



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mapping the Linguistic Landscape of Zamboanga Del Norte Cities: A Study of Language Use in Public Signage

Aljhem M. Basis*

Department of Filipino and Literature, Mindanao State University – Iligan Insitutte of Technology, Andres Bonifacio Avenue, Tibanga, Iligan City, Lanao del Norte, Philippines

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Dec 17, 2025	<p>This study aims to describe the linguistic landscape of two cities in Zamboanga del Norte—Dipolog and Dapitan—through an examination of the types of signage and the languages used in public spaces. A qualitative research design was employed, using purposive sampling to analyze a corpus of 300 public signs (150 from each city) gathered through systematic fieldwork. The signage was classified according to the top-down and bottom-up framework of Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) and by language category, namely English, Cebuano, Filipino, and their combinations. The findings reveal that top-down signage predominates in both cities, with a more pronounced presence in Dipolog, indicating the strong influence of institutional authority in the organization of public space. In terms of language use, English clearly occupies the most visible position in the linguistic landscape of the two cities, followed by the local language Cebuano, while the national language Filipino has only minimal representation. These patterns point to an existing linguistic hierarchy in which English functions as a marker of prestige, modernity, and globalization. The study concludes that the linguistic landscapes of Dipolog and Dapitan reflect the dynamic relationship among language, power, and identity in an urban context. It recommends the development of more inclusive and balanced policies on public signage that promote bilingual and multilingual practices, particularly those that strengthen the presence of local and national languages. It also suggests extending future research to other cities and to additional variables of the linguistic landscape.</p>
Accepted: Feb 20, 2026	
Keywords	
Bottom-Up	
Linguistic Landscape Signage Language Situation Top-Down	
*Corresponding Author: aljhem.basis@g.msuiit.edu.ph	

INTRODUCTION

One significant area within sociolinguistic research is the study of the Linguistic Landscape (LL). Landry and Bourhis (1997) define the linguistic landscape as the written language visible in public spaces—such as road signs, billboards, street names, place names, shop names, buildings, and other forms of written public communication.

In this sense, the linguistic landscape is not merely a display of language; rather, it reflects the culture and identity of a society. Through the LL, it becomes possible to determine which languages are dominant in a particular locality and how these languages interact with one another. As the field developed, the concept of the linguistic landscape expanded from a simple inventory of languages to the notion of “language in the environment” (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009) and to what Dagenais et al. (2008) describe as “environmental print,” where the city is viewed as a text composed of various linguistic elements. This shift has clarified the role of the LL as an indicator of multilingualism and social dynamism in urban spaces.

The linguistic landscape is important in sociolinguistic inquiry because it reveals which languages are used in real social contexts and how they are utilized. Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) emphasize that the LL carries socio-symbolic value, as it serves as a public marker of the identity of communities and regions. The linguistic choices found in signage also point to local priorities, the influence of globalization, and ongoing transformations in urban identities (Blommaert & Maly, 2016). Moreover, language situations in society are linked to language and cultural policies. In the Philippine context,

examining linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as language-use situations, is essential for understanding how languages function within society.

Language policy likewise plays a crucial role in shaping the linguistic landscape because it directly affects the visibility, status, and use of languages in public spaces. According to Gorter and Cenoz (2023), language policy determines which languages appear on official signage, their hierarchical positioning, and how they are presented in multilingual settings. It serves as a mechanism for promoting linguistic diversity, maintaining minority languages, and expressing societal values and government priorities. The need for language policy arises from the socio-political and cultural dynamics of multilingual societies, where language choices in public signage symbolize power relations, identity, and inclusivity.

In addition, the perspectives of Spolsky and Shohamy provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between the linguistic landscape and language policy. Spolsky's (2009a, 2009b, 2020) three components—language practices, beliefs about language, and efforts to modify language practices and beliefs—contribute to explaining how the LL functions as a mechanism of language planning. In this way, the LL both reflects and influences language policy, not as a passive element but as an active force. Shohamy (2015) further argues that linguistic landscape studies may even trigger activism that challenges existing policies, highlighting the role of contestation in shaping language policy. Consequently, the LL becomes an important basis for analyzing and formulating language policies.

