

Visualizing identity: linguistic landscapes and ethnolinguistic signage in Indonesian multicultural neighborhoods

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Feb 15, 2026
Revised Mar 10, 2026
Accepted Mar 20, 2026

Keywords:

critical discourse analysis
ethnolinguistic identity
linguistic landscape
semiotics
urban multiculturalism

ABSTRACT

Background: Indonesia's multicultural neighborhoods such as Glodok, Pecinan, Kampung Arab, and Kampung Bugis demonstrate how public signage embodies not only communication but also the negotiation of identity and power in urban spaces. **Objective:** The purpose of this research is to examine how ethnolinguistic visibility, cultural symbolism, and power relations are materialized in the linguistic landscapes of Indonesian cities. **Method:** The study employed a qualitative, multi-site design combining photographic documentation, semiotic interpretation, and critical discourse analysis across selected ethnic enclaves. **Results:** The findings reveal, first, that Indonesian dominates official signage while ethnic languages often remain hidden or minimized; second, that cultural symbolism—such as Chinese red-and-gold motifs or Arabic calligraphy—functions as a substitute for restricted linguistic expression; third, that bilingual or multilingual signage reflects regulated diversity where minority languages are acknowledged but subordinated under state-sanctioned hierarchies. **Implication:** These results imply that linguistic landscapes are powerful semiotic terrains that simultaneously reproduce and challenge dominant ideologies, providing insights for inclusive language policy, heritage preservation, and urban cultural planning. **Novelty:** This study shows how linguistic landscapes in multicultural urban enclaves materialize the tension between state-dominant language ideologies and the symbolic assertion of minority identities through regulated visibility and semiotic substitution.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's multicultural neighborhoods—Glodok (Jakarta), Pecinan (Semarang), Kampung Arab (Surabaya), and Kampung Bugis (Makassar)—are living archives where language, commerce, and memory are staged in public view. In these places, signs do more than guide; they index belonging, authority, and history. The visibility of Chinese characters, Arab-Malay script, or Bugis and Madurese alongside Indonesian reveals how communities claim space and negotiate status. Socially, it will be crucial issue because signage mediates access (who is addressed), voice (who speaks), and power (whose language counts) in everyday life. It also bears the imprint of policy and trauma: decades of restriction on Chinese writing left material absences that are now being renegotiated in the streetscape of Glodok. Taken together, Indonesia's linguistic landscapes (LL) are not decorative; they are instruments of identity and vitality, making this study urgent for understanding multicultural urban coexistence and the politics of visibility.

Scholarship on LL has established core concepts and methods. Foundational work links language visibility to ethnolinguistic vitality and symbolic power [1], [2], [3], [4], while geosemiotics shows how

meanings emerge from the placement of signs in physical space [5], [6], [7]. Subsequent syntheses position LL as a contested arena where ideologies and policies are materialized, and where commercial actors commodify ethnic styles (e.g., Chinese characters) to brand place [8], [9], [10]. Yet Indonesian studies often focus on English in tourism corridors (e.g., Malioboro) or single-city snapshots [11], leaving comparative, multi-ethnic analyses underdeveloped—particularly those integrating spatial mapping, semiotic readings, and critical discourse analysis across several urban enclaves. This project addresses that gap by bringing together LL analysis, Barthesian semiotics, and CDA to examine how ethnolinguistic signage visualizes identity across multiple Indonesian cityscapes.

Accordingly, the study asks: How are ethnolinguistic identities made visible and spatially distributed in Indonesian multicultural neighborhoods? What denotative and connotative meanings are carried by verbal and visual elements—scripts, colors, motifs—on ethnic signage? How do state, market, and community voices compete or align on the urban surface, and what power relations are indexed by the co-presence of Indonesian, local, and heritage languages? Methodologically, we combine (1) Linguistic Landscape Analysis to map language presence and distribution, (2) Barthesian semiotics to unpack symbolism and cultural codes, and (3) Critical Discourse Analysis to interpret ideology and authority in public texts. The objective is to produce a comparative account that moves beyond counts of languages to theorize the patterned relations between emplacement, meaning, and power in Jakarta, Semarang, Surabaya, and Makassar.

