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Research Article

Language Encounters in Public Parks: Mapping the Linguistic Landscape of Davao City, Philippines

Prizza Mia Pil, Sajed S. Ingilan, Karin Olmedo, & Ameer Ali

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Author Information:

¹Prizza Mia Pil

Alumna

pmvpil02358@usep.edu.ph

orcid.org/0009-0006-9833-152X

¹Sajed S. Ingilan

Associate Professor

ingilan.sajed@usep.edu.ph

orcid.org/0000-0002-4466-2028

²Karin Olmedo

Assistant Professor

karin.olmedo@msugensan.edu.ph

orcid.org/0009-0009-8253-2927

³Ameer Ali

Lecturer

ameer7037@gmail.com

orcid.org/0000-0001-9438-4903

¹College of Arts and Sciences,
University of Southeastern Philippines
Davao City, Philippines

²English Department,
Mindanao State University—General
Santos City
General Santos City, Philippines

³English Department,
Government Arts and Commerce College
Larkano
Larkana, Pakistan

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Abstract

As the most visible expression of language in everyday life, the linguistic landscape (LL) captures the interplay of a community's linguistic diversity, sociocultural dynamics, and underlying language policies. While there is growing interest in these dynamics in both global and national contexts, LL often goes unnoticed and underexamined in local contexts, such as public parks in Davao City, Philippines. Thus, this study explores the linguistic landscape of Davao City public parks, which plays a crucial role in shaping identity and social interaction in the city. The researchers examined the types of signs, the languages or codes present in the signs, and their functions within the nine parks across downtown Davao City. Employing qualitative content analysis, the findings reveal that top-down signs were structured and standardized, while bottom-up signs were informal and diverse. Regarding the codes, the signs were displayed in English, Cebuano, Filipino, Spanish, and Japanese, and were either monolingual, bilingual, or trilingual, serving both informational and symbolic functions. The interaction between the informational and symbolic functions of signs illustrates how language operates as both a tool for regulation and a marker of identity in public recreational spaces. The study highlights how signs serve both regulatory and identity functions in public spaces, thereby recommending the inclusivity of signage policies that enhance cultural representation, particularly of indigenous languages. This research contributes to the understanding of the role of multilingualism in public spaces, identity, and accessibility.

Keywords: linguistic landscape, multilingualism, content analysis, Indigenous languages, Davao City public parks

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it also plays an important role in revealing people's identities. The way individuals speak, the words they use, their accents, and the grammar they follow offer valuable insights into their cultural background and social status (Labov, 1966, as cited in Abdullaev, 2023). In the Philippines, English is one of the official languages, alongside Filipino. This has contributed to the widespread presence of English in public spaces, where it appears on signs, street names, and commercial boards.

Linguistic landscape (LL) refers to the different languages that are visibly presented on signs in a particular area, and how these representations can indicate power relations and cultural influences (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, as cited in Gaho, Kardana, & Sari, 2022). Several scholars (Jazul & Bernardo, 2017; Pliško & Šamo, 2018) have explored the complex interplay between language, culture, and globalization through the lens of linguistic landscape. Given the rise of the global market and the dominance of English in outer circle countries, there is a growing difficulty in locating purely monolingual environments (Gorter, 2017). This is due to the expanding linguistic landscape and the effects of globalization, internalization, and the spread of language in these landscapes in the present.

In Croatia, the visibility of the English language along with German and French, and occasionally with French, Russian, and Slovene in the linguistic landscape found in the Brijuni National Park implies that the park serves as both a physical space and a conceptual tool, describing the dynamic nature of spaces and their potential tool for facilitating effective communication (Pliško & Šamo, 2018). In Indonesia, the Indonesian language was found to be predominantly used for information and regulatory signs in Village Parks in Depok City, West Java, while bilingual signs (in Indonesian and Latin) were reserved for tree names (Supriatnoko et al., 2023). In the Philippines, specifically in Manila Chinatown, following Landry and Bourhis' 1997 Functions of Language, the languages used in the linguistic signs landscape function for information and as a symbol where English dominates as a tool for communication and business, while Chinese often holds symbolic value, signifying cultural authenticity (Jazul & Bernardo, 2017). While these studies highlight the global and national impacts of linguistic landscapes, there is yet insufficient focused research on how these dynamics manifest in the context of public spaces such as parks, in Davao City, Philippines. Although Davao City shows a diverse linguistic landscape, there is a noticeable shortage of research on its linguistic situation (Demetrio & Dreisbach, 2021). Hence, the study aimed to deepen the understanding of how linguistic landscapes function as a space of identity, communication, and social interaction in recreational areas, such as parks. The complexity of language encounters necessitates a more thorough analysis of how globalization is manifested in the language use in public spaces, potentially overshadowing the distinct local identities that the study seeks to highlight.

