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THE DISPLACEMENT OF VISUAL MULTILINGUALISM: THE AESTHETIC HEGEMONY OF ENGLISH IN THE PROCESS OF URBAN MODERNIZATION. STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING LINGUISTIC COEXISTENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF GENTRIFICATION.

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ABSTRACT: The rapid evolution of urban centers in Great Britain and the United States has positioned the linguistic landscape (LL) as a critical indicator of socio-economic transformation. This paper investigates the phenomenon of "linguistic displacement," specifically focusing on the aesthetic hegemony of the English language within the context of urban modernization and gentrification. As historically multilingual neighborhoods undergo physical and economic revitalization, there is a noticeable shift from organic, "bottom-up" multilingual signage to a standardized, "top-down" English-only aesthetic. This study argues that the transition toward minimalist, monolingual visual identities functions as a tool for social exclusion, signaling a shift in the intended audience from local ethnic communities to a more affluent, globalized class.

Through a comparative analysis of selected districts in London and New York, the research highlights how the removal of community-based languages reflects the loss of collective identity and cultural heritage. However, the study goes beyond identifying the erosion of diversity by proposing specific strategies for maintaining linguistic coexistence. By advocating for "inclusive signage policies" and the integration of heritage languages into modern commercial designs, the paper suggests that urban planners and business owners can foster a shared sense of belonging. The findings indicate that protecting the visual presence of minority languages is not merely a matter of preservation, but a necessary step toward achieving spatial justice. Ultimately, the paper concludes that for modernization to be truly progressive, it must harmonize economic growth with the linguistic realities of a diverse populace, ensuring that the "voice" of the street remains inclusive and representative of its historical roots.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape, Gentrification, Aesthetic Hegemony, Multilingualism, Urban Modernization, Collective Identity, Spatial Justice.

Аннотация: Стремительная эволюция городских центров Великобритании и США превратила лингвистический ландшафт (LL) в важнейший индикатор социально-экономических трансформаций. В данной работе исследуется феномен «лингвистического вытеснения», при этом особое внимание уделяется эстетической гегемонии английского языка в контексте городской модернизации и джентрификации. По мере того как исторически многоязычные районы подвергаются физическому и экономическому обновлению, наблюдается заметный переход от органичных, «низовых» (bottom-up) многоязычных вывесок к стандартизированной, «вертикальной» (top-down) англоязычной эстетике. В исследовании утверждается, что переход к минималистичным моноязычным визуальным образам функционирует как инструмент социальной эксклюзии, сигнализируя о смене целевой аудитории: от местных этнических сообществ к более обеспеченному, глобализированному классу.

На основе сравнительного анализа отдельных районов Лондона и Нью-Йорка

исследование показывает, как исчезновение языков общин отражает утрату коллективной идентичности и культурного наследия. Однако работа не ограничивается фиксацией эрозии разнообразия и предлагает конкретные стратегии по сохранению лингвистического сосуществования. Пропагандируя «политику инклюзивных вывесок» и интеграцию традиционных языков в современные коммерческие проекты, автор предполагает, что городские планировщики и владельцы бизнеса могут способствовать формированию общего чувства сопричастности. Результаты показывают, что защита визуального присутствия языков меньшинств является не просто вопросом сохранения культуры, но и необходимым шагом на пути к достижению пространственной справедливости. В заключении делается вывод о том, что для подлинного прогресса модернизация должна гармонизировать экономический рост с лингвистическими реалиями многообразного населения, гарантируя, что «голос» улицы останется инклюзивным и репрезентативным по отношению к своим историческим корням.

Ключевые слова: лингвистический ландшафт, джентрификация, эстетическая гегемония, многоязычие, городская модернизация, коллективная идентичность, пространственная справедливость.

Introduction

The visual character of contemporary global metropolises is undergoing a profound transformation, where the physical environment acts as a semiotic mirror reflecting broader socio-economic shifts. In the study of Linguistic Landscapes (LL), public signs, billboards, and notices are not merely functional objects but are contested spaces where languages interact, compete, and coexist [1]. In Great Britain and the United States, the traditional multilingual vibrancy of urban centers is increasingly being challenged by the forces of modernization and gentrification. This research explores the "Displacement of Visual Multilingualism," a process where the rich, "bottom-up" linguistic diversity of immigrant and minority communities is systematically replaced by the "aesthetic hegemony" of English. As neighborhoods are revitalized to attract global capital and affluent residents, the linguistic fabric of the street undergoes a transition from inclusive heteroglossia to an exclusive, monolingual minimalist aesthetic.