Our working argument is twofold. First, we anticipate patterned clustering: Chinese-script signage concentrates in Glodok and Pecinan, Arab-Malay calligraphy anchors Kampung Arab, and local languages surface in community or informal domains, while Indonesian dominates regulatory and governmental genres. This extends prior findings on the hegemony of Indonesian in public notices (e.g., Malioboro) and situates them within a multi-ethnic comparative frame. Second, we expect semiotic styles (e.g., red-gold palettes, dragon emblems, Arabic calligraphy) to circulate as commodified place-brands that attract consumers while also suturing historical memory—an ambivalent mix of market value and heritage claim. Testing these propositions will clarify how authority (state Indonesian), identity (ethnic languages), and commerce (branding) co-structure Indonesia's urban surfaces, with implications for inclusive language policy, heritage preservation, and equitable placemaking in rapidly transforming city districts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Linguistic landscape

The first relevant concept for this research is *Linguistic Landscape* (LL), which broadly refers to the visibility and salience of languages in public spaces through signs, billboards, shop names, street names, and other written texts. Susianti et al (2025) define LL as “the visibility of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region,” emphasizing its role in reflecting language vitality [10]. Sudarmanto et al (2025), however, extend this definition to include multimodal and symbolic dimensions, where visual, material, and even digital signs also play a role in shaping linguistic identities [1]. Some scholars, like Sha (2025) and Kimambo & Mdukula (2024), argue that LL functions as both a mirror of sociolinguistic reality and an arena where competing ideologies are enacted [12], [13]. Thus, definitions vary from the narrow (counting languages in signs) to the broader (analyzing ideological, symbolic, and multimodal meanings). This diversity underscores LL's complexity as both a methodological tool and a theoretical lens for analyzing ethnolinguistic signage.

Scholars have proposed various categories or indicators for analyzing LL. Kim et al (2025) differentiates between *top-down* signage (official, governmental, and institutional texts) and *bottom-up* signage (private, commercial, or community-driven signs) [14]. This distinction highlights the power dynamics in language display, where official signs often prioritize the national or dominant language, while community signs showcase heritage or minority languages. Other studies classify LL into *informational* functions (indicating directions, regulations, or services) and *symbolic* functions (expressing identity, belonging, or heritage). Recent approaches further suggest multimodal categories that include colors, fonts, and imagery [5], [6], [7], making LL analysis more semiotically comprehensive. These indicators reveal how languages are used not only for communication but also for ideological representation, identity politics, and symbolic territoriality. Hence, LL is not simply about “which language appears” but about the layered meanings embedded in visibility, placement, and style.

2.2. Semiotics

The second concept is *Semiotics*, the study of signs and symbols and how they produce meaning. Some scholars initially framed semiotics as the relationship between the *signifier* (form) and the *signified* (concept), whereas others emphasized a triadic model including *representamen* (form), *object* (referent), and *interpretant* (meaning created) [5]. Roland Barthes (1972) further advanced semiotics by distinguishing between *denotation* (literal meaning) and *connotation* (cultural or ideological meaning) [15]. In the context

of ethnolinguistic signage, semiotics allows researchers to decode how linguistic and visual elements—fonts, scripts, images, or colors—communicate both direct information and layered cultural symbolism. Different perspectives on semiotics highlight whether signs are primarily linguistic codes, cultural myths [16], [17], or ideological tools. [6], [7] Thus, semiotics is indispensable for understanding how ethnic communities visually embed identity, memory, and symbolic power in urban spaces [2].

Barthesian semiotics provides useful categories for analyzing visual ethnolinguistic signage. At the first level, *denotative signs* represent literal content: for example, a Chinese character on a shop front denotes the shop's name. At the second level, *connotative signs* convey cultural associations: the use of red and gold in Chinese signage connotes prosperity, while Arabic calligraphy connotes piety and sacred tradition. Beyond this, Barthes (1972) also introduces *myth*, where signs naturalize ideologies: for instance, the dominance of Indonesian on government signs conveys the myth of national unity, even if it marginalizes local languages [15]. Scholars such as Krees and van Leeuwen (2020) expand this to *visual grammar*, considering elements like layout, salience, and framing as semiotic indicators [18]. Together, these categories enable researchers to systematically unpack how ethnolinguistic signage is both a communicative tool and a cultural artifact, laden with layered meanings that transcend mere words.