Although linguistic landscape research continues to grow worldwide, including in the Philippines, studies focusing on specific local contexts—particularly in Mindanao—remain limited. In the Zamboanga Peninsula Region, only the study of Cantina (2021) has examined commercial signage along the Dipolog Boulevard. However, this work focused exclusively on the use of English and did not include other local languages. As a result, the overall linguistic landscape of the region has not been fully represented, making further investigation necessary for a more comprehensive understanding of multilingual communication.

This study primarily aims to describe the linguistic landscape of two cities in Zamboanga del Norte, within the Zamboanga Peninsula Region—Dipolog and Dapitan—by examining the language situation projected through various forms of signage found in their public spaces. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) identify the types of signage present in the public spaces of Dipolog and Dapitan; and (2) determine the languages used in these public signs.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach in analyzing the data. The materials were gathered from public spaces in two cities of Zamboanga del Norte—Dipolog and Dapitan. Purposive sampling, which is commonly used in qualitative research, guided the selection of data in order to focus on information-rich cases and maximize the analytical value of the corpus. The number and distribution of signs were counted according to language use, while qualitative content analysis was applied to the visual materials collected from locations such as public markets, bus terminals, boulevards, plazas, billboards, streets, and city halls.

Research Locale

The investigation was conducted in two cities of Zamboanga del Norte. Region IX, known as the Zamboanga Peninsula, is situated in the western part of Mindanao. It is composed of three provinces—Zamboanga del Norte, Zamboanga del Sur, and Zamboanga Sibugay—and five cities: Dapitan, Dipolog, Isabel, Pagadian, and Zamboanga. Figure 1 presents the map of the Zamboanga Peninsula.