The Linguistic Landscape (LL) offers insights into societal multilingualism and language policies, reflecting the evolving nature of communities (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, as cited in Guo & Zhao, 2021). Ben-Rafael (2009) defined LL items as any written signs outside an individual's home, including road signs, private names, streets, shops, or schools (Hernández, López-Gopar, & Sughrua, 2017). Building on Landry and Bourhis (1997), Ben-Rafael (2009) also introduced the distinction between top-down and bottom-up signs, drawing on the connection between government and private sectors. Top-down signs are standardized and regulated, reflecting formal language policies, while bottom-up signs are informal and diverse, allowing self-expression in multiple languages. LL examines the spatial, material, and linguistic dimensions of signage through code preference, inscriptions, and emplacement. Signs are not merely passive markers; they actively shape social interactions, reflect power relations, and influence public perceptions.

With the continuous rise of globalization, modernization, and the development of various programs, LL, as a valuable manifestation of language planning and policies, has undergone drastic changes. Given these dynamics, language planning and policy (LPP) played a crucial role in shaping

the linguistic landscape of the Philippines and contributed to the country's multilingualism. As pre-colonial Asia's melting pot, the Philippines has seen the influence of language and trade with other countries. Given the complex and evolving language policy landscape, identifying the dominant languages in the Philippines' public sphere can be challenging. The country's multilingualism, marked by the coexistence of official languages, regional languages, and foreign languages, shapes the linguistic environment in public spaces.

This study investigates how the linguistic landscape of Davao City parks, through top-down and bottom-up signs, place semiotics, and linguistic landscape functions, communicates with diverse social groups. The main argument is that different types of signs and languages serve specific communicative functions for specific audiences. The study addresses: (1) What types of signs are present? (2) What languages are used? (3) How do these elements serve communicative functions for different social groups?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, employing content analysis to systematically document and interpret the linguistic signs found within Davao City parks. Qualitative research is especially effective for exploring complex, context-specific phenomena and analyzing non-numerical data, including visual and textual elements (Ayton, 2023).

To analyze the data effectively, Content Analysis was selected as the primary tool as it facilitates the organization of data into meaningful categories, revealing patterns and themes embedded in the linguistic environment (Downe-Wambolt, 1992, as cited in Bengtsson, 2016). The study also incorporated theoretical frameworks from linguistic research, including top-down and bottom-up classifications to distinguish between institutional and community-driven sign production (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006), place semiotics to analyze emplacement and code preferences (Scollon & Scollon, 2003), and the two basic functions of linguistic landscape—informational and symbolic functions to interpret the practical and cultural significance of signs (Landry & Bourhis, 1997).

However, in the specific context described, the researchers emphasize only two of these factors—(a) emplacement and (b) code preference—because analyzing the visual aspects of inscription is beyond the scope of this study. The exclusion of the analysis of inscription, which involves examining the visual design and composition of signs, narrows the study's focus in relation to how and where the languages are placed and what languages they employ. This approach ensures a multidimensional analysis of the linguistic landscape, providing insights into how language operates as both a communicative tool and a cultural symbol within recreational spaces. The data collection occurred on February 6, February 8, February 13, February 18, February 26, and February 27, 2025, covering nine park locations around the city including Davao Riverfront Crocodile Park & Zoo, Peoples Park, Ramon Magsaysay Park, Osmeña Park, Rizal Park, Life is Here Park, Freedom Park, Doña Vicenta Park, and Quezon Park. The data collection spans four (4) hours per session to ensure comprehensive documentation of the linguistic landscape. Each of these nine parks was selected due to its accessibility, popularity, and significance as a public recreational space, making them ideal sites for analyzing the linguistic diversity and cultural dynamics of the city.

The signs displayed a range of official notices, including government-issued rules and regulations, as well as informal community-made displays, such as advertisements and announcements. These signs serve as a rich source of data for analyzing the interplay of language, power, and identity within the city's public spaces. The researchers ensured that the data represented a wide range of sign types, languages, and functions, providing a comprehensive view of the linguistic landscape in the selected parks.