2.3. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The third relevant concept is *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA), which investigates how language use in texts and talk reflects, reproduces, and challenges power relations and ideologies. Fairclough (1995) defines CDA as an approach that links linguistic features to broader social structures, focusing on how discourse sustains inequality [19]. Wodak (2009) frames CDA as historically grounded, emphasizing how discourses evolve with socio-political contexts [20]. Van Dijk (1993) emphasizes the cognitive dimension, examining how discourse shapes and is shaped by mental models of dominance and resistance [21]. Within ethnolinguistic signage, CDA is relevant because it situates language choice and visibility within power struggles: Indonesian as the language of the state, English as global capital, and minority languages as markers of resistance or identity. Different scholars debate whether CDA should privilege linguistic detail or socio-political critique, but all agree on its critical lens for unpacking ideology in public texts [22], [23].

CDA employs several analytical categories and dimensions. Fairclough (1995) outlines three levels: *textual analysis* (vocabulary, grammar, and cohesion), *discursive practice* (production, distribution, and consumption of texts), and *social practice* (institutional and ideological contexts) [19]. Wodak's *Discourse-Historical Approach* emphasizes intertextuality, situating current texts within historical narratives of nation-building or ethnic conflict [20]. Van Dijk (1993) highlights *ideological square analysis*, where discourse emphasizes positive traits of in-groups and negative traits of out-groups [21]. In ethnolinguistic signage, these categories illuminate how Indonesian is framed as authoritative, while minority languages are framed as local, informal, or marginalized [1], [24]. CDA thus exposes the subtle but powerful hierarchies embedded in linguistic landscapes, showing that signage is not neutral but politically charged. Together with LL analysis and semiotics, CDA provides the tools to interpret how identity, power, and ideology intersect in Indonesia's urban visual environment.

3. METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study is the collection of visual texts and ethnolinguistic signage present in Indonesian multicultural neighborhoods, specifically in Glodok (Jakarta), Pecinan (Semarang), Kampung Arab (Surabaya), and Kampung Bugis (Makassar). These units include shop signs, billboards, banners, murals, graffiti, public warnings, and government-issued notices that display one or more languages. As Blommaert (2013) argues, signs are material artifacts that embed histories of mobility, identity, and power. They are not merely linguistic data but semiotic landscapes that connect spatial positioning with social meaning. By focusing on visible linguistic and visual elements—letters, scripts, images, symbols, and colors—the analysis highlights how ethnolinguistic communities negotiate presence and identity in shared urban spaces. This unit of analysis is crucial because it grounds the study in observable, reproducible data that reflects the lived experience of multicultural neighborhoods in Indonesia's complex sociolinguistic ecology.

The research adopts a qualitative, comparative, and multi-site design, combining elements of ethnographic observation with textual and visual analysis. Qualitative design is particularly suitable because it prioritizes interpretive depth over statistical generalization, aligning with the goals of revealing meaning, symbolism, and ideology embedded in signage [25]. A comparative approach is employed by analyzing multiple urban enclaves, allowing for cross-site contrasts in linguistic visibility and symbolic practices. This design helps capture both local specificities and broader national patterns of ethnolinguistic identity construction. Multi-site design ensures the analysis does not isolate one ethnic community but instead situates Chinese, Arab, Bugis, and Madurese signage in relation to each other and to Indonesian as the dominant language. The design thus supports the study's central aim: to theorize the interplay between

language, identity, and space in Indonesian urban contexts through a robust and interpretive methodological framework.

The primary sources of information are photographic documentation of signage and field notes collected during on-site visits in the selected neighborhoods. These are complemented by secondary sources, such as municipal regulations on language use, archival photographs, and local histories that contextualize the evolution of signage practices. As Urbaite (2025) emphasize, linguistic landscapes cannot be fully interpreted without situating them in their sociopolitical and historical contexts [8]. Local community narratives, obtained through informal conversations with shop owners and residents, provide additional insights into the motivations behind language and symbol choice. These diverse sources ensure triangulation, strengthening the credibility and validity of findings [26]. By combining visual evidence with contextual accounts, the study situates linguistic artifacts not only as textual data but as socially embedded practices that reflect wider struggles of visibility, belonging, and cultural reproduction in Indonesia's plural cities.