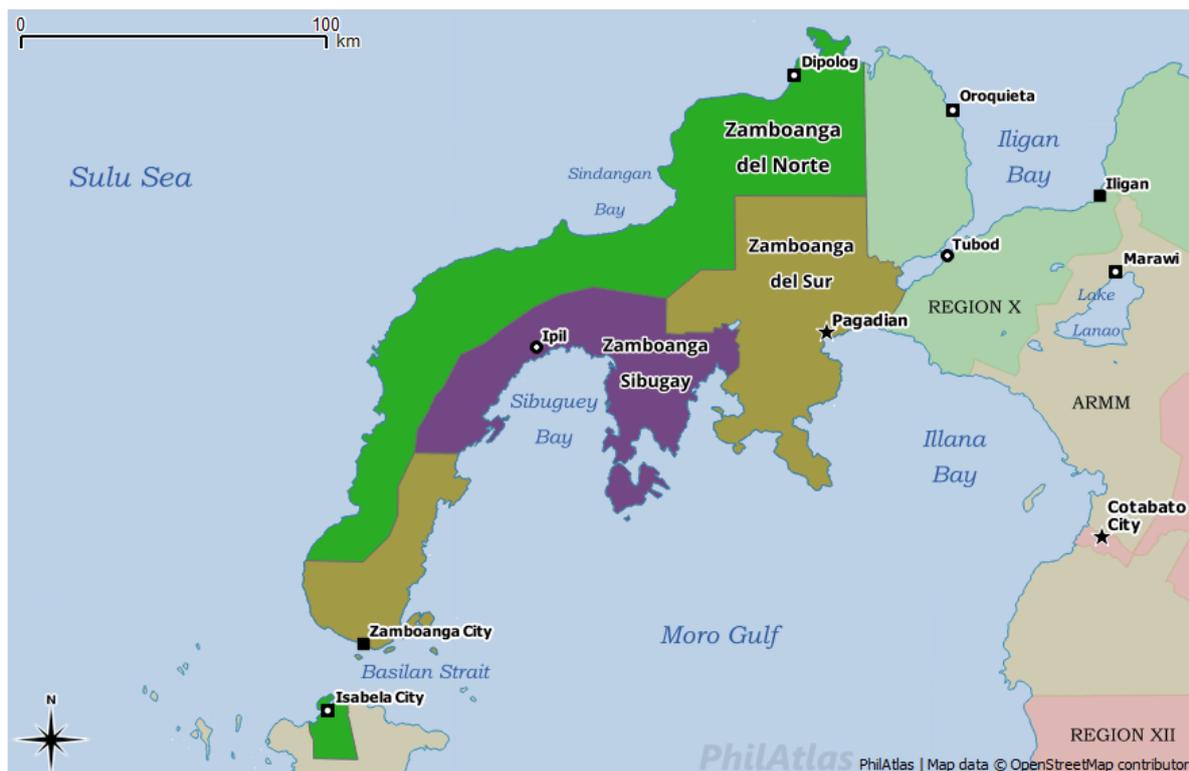


Figure 1. Map of the Zamboanga Peninsula

(Source: <https://www.philatlas.com/mindanao/r09.html>)

Data Set

The corpus consisted of 150 signs from each city, yielding a total of 300 signage samples collected from Dipolog and Dapitan. An equal number of samples from both sites was maintained to ensure balanced interpretation and a more reliable comparison between the two urban settings.

To ensure systematic data gathering, the following criteria were observed in selecting the signage: (1) the signs had to be located within the city center and positioned in places that are highly visible to passersby; these included street signs, advertising materials, public notices, warnings and prohibitions, building names, informational signs (e.g., instructions and opening hours), commemorative markers, objects with written text, and graffiti; (2) the signs had to be clearly identifiable and legible; and (3) identical signs found in multiple locations were counted only once.

Data Collection Procedure

The data were obtained through systematic fieldwork that focused on photographing public signage in Dipolog and Dapitan: (1) prior to the actual documentation, the researcher coordinated with the Office of the City Mayor in each locality to secure permission to take photographs in public spaces; (2) after the necessary approval had been granted, data collection commenced in March 2025. The entire process lasted for two weeks, with one week allotted to each city.

Data Analysis

Once the corpus had been completed, the collected materials were subjected to careful analysis. First, the signs were categorized using the top-down and bottom-up framework of Ben-Rafael et al. (2006). In this model, top-down signage refers to those produced by government bodies or official institutions, whereas bottom-up signage covers private, non-official, and commercial signs. Second, the signage was also classified according to the language or languages used, namely: Filipino only, English only, English–Filipino code-mixing, Cebuano only, Cebuano–English, and Cebuano–Filipino.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Types of Signage in The Cities of Dipolog and Dapitan

City of Dipolog

The data presented in Table 1 indicate a clear predominance of top-down signage in Dipolog City. Out of the 150 signs documented, 93 (62%) were classified as top-down, while 57 (38%) fell under bottom-up signage. This distribution points to the strong visibility of signs installed by government agencies, formal institutions, and other authorities for the purpose of disseminating public information and regulations. In line with the framework of Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), top-down signs embody institutional authority and control over public space, whereas bottom-up signs originate from private individuals, entrepreneurs, and commercial actors pursuing personal or business-related objectives.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage distribution of signage types in Dipolog city

Type of Signage	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Top-Down</i>	93	62
<i>Bottom-Up</i>	57	38
<i>Total</i>	150	100

The dominance of top-down signage suggests a strong presence of local governance and reflects the exercise of political power and administrative order in the city. It also implies a high level of regulation in the management of public spaces, particularly in matters related to cleanliness, traffic control, public safety, and social services.

At the same time, the proportion of bottom-up signage (38%) should not be overlooked. Its presence signals the active involvement of residents and business owners in shaping the city's social space. Such signs function as expressions of community identity, personal initiatives, and commercial activity—elements that are integral to urban development and the local economy of Dipolog.