The analysis was then validated by three researchers and sociolinguistics experts from Davao City and Bukidnon, Philippines.

Results and Discussion

The presence of various linguistic signages in public recreational parks across Davao City reflects the increasing complexity of urban spaces resulting from fast-paced urbanization. As people from diverse linguistic backgrounds move into the city, contributing to the population of local and indigenous peoples, these recreational areas become sites of interaction shaped by multilingual practices. This section examines the linguistic landscape of selected parks, focusing on the types of signs, languages used, and their functions. Through this, the study highlights the socio-cultural and policy-driven factors that influence how language is used and displayed in urban recreational spaces, underscoring the importance of linguistic landscapes in reflecting socio-cultural identity, language policy, and multilingual practices in these environments.

Types of Signs found in the Linguistic Landscape of Davao City Parks

The types of signs found in the linguistic landscape of Davao City parks include top-down and bottom-up signs. Table 1 presents a total of 117 signs distributed across the selected parks around the city, reflecting a diverse linguistic landscape shaped by both official and community-driven signage.

Table 1

Types of Signs found in the Linguistic Landscape of Davao City Parks

Types of Signs	Frequency in %
Top-down	52.14 (n=61)
Bottom-up	47.86 (n=56)
Total	117

Based on Table 1, there are 61 signs that were classified as top-down signs, accounting for 52.14% of the linguistic landscape, issued by government institutions and park authorities, primarily serving regulatory and informational purposes. These signs included park rules, directional guides, and official notices, often found in prominent locations such as key entry points, pathways, and major landmarks within the parks. Meanwhile, 56 signs were categorized as bottom-up, accounting for 47.86% of the linguistic landscape, which were created by private individuals, businesses, or local organizations. These include advertisements, store signs, and unofficial community announcements, often posted on bulletin boards, columns, and other accessible spaces. The classification of these signs follows the framework proposed by Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), distinguishing between top-down and bottom-up signage. This analysis aims to highlight the distribution of authority-driven and community-driven signage within these recreational spaces. The following sections present the data and discussion in the top-down signs.

Top-down Signs

Top-down signs are created and displayed by institutional agencies under the control of local government or central government policies. These signs typically mirror official language policies, as governments hold authority over their content and linguistic choices (Jazul & Bernardo, 2017). Among the top-down signs collected, the following presents samples of top-down signs in different downtown parks of Davao City.

Figure 1

PLL-1: Motorcycle No Parking (Source: Fieldwork in Quezon Park, 2025)



The City Transport and Traffic Management Office (CTTMO) has issued the “Motorcycle No Parking” as seen in Figure 1, PLL (Park Linguistic Landscape)-1. This sign serves as an authoritative directive, prohibiting motorcyclists from parking in the perimeter area of the park where it is located. This sign is essential in preventing congestion in the surrounding streets of Quezon Park. This ensures accessibility and safety for both motorcyclists and pedestrians, particularly given the rapid rise in motorcycle use in major cities. The sign is further legitimized by the CTTMO’s initials, which strengthen governmental control over traffic.

Figure 2

PLL-2: Parking time (Source: Fieldwork in Quezon Park, 2025)



The sign shown in Figure 2, PLL-2, time-restricted parking sign in the vicinity of Quezon Park specifies the hours when parking is permitted. By restricting long-term parking, which might lead to congestion, this regulatory sign helps ensure parking availability for those who need to park during the day. These signs demonstrate a calculated strategy in public areas, striking a balance between traffic management and accessibility. It can be seen beneath the rule itself; the CTTMO is the one issuing this sign.

This top-down sign in public spaces is similar to the findings of other linguistic landscape studies. According to Fortuna (2023), top-down signs overwhelmingly outnumber bottom-up signs, reflecting the dominance of government-issued signage over privately created ones. In connection with academic institutions, a similar phenomenon can be observed, where official signs, such as those issued by government authorities, are produced by authoritative entities. These signs tend to be formal, adhering to official language policies or regulatory guidelines. Likewise, in Davao City parks, the dominance of top-down signs signifies the government's important role in shaping public space. Similarly, we can conclude from Valerio's (2018) study that top-down agents are better equipped to develop and display linguistic landscape signs in larger quantities. With that, the presence of top-down signs in the selected analyzed dataset may indicate a centralized approach to public signage, where regulatory and informational signs are prioritized to amplify authoritative forces.