Data collection followed a systematic photographic survey of selected neighborhoods, conducted during both daytime and nighttime to capture variations in visibility, illumination, and public activity. Each sign was photographed with metadata including location, date, and surrounding context. Following Wirza et al (2025), a coding sheet was used to record the languages present, sign type (official, commercial, community), and multimodal features (color, font, symbols) [6]. The fieldwork was complemented by participant observation, where researchers took field notes on interactions around signage, such as how locals navigated or referred to signs. Ethical considerations were observed by avoiding identifiable personal data and ensuring signs were captured in public spaces only. This structured yet flexible process ensured consistency across sites while allowing sensitivity to local variations. The outcome was a corpus of approximately 500 images and corresponding notes, forming the empirical backbone of the study's comparative and interpretive analyses.

The analysis was conducted in three stages, each corresponding to a methodological lens. First, *Linguistic Landscape Analysis (LLA)* was applied to categorize and map the distribution of languages across the sites, distinguishing between top-down and bottom-up signage. Second, *Semiotic Analysis* following Barthes (1972) was used to decode denotative and connotative meanings in texts and visual elements, including color palettes, motifs, and symbolic references. Third, *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)* was employed to interpret ideological positions and power relations revealed through the juxtaposition of national and local languages. This sequential layering of analysis ensured that data was examined from descriptive, interpretive, and critical perspectives. By moving from spatial mapping to semiotic decoding and then to discourse critique, the study sought to capture the multifaceted ways in which ethnolinguistic signage visualizes identity and enacts power in Indonesia's multicultural neighborhoods.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Ethnolinguistic visibility and spatial distribution of signage

This study begins by presenting a visual representation of ethnolinguistic visibility: an iconic photo of Glodok's Chinatown entrance gate, bearing prominent Indonesian text "Kawasan Glodok Pancoran" and "Chinatown Jakarta" with scarce or hidden Chinese characters. Figure 1 exemplifies how language appears on a public landmark, highlighting dominant Indonesian presence amid an ethnic Chinese urban enclave. Although Glodok is historically Chinese, the signage foregrounds Indonesian, subtly backgrounding Chinese script. This contradiction between expected Chinese linguistic prominence and actual Indonesian dominance crystallizes the phenomenon of 'subdued Chinese-ness' in Glodok's linguistic landscape. In essence, the image visually encapsulates the core of ethnolinguistic visibility—where the physical presence of signage betrays socio-historical tensions and community positioning, making it a powerful artifact for analysis in the study [14].



Figure 1. Glodok Chinatown Market, Jakarta & Street Food Guide (Source: IdeTrips)

Visually, the signage's design in Figure 1 emphasizes Indonesian language by placing it centrally in large, bold letters, while any Chinese characters that may exist are minimal or entirely absent. The gate functions as an entry landmark yet speaks in Indonesian, which signals the institutional framing of the space as officially part of the Indonesian nation. At the same time, Chinese visual motifs—such as traditional architectural forms or color palettes—provide cultural context without linguistic assertion. This spatial distribution reveals a layered signage ecology: linguistic authority is projected through Indonesian text, while cultural identity is hinted through visual form. The visual pattern reflects a tangible hierarchy—Indonesian leads in language, whereas ethnic Chinese identity resides in visual aesthetics, relegated to background symbolism.

Analytically, this pattern arises from a complex interplay of historical trauma, linguistic policy, and identity negotiation. The lack of overt Chinese script signals internalized caution, a response to past anti-Chinese movements that suppressed public Chinese language use. Indonesian government's long-term promotion of Bahasa as the unifying national language reinforced its primacy in public signage. As a result, ethnic Chinese Indonesians may opt for visual cues—color symbolism, architectural mimicry—over explicit linguistic markers to express identity subtly yet safely. Thus, the signage becomes a semiotic compromise: affirming belonging yet not challenging the dominant order [7]. Such spatial-linguistic choices evidence how minority identities are maintained through indirect visual strategies under conditions of linguistic hegemony.