These findings parallel the results of Cenoz and Gorter (2006), who likewise observed a substantial proportion of top-down signage in urban environments influenced by regulatory authorities. The outcome is also consistent with Backhaus (2007), whose study demonstrated how the prevalence of official signage reflects the role of the state and institutions in maintaining order and security in public spaces.

Overall, the Dipolog data show that while top-down signage serves as a marker of political and administrative authority, bottom-up signage remains a vital indicator of civic participation and identity formation within the urban landscape.

City of Dapitan

As shown in Table 2, top-down signage in Dapitan City also outnumbers bottom-up signage, with 84 signs (56%) compared to 66 signs (44%) out of the 150 samples documented. This reveals a moderate dominance of signs produced by government offices and formal institutions to implement policies and regulate public space.

Table 2. Frequency and percentage distribution of signage types in Dapitan City

Type of Signage	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Top-Down</i>	84	56
<i>Bottom-Up</i>	66	44
<i>Total</i>	150	100

However, the relatively high proportion of bottom-up signage (44%) points to the active role of the private sector, local businesses, and residents in the construction of public space. These signs typically reflect commercial activity, economic life, and the personal and collective identities of the local community. The data suggest that the people of Dapitan are not merely passive recipients of institutional directives but are active contributors to the production of their urban environment, resulting in a more balanced representation of authority and local identity.

This pattern is comparable to the findings of Huebner (2006), where the close distribution between top-down and bottom-up signage highlighted the interaction between institutional power and community agency in shaping the linguistic landscape of a city.

Thus, although institutional control remains visible through the slightly higher proportion of top-down signage, the substantial presence of bottom-up signs indicates broad participation by citizens and entrepreneurs in defining and organizing the public space of Dapitan. The relationship between authority and community in the city's linguistic landscape can therefore be described as relatively balanced and interactive.

Languages Used in The Linguistic Landscape of Dipolog and Dapitan

City of Dipolog

Table 3 shows that English is overwhelmingly the dominant language in the linguistic landscape of Dipolog City. Out of the 150 signs analyzed, 113 (75.33%) were written solely in English. Cebuano follows at a considerable distance with 20 signs (13.33%), while Filipino appears only in 3 signs (2%). Bilingual and multilingual combinations are also present but in much smaller proportions: English-Filipino (7 or 4.67%), English-Cebuano (5 or 3.33%), and English-Filipino-Cebuano (2 or 1.33%).

Table 3. Frequency and percentage distribution of languages in the linguistic landscape of Dipolog

Language Used	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Filipino	3	2
Cebuano	20	13.33
English	113	75.33
English-Filipino	7	4.67
English-Cebuano	5	3.33
English-Filipino-Cebuano	2	1.33
Total	150	100

The strong preference for English indicates its high prestige and wide acceptance in both commercial and official domains of the city. This aligns with global trends that associate English with globalization, commerce, education, and modernity (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Cenoz & Gorter, 2006). The finding also corroborates the earlier study of Cantina (2021), which identified English as the primary language in commercial signage along the Dipolog Boulevard.

Cebuano, although present, appears in a secondary position relative to English, reflecting its role as the local language of the community. The very limited use of Filipino suggests that it has low functional value as a lingua franca in the city, particularly in a context where both English and Cebuano are already firmly established (Tupas & Rubdy, 2015; Bernardo, 2018).

The use of bilingual and multilingual signs serves as a strategy for reaching a broader audience across different linguistic groups. This supports Karolak's (2022) argument that mixed-language signage is an effective communicative approach in multilingual communities.

Taken together, the data reveal a clear linguistic hierarchy: English occupies the highest position, followed by the local language Cebuano, while Filipino remains at the lowest level of visibility. This hierarchy carries important implications for the formulation of language policies and programs aimed at strengthening the presence of both local and national languages in response to the pervasive dominance of English in the city's linguistic landscape.