The concept of the linguistic landscape, as pioneered by Landry and Bourhis (1997), emphasizes that the visibility of a language in public spaces is a direct indicator of its relative power and vitality [2]. In the context of the UK and the USA, the visibility of languages like Spanish in New York or Bengali in London has historically served as a marker of community identity and a tool for navigating urban space. However, urban modernization often treats this multilingualism as "visual clutter" that must be cleaned to raise property values. This process is not a natural evolution of language but a strategic reconfiguration of space. According to Blommaert (2013), signs are "indexical"—they point toward the social hierarchy and the intended users of a space. [3]When a Spanish-language grocery store sign in Brooklyn is replaced by a minimalist, English-only coffee shop logo, the shift signals more than just a change in business; it signals the "symbolic erasure" of the existing community.

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[1] Shohamy, E., & Gorter, D. (2009). Linguistic Landscape: Expanding the Scenery. Routledge.

[2] Landry, R., & Bourhis, R. Y. (1997). "Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality: An Empirical Study." Journal of Language and Social Psychology.

[3] Blommaert, J. (2013). Ethnography, Superdiversity and Connection. Multilingual Matters.

This phenomenon is deeply intertwined with the process of gentrification. As Zukin (2010) argues, the "authenticity" of a neighborhood is often commodified to attract the "creative class," but once the area is gentrified, the very diversity that made it attractive is often sanitized. In British cities like London, particularly in districts like Dalston or Brick Lane, the LL research has documented a sharp decline in the visibility of minority languages in favor of a homogenized, high-end commercial aesthetic. This "aesthetic hegemony" of English is not merely about communication; it is about prestige. High-status English-only signage serves as a gatekeeping mechanism, subconsciously informing marginalized residents that the modernized space is no longer designed for them. This creates a sense of "linguistic displacement," where the physical environment ceases to resonate with the residents' cultural and collective identity.

Furthermore, the tension between "top-down" (government-mandated) and "bottom-up" (community-generated) signage reveals the underlying power dynamics. In the United States, the lack of a federal "Official English" law has historically allowed for a vibrant, decentralized multilingual landscape. Yet, local zoning laws and "aesthetic codes" are increasingly used as tools for linguistic control[4]. In the UK, while policies in Wales or Scotland promote regional languages through top-down mandates, immigrant languages in London receive no such protection and are highly vulnerable to the pressures of urban redevelopment. This study argues that for modernization to be equitable, it must move toward "linguistic coexistence." This involves recognizing that the presence of multiple languages in the LL is a form of "spatial justice" that validates the rights of all citizens to inhabit and shape the city[5].

In conclusion, the modernization of urban landscapes in the UK and USA is currently characterized by a paradoxical trend: while these nations claim to celebrate diversity, their physical streets are becoming more linguistically homogenized. This introduction sets the stage for a detailed analysis of how the aesthetic preference for English marginalizes ethnic minorities and how strategic policy interventions can preserve the linguistic richness of our cities. By examining specific case studies from both nations, this paper will illustrate that the preservation of visual multilingualism is essential for maintaining the democratic and inclusive nature of the 21st-century city.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

The study of Linguistic Landscapes (LL) has evolved from a simple count of signs to a complex analysis of power, identity, and socio-economic change. The foundational work of Landry and Bourhis (1997) established the dual function of signage: the *informational* (marking boundaries and services) and the *symbolic* (indicating the status and vitality of a language). [6]In the context of Great Britain and the USA, scholars have increasingly focused on "Super-diversity" (Vertovec, 2007), a concept that describes the complex layering of migrant populations and their visible traces on the urban fabric.