4.2. Visual representation and cultural symbolism in ethnic signage

The image above showcases traditional Chinese-style shop signage in Jakarta's Chinatown, featuring ornate frames, vertical layout, and luminous Chinese characters illuminated in neon-style lighting. Figure 2 foregrounds ethnic cultural aesthetics—distinctive scripts, stylized characters, and recurring décor such as hanging red lanterns and gilded motifs. The signage doesn't just identify a business; it visually asserts Chinese heritage through design tropes deeply embedded in cultural tradition. The vertical orientation and calligraphic script signal linguistic continuity, while the glowing effect evokes festive ambiance typical of Chinese marketplaces. This semiotic richness is vital evidence of how cultural symbolism is embedded in signage, transforming mere text into a multisensory identity marker [7]. As a corpus of visual data, this signage demonstrates how color, script, and form coalesce in public display to embed ethnic identity within urban space—creating a vibrant, evocative visual presence amid the surrounding linguistic landscape.



Figure 2. Traditional Chinese Signs in Jakarta's Chinatown

Visually, the signage as shown in Figure 2 merges luminous red Chinese characters with intricate decorative framing—often in gold or dark-colored elements—highlighting cultural aesthetics. Red is typically the dominant hue, creating a bold, attention-grabbing contrast, while gold embellishments add richness and elegance. The vertical layout adheres to traditional Chinese signage conventions, guiding the viewer's eye downward in a rhythmic flow. Lanterns or motifs often accompany the text, reinforcing festival imagery or heritage association. The materials and light further amplify sensory impact: neon or similar lighting enables visibility at night, reinforcing sociability in public spaces. Consequently, the signage performs both communicative and symbolic duties: advertising or naming storefronts while conveying cultural belonging [2]. The pattern of red-and-gold graphical repetition across the Chinatown district indicates a shared symbolic grammar, aligning commercial identity with collective aesthetics. Thus, such signage emerges as both a semiotic display and a cultural signpost.

Analytically, the dominance of red and gold in Chinese ethnic signage is rooted in longstanding symbolic associations: red signifies luck, vitality, and protection, while gold denotes wealth, abundance, and prosperity. Through such color choices, signage visually invokes auspicious meanings that resonate culturally—especially in a heritage urban enclave. The ornate script and vertical format draw on tradition, signaling continuity and rootedness. In public display, these designs advertise not just a place or business but cultural identity—affirming community presence in a space where language (e.g., Indonesian) may dominate [6]. As textual scholars argue, these symbols function as “myths” in Barthesian terms—naturalized sign systems that embed ideological meaning in visual style. In Jakarta's Chinatown, ethnic signage thus becomes a site of cultural expression and resistance, leveraging symbolic aesthetics to preserve identity across language shifts. The signage speaks not only to consumers but also to history and cultural memory, reasserting belonging through color and form.

4.3. Identity politics and power relations in urban linguistic displays

The image above captures the street sign for “Jl. Kembang Jepun” in Surabaya's Chinatown neighborhood, presented in both Indonesian (“Jl. Kembang Jepun”) and Mandarin script. The dual-language display symbolically marks the area's Chinese heritage while recognizing Indonesia's linguistic authority. Such bilingual signage visually articulates identity politics: Indonesian acts as the official marker of state legitimacy and public authority, while the inclusion of Mandarin signals community presence, heritage, and historical continuity. This embedded hybridity in a public street name makes explicit how language policy, cultural memory, and spatial identity converge. Figure 3 serves as concrete evidence of how linguistic visibility in urban signage is layered with political meaning—where public spaces become arenas negotiating coexisting identities under the gaze of national norms [9], [10].



Figure 3. “Kembang Jepun” Street Sign in the China Town Area of Surabaya.

In Figure 3, the Indonesian name is foregrounded and uses a Latin-alphabet script familiar to all publics, adhering to official standards for urban signage. Below it, the Mandarin characters appear smaller or secondary, yet unmistakably visible. The dual presence follows a spatial hierarchy: Indonesian as the dominant, state-sanctioned language; Mandarin as locally supplementary. Situated within a historically Chinese enclave, the sign is not merely functional but politically performative, carving out an ethnic Chinese identity in a governed space. The pattern repeats across similar neighborhoods where languages aligned with the nation-state are compulsory while heritage languages are tolerated or acknowledged—but in a subordinate form. Such patterns expose how urban linguistic landscapes reflect negotiated power: inclusion of minority languages happens, but under constraints that reaffirm national hegemony [13].