City of Dapitan

The data in Table 4 show the overwhelming dominance of English in the linguistic landscape of Dapitan City. Out of the 150 signs examined, 123 (82%) were written exclusively in English. This figure is considerably higher than those for the other language categories, namely English-Cebuano with 14 signs (9.33%), English-Filipino with 8 signs (5.33%), and Cebuano-only signage, which registered the lowest frequency with 5 signs (3.33%).

Table 4. Frequency and percentage distribution of languages in the linguistic landscape of Dapitan

Language Used	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Cebuano	5	3.33
English	123	82
English-Filipino	8	5.33
English-Cebuano	14	9.33
Kabuuan	150	100

The extensive use of English indicates that it continues to function as the language of highest prestige and as the primary medium for commercial transactions, educational purposes, and official communication in the city. This pattern may be associated with the character of Dapitan as a major historical and tourist destination, where English plays a crucial role in facilitating interaction with both local and international visitors. Such a finding supports the observation of Lanza and Woldemariam (2009) that English tends to be more visible in areas with high tourist mobility because of its global communicative value.

The presence of bilingual signage, particularly English–Cebuano and English–Filipino, suggests an attempt to accommodate the local population, although their proportion remains clearly secondary to monolingual English signs. This aligns with Edelman’s (2010) claim that bilingual signs often serve as a means of acknowledging the local community while maintaining an international orientation through the use of English.

On the other hand, the minimal representation of Cebuano, with only 3.33%, points to its limited visibility and relatively low prestige in the public spaces of the city. This may indicate the existence of a linguistic hierarchy in Dapitan in which the local language is largely confined to more private or informal domains, while English dominates as the language associated with modernity and socio-economic advancement. This observation is consistent with the findings of Tan and Tan (2015) regarding the hierarchical ordering of languages in urban linguistic landscapes.

Taken together, the data clearly position English at the center of the linguistic landscape of Dapitan, with local languages playing only a secondary role in the city’s public sphere.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to describe the linguistic landscape of two cities in Zamboanga del Norte—Dipolog and Dapitan—by examining the language situation reflected in the different types of signage found in public spaces. More specifically, it analyzed the categories of signage (top-down and bottom-up) and the languages used in them in order to explain how power, identity, and social communication are configured within the urban contexts of the two cities.

The findings show that top-down signage is dominant in both Dipolog and Dapitan, although its prevalence is more pronounced in Dipolog. This pattern points to the strong presence and influence of local government units and formal institutions in the regulation and organization of public space. At the same time, the proportion of bottom-up signage in both cities—particularly in Dapitan—indicates the active participation of private enterprises and ordinary citizens in shaping the urban environment. In terms of language use, English clearly occupies the most visible position in the linguistic landscape of both cities, followed by the local language Cebuano, while the national language Filipino has only minimal representation. Bilingual and multilingual signs are present but remain secondary to monolingual English signage.

These results suggest the existence of a clear linguistic hierarchy in which English carries the highest prestige and serves as a symbol of modernity, globalization, and economic activity. Although Cebuano is present, its visibility in public space is limited, and Filipino is almost absent. The findings reinforce the theoretical perspectives of Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), Landry and Bourhis (1997), and Cenoz and Gorter (2006) concerning the relationship between language, power, and identity in the linguistic landscape. They also demonstrate that public space functions not only as a channel for information but as a site where language ideologies, policies, and socio-cultural dynamics are made visible.

The study has important implications for language policy and language planning, particularly in promoting multilingualism and in strengthening the role of local and national languages. The low

representation of Cebuano and Filipino in public signage suggests the need to reassess existing strategies in order to enhance their visibility and prestige without disregarding the practical functions of English.

In light of these conclusions, it is recommended that local government units and institutions encourage a more inclusive and balanced use of languages in public signage through policies that promote bilingual or multilingual displays, especially those that incorporate Cebuano as the local language and Filipino as the national language. Such measures would not only reinforce local identity but also facilitate more effective communication across different sectors of the community.

