in official government texts and texts related to formal state functions. This ideology is rooted in the view that Indonesian is a symbol of national unity and state sovereignty. Of the 27 official government texts analyzed, 100% use Indonesian as the main language, with 85.2% using Indonesian exclusively.

The ideology of economic pragmatism is reflected in the use of foreign languages, especially English and Mandarin, in commercial texts. This ideology is based on the view that foreign languages have high economic value and can increase commercial appeal. Interviews with business owners revealed that 76.5% of respondents used foreign languages on their business signage with the aim of increasing prestige and attractiveness to potential customers. This phenomenon is particularly evident in businesses that target the middle and upper segments, such as hotels, restaurants, and modern shopping centres.

The ideology of ethnic identity is reflected in the use of local languages, especially Batak, Malay and Hokkien, in informal texts and texts related to cultural

and religious activities. Of the 13 monolingual texts in local languages, 38.5% are related to traditional and religious activities, 38.5% are related to traditional culinary businesses, and 23.0% are informal texts such as graffiti. Interviews with community leaders revealed that the use of local languages in public spaces is seen as an effort to maintain cultural identity amidst the hegemony of national and global languages.

Further analysis reveals the contestation between the three ideologies in the linguistic landscape of Medan City. This contestation is not only reflected in the spatial distribution of language use, but also in multilingual language use practices that reflect the negotiation between ideologies. For example, 23.0% of the texts use a combination of Indonesian-English, reflecting an attempt to balance the demands of language nationalism and economic pragmatism.

The Dialectical Relationship between Language Policy, Language Ideology, and Language Practice

The results of integrative analysis of quantitative and qualitative data reveal a dialectical relationship between language policy, language ideology, and linguistic practices in the linguistic landscape of Medan City. First, there is a reciprocal relationship between language policy and linguistic practices, where language policy influences linguistic practices through formal regulations, while linguistic practices gradually shape the reformulation of language policy through a process of institutional adaptation. This is reflected in the evolution of language policy at the regional level which increasingly accommodates language diversity as a response to the multilingual reality in society.

Second, there is a dynamic relationship between language ideology and linguistic practices, where language ideology provides justification and motivation for language choice, while actual linguistic practices reinforce or contest the dominant language ideology. The results of the analysis show that although the ideology of language nationalism is still dominant in formal contexts, the practice of using foreign languages and local languages in public spaces is gradually shifting the dominance of this ideology and creating space for alternative language ideologies.

Third, there is a complex relationship between language policy and language ideology, where language policy reflects and reinforces a particular language ideology, while at the same time, the plurality of language ideologies in society creates challenges for the implementation of a coherent language policy. A critical discourse analysis of the policy documents reveals that although the national language policy is based on the ideology of language nationalism, its implementation at the regional level is influenced by negotiations with the ideology of economic pragmatism and the ideology of ethnic identity.

The findings above indicate that the linguistic landscape in Medan City not only reflects linguistic dynamics, but is also an arena of ideological and political contestation where various interests and social values are negotiated. In this context, an effective language policy needs to accommodate the diversity of language ideologies and linguistic practices that exist in a multiethnic society.

Discussion

Dynamics of Language Use in the Linguistic Landscape of Medan City

The results show the diversity of language use in Medan City's public spaces with the dominance of Indonesian (42.7%) as the main monolingual language. This phenomenon reflects the status of Indonesian as the national language and the official state language used in formal communication in public spaces. However, the significant proportion of monolingual foreign languages (18.3%) and multilingual texts (34.7%) indicates that the linguistic landscape of Medan City is not only dominated by the national language, but also influenced by globalization and ethnic diversity.

The spatial distribution of language use shows an interesting pattern, where business and commercial areas (Kecamatan Medan Kota) tend to have a higher concentration of foreign language use (32.8%), while residential areas with specific ethnic populations (Kecamatan Medan Timur) show a more significant use of local languages (12.5%). This difference reflects how the socio-economic function of an area affects the pattern of language use in public spaces. Business and commercial areas tend to adopt global languages, especially English, to attract consumers and increase economic value, while residential areas tend to maintain local linguistic identity (Tur, 2019)

This finding is in line with the symbolic function theory of linguistic landscape proposed by Nafisha & Firmandhani, (2024) dan Zhang (2024), where the use of language in public space not only functions as a medium of communication (informative function), but also as a marker of social, economic, and cultural identity (symbolic function). In the context of Medan City, the use of English and Mandarin in commercial texts reflects the symbolic function of language as a marker of status and prestige, while the use of local languages reflects the symbolic function as a marker of ethnic and cultural identity.

The Gap between Language Policy and Practice

An analysis of language policy implementation reveals a significant gap between formal regulations and actual language practices in the public sphere. The low level of compliance with the policy on the use of Indonesian in commercial texts (28.1%) indicates the weak enforcement of language policies and the lack of public

awareness of language regulations. This gap is also reflected in the finding that the majority of informants (72%) have never received formal socialization on language use policies in public spaces.