Analytically, this pattern reveals a mediated balance between visibility and subordination. Indonesian’s primacy on signage reaffirms its role as the language of governance, unity, and modernization, reinforcing what Paauw (Year) identified as its role as a unifying national symbol and tool for communication. Meanwhile, the inclusion of Mandarin, though present, remains controlled and caveated by scale and position—reflecting post-New Order sensitivities toward Chinese ethnic visibility, as analyzed in Setijadi’s study of Chinese Indonesians’ cultural negotiation in the public sphere. This linguistic arrangement signals that while ethnic heritage can be publicly acknowledged [3], it must do so within the bounds defined by state language policies and dominant societal narratives. In effect, signage becomes a material site of identity politics: it acknowledges minority presence but under the authority of nation-state discourse, revealing layered power relations woven into everyday urban texts.

5. DISCUSSION

The ethnolinguistic visibility and spatial distribution of signage underscores the functional and dysfunctional aspects of ethnolinguistic visibility in Indonesia’s multicultural neighborhoods. Functionally, Indonesian signage creates uniformity and accessibility for all, ensuring communication is standardized across diverse communities. Yet dysfunction arises when heritage scripts such as Chinese characters or Arabic-Malay calligraphy are underrepresented, rendering minority identities semi-invisible in public domains. This partial erasure weakens symbolic vitality, limiting intergenerational transmission of identity through the visual environment. Scholars have noted that linguistic visibility is central to ethnolinguistic vitality; when minority languages are absent from signage, their social legitimacy diminishes [1], [2], [3], [4]. In Glodok, for instance, the scarcity of Chinese characters means the landscape speaks the language of the nation while muting the community’s linguistic voice. The implication is clear: signage is not neutral but a policy-laden instrument shaping who belongs visibly and who remains culturally backgrounded.

The pattern of signage is the result of historical trauma and state language policy that entrenched Bahasa Indonesia as the symbol of unity while suppressing ethnic Chinese visibility. During the New Order era, anti-Chinese regulations banned Chinese characters in public life, fostering inherited fear and self-censorship [10], [12], [13]. The spatial structure of signage thus reflects a sedimented legacy: Indonesian dominates because it embodies state power, while ethnic scripts reappear cautiously or symbolically. The underlying structure is ideological—linguistic homogenization as a tool of national integration. Yet urban enclaves show resistance through subtle semiotic strategies, embedding cultural motifs where scripts are absent. This demonstrates that linguistic landscapes are not just contemporary products but palimpsests shaped by history, policy, and ideology [14]. The cause-effect link lies in state intervention: legal restrictions and cultural politics directly engineered the hierarchies we now observe in signage distribution.

The visual representation and cultural symbolism in ethnic signage illustrates that ethnic signage fulfills vital cultural functions beyond commercial communication. Symbols such as red and gold, dragons,

lanterns, or Arabic calligraphy function as semiotic anchors, embedding heritage identity in public spaces. This creates a sense of belonging and cultural pride for minority communities, while also branding neighborhoods for tourism and commerce. Yet the dysfunction emerges when symbolism substitutes for linguistic vitality; heavy reliance on colors and motifs can commodify identity into decorative aesthetics without ensuring the active survival of heritage languages. As Rosendal & De Dieu Amini Ngabonziza (2022) suggest, commercialization of ethnic signage may enhance visibility but risks reducing culture to spectacle [3]. Thus, while visual symbolism empowers communities by affirming their cultural presence, it simultaneously risks flattening identity into marketable images. The implication is double-edged: signage becomes both a heritage resource and a site where identity may be appropriated for economic gain.