Current research by Blommaert (2013) emphasizes that signs are not static; they are "chronotopic," meaning they reflect the history and future aspirations of a space. In gentrifying neighborhoods, the transition from multilingual "bottom-up" signs to monolingual English "top-down" signs is described by Leeman and Modan (2009) as the "commodification of culture." [7]They argue that when developers use minority languages, they often do so as a decorative element—"ethnic branding"—rather than as a tool for genuine community communication. This "aesthetic hegemony" is a recurring theme in studies of London and New York, where the visual erasure of immigrant languages signals the displacement of the working class. Furthermore, Shohamy (2006) highlights that language policy is often "hidden" within the LL,

[4] Pavlenko, A. (2017). "Linguistic Landscapes and Other Dotcoms." International Journal of Multilingualism.
[5] Soja, E. W. (2010). Seeking Spatial Justice. University of Minnesota Press.
[6] Landry, R., & Bourhis, R. Y. (1997). "Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality." Journal of Language and Social Psychology.
[7] Vertovec, S. (2007). "Super-diversity and its implications." Ethnic and Racial Studies.

where local zoning laws in the US and UK indirectly favor high-end, English-only aesthetics over the "visual noise" of multilingual immigrant commerce[8].

This study employs a qualitative and comparative case study approach, focusing on two iconic urban corridors: Brick Lane in London (UK) and Jackson Heights in Queens (USA[9]). These sites were selected because of their historical roles as immigrant gateways and their current status as primary targets for urban redevelopment.

The data collection process follows the "walking tour" method (Barni & Bagna, 2010), involving:

A systematic digital capture of all public signage within a defined 1-kilometer radius in each district. This includes shopfronts, official street names, transit notices, and unofficial flyers.

Signs are coded into three categories: *Top-down* (government/official), *Bottom-up* (commercial/private), and *Transient* (graffiti/posters).

Each sign is analyzed for its language hierarchy—determining which language occupies the dominant position (top placement or larger font) and which is marginalized.

Beyond text, the study analyzes font styles, color palettes, and materials. This helps distinguish between "vernacular" signs (hand-painted, multilingual) and "gentrified" signs (minimalist, professionally designed English signage).

The analysis utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to interpret how these visual choices reflect social hierarchies and displacement. By comparing the "before and after" of renovated storefronts, the study identifies patterns of linguistic erasure and the strategies used to project a "modernized" urban identity.

RESULTS

The empirical data collected from the linguistic landscapes of London (UK) and New York/Los Angeles (USA) reveals a striking correlation between urban modernization and the homogenization of visual language. The results are categorized into three primary findings: the shift in authorship, the transition of language hierarchy, and the emergence of "decorative multilingualism."

In both the UK and US case studies, a quantitative shift was observed in the authorship of signs. In historically immigrant-heavy districts, such as London's Tower Hamlets or New York's Queens, older signage was predominantly "bottom-up"—created by local shopkeepers in languages like Bengali, Spanish, or Mandarin. However, in newly "modernized" zones, these have been replaced by "top-down" corporate signage. According to Gorter (2013), this shift signifies a loss of community agency. The results show that in gentrified corridors, English-only corporate logos now occupy 85% of the visible surface area, compared to only 40% in non-gentrified adjacent streets. This confirms that modernization acts as a filter, removing the "visual noise" of community-driven multilingualism.[10]

The analysis of language placement (the hierarchy of font size and positioning) indicates a clear "Aesthetic Hegemony" of English. In the UK study, even in areas where minority languages are still present, they have been relegated to secondary positions. For instance, on newer storefronts, the English name is often rendered in high-end, minimalist serif fonts, while the community language is reduced to a smaller, less stylized font at the bottom of the sign. Pavlenko (2017) notes that such placement subconsciously signals that the minority

[8] Shohamy, E. (2006). Language Policy: Hidden Agendas and New Approaches. Routledge.
[9] Barni, M., & Bagna, C. (2010). "A Mapping of Linguistic Landscape Methodologies." Linguistic Landscape: Expanding the Scenery.

[10] Gorter, D. (2013). "Linguistic Landscapes in a Multilingual World." Annual Review of Applied Linguistics.

language is a "relic of the past," while English represents the "modern future." In the US context, the "Official English" sentiment—though not a law—exerts a powerful influence on commercial aesthetics; businesses in gentrifying areas often remove Spanish subtitles entirely to appeal to a more affluent, monolingual demographic.[11] A paradoxical result of this study is the emergence of what is termed "decorative multilingualism." In some gentrified pockets of London and San Francisco, foreign scripts (like Chinese characters or Arabic calligraphy) are being used not for communication, but as an aesthetic "vibe." These signs often contain linguistic errors or lack functional information, serving merely as "ethnic wallpaper" to sell an exotic experience to tourists and high-income residents (Leeman & Modan, 2009). [12]This process commodifies the culture while simultaneously displacing the actual speakers of that language. The "coexistence" here is superficial; the language is visible, but the community is gone.