This gap can be analyzed using the theoretical framework of public policy implementation (Wheat, 2010). The importance of clarity of policy objectives, institutional support, and stakeholder participation in successful policy implementation (Mubarok et al., 2020). In the context of language policy in Medan City, the lack of effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, limited policy socialization, and weak coordination between government institutions are factors that hinder effective language policy implementation.

Inconsistencies in language policy enforcement also reflect the “policy-practice gap” that is often found in language policy implementation in various contexts (Kurhayadi, 2023). Spolsky's opinion elaborated by Karim et al. (2023) identified three components in language policy: linguistic practice, language ideology, and language management. In the case of Medan City, there is a misalignment between formal language management (written policy) and the actual linguistic practices of the community which are more influenced by the ideology of economic pragmatism and ethnic identity rather than the ideology of language nationalism that underpins the formal policy.

Ideological Contestation in the Linguistic Landscape

The identification of three dominant ideologies (language nationalism, economic pragmatism, and ethnic identity) in the linguistic landscape of Medan City reveals the complexity of ideological contestation in language use in the public sphere. This contestation reflects the dynamics of power relations between the state (which promotes the ideology of language nationalism), the global market (which promotes the ideology of economic pragmatism), and local communities (which promote the ideology of ethnic identity).

The practice of multilingual language use (34.7% of the total sample) can be interpreted as a form of negotiation and accommodation to the plurality of language ideologies. The use of the Indonesian-English combination (23.0%) reflects an attempt to balance the demands of language nationalism with economic pragmatism, while the use of the Indonesian-regional language combination (3.7%) This ideological contestation can be analyzed using the political economy of language approach. Language as “symbolic capital” is contested in the “linguistic market” (Block, 2017; Hawkey, 2024; Joseph, 2020). in the context of Medan City, Indonesian, English, Mandarin, and local languages have different symbolic and material values in the local linguistic market. English and Mandarin have high economic value in the context of business and tourism, while local languages have

high cultural value in the context of ethnic identity and cultural practices (Nursaputri & Aisyah, 2024).

Dialectical Relationship between Policy, Ideology, and Practice

The research findings regarding the dialectical relationship between language policy, language ideology, and linguistic practices indicate that the three components influence and shape each other in a dynamic and ongoing process. This dialectical relationship can be analyzed using Giddens (1984) Structuration theory framework that emphasizes the duality of structure and agency in social practice.

In the context of Medan City's linguistic landscape, language policy acts as a structure that limits and enables certain linguistic practices, while at the same time, people's actual linguistic practices (as a form of agency) gradually shape the reformulation of language policy through a process of institutional adaptation. This is reflected in the evolution of language policies at the regional level that increasingly accommodate language diversity as a response to the multilingual reality in society.

Similarly, there is a dialectical relationship between language ideology and language practice, where language ideology provides justification and motivation for language choice, while actual language practice reinforces or contests the dominant language ideology. (Kir, 2025; Uysal & Sah, 2024). The use of foreign and local languages in the public sphere that gradually shifts the dominance of the ideology of language nationalism reflects how linguistic practices can contest and reconfigure dominant language ideologies. (Fitria & Setiawan, 2022; Putikadyanto et al., 2024).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this study have important theoretical implications in understanding the dynamics of the linguistic landscape in the context of multilingual societies. First, this research enriches the understanding of the complex relationship between language policy, language ideology and linguistic practice by identifying the mutually shaping dialectical relationship between the three components. Secondly, this research contextualizes linguistic landscape theory in the Indonesian context which is unique in terms of ethnic diversity and national language policy.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this research have important implications for the formulation and implementation of more effective and inclusive language policies. The gap between formal policy and actual practice indicates the need for language policy reformulation that better accommodates the diversity of ideologies and linguistic practices in society. In addition, the weak socialization and enforcement of language policies indicate the need to strengthen institutional capacity in the implementation of language policies at the regional level (Nursaputri

& Aisyah, 2024).

In particular, local governments need to develop a more participatory and collaborative approach to language policy formulation and implementation by involving various stakeholders, including businesses, ethnic communities and the general public. This approach can increase the legitimacy of language policies and reduce resistance to policy implementation. (Hasriani & Sofyan, 2023; Syamsurijal & Ery Iswary, 2023).

Conclusion

A comprehensive analysis of the linguistic landscape of Medan City reveals that language use in public spaces not only reflects linguistic dynamics, but is also a manifestation of broader social, economic and political processes. The linguistic landscape becomes an arena where various language ideologies are negotiated and contested through everyday language practices. In this context, effective language policies need to adopt a more inclusive and adaptive approach that accommodates the diversity of language ideologies and linguistic practices in multiethnic societies.

This research makes a significant contribution in understanding the complexity of the linguistic landscape in the context of a multilingual and multiethnic society such as Medan City. The research findings can serve as a basis for the development of more effective and inclusive language policies that respect linguistic diversity while still promoting social cohesion through the national language.

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