It is further suggested that awareness programs be developed for business owners and the private sector regarding the value of linguistic diversity in public space. This initiative may also be integrated into cultural promotion and tourism development, particularly in Dapitan, which is recognized as a major historical and tourist destination.

From an academic perspective, future studies may expand the scope of analysis by including other cities in the Zamboanga Peninsula in order to provide a more comprehensive account of the region's linguistic landscape. Other variables may also be explored, such as the semiotics of sign design, size, spatial placement, and symbolism, as well as the perceptions of residents toward the languages used in public signage.

As a limitation, this study focused only on the types of signage and the languages they contain and did not examine readers' perceptions or the actual effectiveness of these signs in communication. Subsequent research may address this gap through interviews and survey methods that capture community perspectives. In doing so, a deeper understanding can be developed of the role of the linguistic landscape in the construction of identity, the negotiation of power, and the shaping of social relations in a multilingual Philippine society.

REFERENCES

- Backhaus, P. (2007). *Linguistics landscapes: A comparative study of urban multilingualism in Tokyo*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Ben-Rafael, E., Shohamy, E., Amara, M., & Trumper-Hecht, N. (2006). Linguistic landscape as symbolic construction of the public space: The case of Israel. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 3(1), 7-30.
- Bernardo, A. B. (2018). English in Philippine education: Solution or problem? *Englishes*, 20(1), 74-83.
- Blommaert, J. and Maly, I. (2016). Ethnographic linguistic landscape analysis and social change: A case study. In K. Arnaut, J. Blommaert, B. Rampton and M. Spotti (eds) *Language and Superdiversity* (pp. 191–211). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Cantina, J. M. (2021). Analysis on the linguistic landscapes in Dipolog City, Philippines. *Agathos*, 12(2), 143-158.
- Gorter, D., & Cenoz, J. (2023). A panorama of linguistic landscape studies. *Multilingual Matters*. <https://doi.org/10.21832/GORTER7144>
- Cenoz, J., & Gorter, D. (2006). Linguistic landscape and minority languages. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 3(1), 67-80 (special issue edited by D. Gorter).
- Dagenais, D., Walsh, N., Armand, F., & Maraillet, E. (2008). Collaboration and co-construction of knowledge during language awareness activities in Canadian elementary school. *Language Awareness*, 17(2), 139–155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658410802147365>
- Edelman, L.J. (2010). *Linguistic Landscapes in the Netherlands: A Study of Multilingualism in Amsterdam and Friesland*. Utrecht: LOT Utrecht.
- Huebner, T. (2006). Bangkok's linguistic landscape: Environmental print, codemixing, and language change. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 3(1), 31-51.
- Karolak, M. (2022). Linguistic landscape in a city of migrants: A study of Souk Naif area in Dubai. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 19(4), 605-629. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2020.1781132>
- Landry, R., & Bourhis, R. Y. (1997). Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality: An empirical study. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 16(23), 23-49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X970161002>
- Lanza, E., & Woldermariam, H. (2009). Language ideology and linguistic landscape. In E.

- Shohamy & D. Gorter (Eds.), *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery* (pp. 189-205). New York: Routledge.
- Shohamy, E. (2015). LL research as expanding language and language policy. *Linguistic Landscape* 1 (1/2), 152–171.
- Shohamy, E., & Gorter, D. (Eds.). (2009). *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery*. Routledge.
- Spolsky, B. (2009). *Language management*. Cambridge University Press.
- Spolsky, B. (2020). Linguistic landscape: The semiotics of public signage. *Linguistic Landscape* 6 (1), 2–15. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ll.00015.spo>
- Tan, P. K., & Tan, D. K. H. (2015). Linguistic landscape and exclusion: An examination of language choice in Singapore. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 12(4), 419-434.
- Tupas, R., & Rubdy, R. (2015). Language planning in multilingual Philippines: Revisiting the politics of language in education. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 16(3), 229-248.