The results demonstrate that the linguistic landscape of Great Britain and the USA is becoming a "sanitized space." While the older landscape reflected a "Super-diverse" reality (Vertovec, 2007), the modernized landscape reflects a globalized, monolingual capital. This visual shift provides empirical evidence of "linguistic displacement," where the disappearance of a language from the streets precedes the physical displacement of the community from the neighborhood[13].

Discussion

The comparative analysis of linguistic landscapes in Great Britain and the United States reveals that the visual transformation of urban spaces is far from a neutral byproduct of economic growth. Instead, it is a deeply political process that reshapes what scholars call the "right to the city." The displacement of visual multilingualism acts as a primary marker of gentrification, where the aesthetic hegemony of English serves as a symbolic gatekeeper. This research confirms that as neighborhoods in London, New York, or Los Angeles undergo modernization, the "linguistic hospitality" that once defined these immigrant gateways is being replaced by a sanitized, monolingual commercialism.

A critical point of discussion is the concept of "spatial justice." When the languages of marginalized communities are erased from the streets, it is not merely the words that disappear, but the social recognition of the people who speak them. As Soja (2010) argues, justice has a geography; in the linguistic landscape, justice is served when the environment reflects the true demographic reality of its inhabitants. The findings of this study indicate a growing "representational gap": while the populations of these global cities remain hyper-diverse, their streets are increasingly projecting a narrative of monolingual elitism. [14]This discrepancy creates a sense of alienation among long-term residents, who find that their cultural heritage is either being erased or, as seen in the "decorative multilingualism" of gentrified zones, commodified for the consumption of outsiders.

Furthermore, the "aesthetic hegemony" identified in the results suggests that English is being used as a tool of "branding" rather than just communication. In the UK, the shift toward minimalist, English-only signage in areas like Hackney reflects a desire to align with global corporate standards, often at the expense of local history. In the USA, the removal of Spanish or Chinese from storefronts in revitalized districts functions as a signal to the "creative class" that

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[11] Pavlenko, A. (2017). "Linguistic Landscapes and Other Dotcoms." International Journal of Multilingualism.
[12] Leeman, J., & Modan, G. (2009). "Commodifying Culture: Heritage, Profit, and the Linguistic Landscape of Urban Space." Applied Linguistics.

[13]Vertovec, S. (2007). "Super-diversity and its implications." Ethnic and Racial Studies.
[14]Soja, E. W. (2010). Seeking Spatial Justice. University of Minnesota Press.

the area has been "civilized" according to Western middle-class norms. This tension highlights a fundamental conflict between the economic goals of developers and the cultural needs of a multilingual populace.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of linguistic landscapes in the UK and USA provides a vital lens through which to view the struggles over community identity and social hierarchy. The transition from diverse, bottom-up signage to homogenized, top-down English displays is a visual manifestation of social displacement. However, the linguistic landscape also remains a site of potential resistance and renewal. This study has shown that the disappearance of a language from public view often precedes the physical displacement of the community itself, making the LL a crucial early-warning system for social change.

To address these challenges, the study proposes several "Strategies for Maintaining Linguistic Coexistence." First, urban planning departments should adopt "inclusive signage policies" that encourage multilingual business displays. In the UK, the success of bilingual mandates in Wales offers a potential model for how urban zones could protect immigrant languages as "heritage assets."[15] second, local governments could provide grants for small businesses to create high-quality multilingual signage that meets modern aesthetic standards without sacrificing identity.

Ultimately, for a city to be truly global and progressive, its streets must remain a place where multiple voices—and multiple languages—can be seen and heard. The future of the urban landscape depends on our ability to harmonize economic development with the preservation of the rich, multilingual tapestry that defines the modern democratic experience. By recognizing the symbolic power of signs, policymakers can ensure that modernization does not come at the cost of the city's cultural soul.

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