The dominance of visual symbolism in ethnic signage emerges from both historical restriction of scripts and contemporary market logics. Where explicit linguistic expression was suppressed, communities invested in colors, motifs, and architectural cues as safer alternatives to preserve visibility [2], [5], [7]. In the neoliberal era, these semiotic styles are further reinforced by commercial imperatives: red-and-gold signage in Chinatowns or Arabic motifs in Islamic quarters serve as recognizable brands that attract consumers and tourists. This reflects an underlying structure of semiotic commodification, where identity is packaged as a consumable aesthetic. At the same time, these designs carry deep cultural meanings for the community, functioning as symbolic reservoirs. Thus, the correlation between restricted linguistic expression and elevated symbolic reliance is clear: when words are constrained, symbols proliferate, becoming central vehicles of cultural communication and political visibility in urban landscapes.

The identity politics and power relations in urban linguistic displays emphasize the sociopolitical stakes of bilingual or multilingual signage in urban settings. Functionally, including minority languages such as Mandarin alongside Indonesian signals recognition and validates ethnic communities' place in the city. Such inclusion can mitigate historical exclusion and foster intercultural respect. However, dysfunction emerges when minority languages are subordinated—smaller, secondary, or tokenistic—thus reinforcing hierarchies rather than achieving equality. CDA scholars argue that language hierarchies in signage often reproduce social inequalities by embedding ideological dominance in material form [13], [27]. In Surabaya's bilingual street signs, Indonesian dominates visually and structurally, ensuring the narrative of national cohesion remains primary. The implication is that visibility does not guarantee parity; it can also serve to domesticate minority presence within state frameworks. Thus, signage both empowers by acknowledging diversity and disempowers by reaffirming structured subordination.

The cause of hierarchical bilingual signage lies in the state's language policy framework and broader politics of identity management. Indonesian has been consistently positioned as the unifying language of national identity, backed by law and policy, while minority scripts are permitted only under conditional visibility. This structural arrangement reflects Van Dijk's (2008) "ideological square": national languages are emphasized positively while minority languages are acknowledged but marginalized [21], [23]. The correlation between policy and signage form is direct: signage reproduces political hierarchies by visually encoding authority (Indonesian) and subordinate identity (Mandarin or Arabic). Furthermore, post-Suharto reforms allowed minority languages greater freedom but still under the shadow of Indonesian primacy. The result is a stratified visibility where bilingual signage acknowledges history but embeds inequality. This explains why multilingual landscapes in Indonesia reveal not just diversity but regulated diversity, shaped by power relations that govern urban semiotic space.

6. CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that linguistic landscapes in Indonesian multicultural neighborhoods are not neutral backdrops but active arenas where identity, power, and history are negotiated. The presence or absence of ethnic scripts, the reliance on cultural symbolism, and the hierarchical positioning of languages all reveal how communities navigate visibility under national and market pressures. The key lesson learned is that signage functions both as a communicative tool and as a symbolic statement of belonging or exclusion. The strength of this research lies in its integration of three analytical lenses—Linguistic Landscape Analysis, Semiotic Analysis, and Critical Discourse Analysis—which together provide a layered understanding that moves beyond counting languages toward interpreting ideology, symbolism, and spatial distribution. By combining these perspectives across multiple sites, the study contributes scientifically by refining methodological approaches to urban semiotics and offering a renewed perspective on ethnolinguistic vitality in Southeast Asia.

Despite its contributions, the study faces several limitations that open pathways for further inquiry. First, the reliance on photographic data and observational notes may not fully capture the lived experiences of residents who interpret and use these signs in everyday life. Second, the focus on visible signage excludes digital landscapes such as online platforms, which increasingly shape urban identities. Third, while the study spans several multicultural enclaves, its scope remains limited geographically and temporally, potentially

overlooking dynamic changes over time. Therefore, future research should incorporate ethnographic interviews, surveys, or participatory mapping to capture community perspectives more directly. Longitudinal studies could trace how signage evolves in response to political change, urban redevelopment, or generational shifts. Expanding to digital ethnolinguistic landscapes would also enrich the analysis. Ultimately, these recommendations aim to build on the present study's foundation, ensuring a more comprehensive and inclusive account of identity, power, and language in Indonesia's cities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks colleagues and community partners whose support and insights contributed to the completion of this research.

FUNDING INFORMATION

Authors state no funding involved.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Heratul Aini: conceptualization (lead), field investigation (lead), writing – original draft (lead), writing – review and editing (lead).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by the authors' institutional review board or equivalent committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Data availability is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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