Bottom-up Signs

Bottom-up signs refer to those created by individuals, associations, or corporate actors who operate with autonomy within legal boundaries (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006, as cited in Abbas et al., 2023). The following sections present the data and discussion in a bottom-up manner.

Figure 3

PLL-49: Del Pilar Shrine (Source: Fieldwork in Magsaysay Park, 2025)



Figure 3, PLL-49, which says, “Nuestra Señora La Virgen Del Pilar Shrine,” introduces a religious dimension to bottom-up signage. The signage reflects the historical and cultural influences of colonial heritage in the Philippines, emphasizing how religious and linguistic identities combine. This sign was created by a small local group affiliated with a parish, which is more private, illustrating the lasting impact of historical influences through the use of the Spanish language. This illustrates how historical and linguistic influences continue to shape new linguistic landscapes, particularly in sites of religious significance, where traditions are preserved and upheld over generations.

Figure 4

PLL-52: Rose Refreshment Store (Magsaysay Park)



Figure 4, PLL-52, showcases a bottom-up signage for the store, which signifies the role of linguistic landscape in economic activity. These signs showcase the intersection of language, religion, and commerce. The latter expands market reach to visitors and non-native speakers, reflecting their commercial adaptability to bottom-up signage. The former spreads religious belief through the bottom-up display of a religious excerpt. This linguistic approach reveals how businesses and religion strategically utilize language to maximize engagement with their target audience. This analysis aligns with the findings of Jazul and Bernardo (2017), who observed that multilingual signage in Manila's Chinatown serves both communicative and cultural functions, reinforcing local identity through grassroots efforts. Similarly, in Davao City parks, commercial signages function as bottom-up signage, shaped by private business owners to attract customers and establish their cultural presence.

Ultimately, the presence of bottom-up signage in parks underscores the community's role in shaping public spaces, specifically parks. Additionally, private signs in commercial spaces, such as shops and advertisements, are bottom-up and reflect individual choices (Fortuna, 2023). These signs serve as reflections of grassroots involvement, offering a direct insight into how people express themselves through signs in communal spaces. They also reveal an organic, evolving linguistic landscape shaped by social, economic, and cultural dynamics through bottom-up signages, not just through top-down signages. Exploring additional factors, such as the languages present in this signage, can add further to this discussion.

Languages Found on the Signs in the Linguistic Landscape of Davao City Parks

The languages or the codes used in the signs in Davao City parks are English, Cebuano, Filipino, Spanish, and Japanese. Such signs are either monolingual, bilingual, or trilingual. The code preferences and the emplacement present the semiotics of the signs.

Table 2

Languages on Signs in the Linguistic Landscape of Davao City Parks

Code(s)	% Top-down	% Bottom-up
Monolingual English	77.05 (n=47)	69.64 (n=39)
Monolingual Cebuano	6.56 (n=4)	8.93 (n=5)
Monolingual Filipino	6.56 (n=4)	-
Bilingual English-Cebuano	4.92 (n=3)	8.93 (n=5)
Bilingual English-Filipino	4.92 (n=3)	3.57 (n=2)
Bilingual English-Spanish	-	3.57 (n=2)
Bilingual Filipino-Japanese	-	1.79 (n=1)
Trilingual English-Cebuano-Filipino	-	3.57 (n=2)
Total	61	56

Table 2 presents the matrix of codes and their frequency counts, categorized by the number of top-down signs and bottom-up signs. Table 2 revealed that the majority of top-down signs (77.05%) show monolingual English, with 47 occurrences. It was also revealed that top-down signs utilize monolingual Cebuano with four occurrences (6.56%) and monolingual Filipino with four occurrences (6.56%). In contrast, no occurrences were recorded for Japanese and Spanish top-down signs. A small percentage of top-down signs utilized bilingual codes, with 4.92% for both English-Filipino and English-Cebuano, each with three occurrences. Notably, no trilingual or multilingual codes were captured among the top-down signs. Bottom-up actors exhibit a greater linguistic diversity. While monolingual English remains dominant at 69.64% with 39 occurrences, monolingual Cebuano is at 8.93% with five occurrences. Additionally, 8.93% of bottom-up signs use bilingual English-Cebuano with five occurrences, 3.57% use bilingual English-Filipino with two occurrences, 3.57% use bilingual English-Spanish with two occurrences, and 1.79% bilingual English-Japanese with only one occurrence. A small portion (3.57%) of bottom-up signs employs a trilingual English-Cebuano-Filipino code with two occurrences.

The findings indicate that while top-down strongly favors monolingual English, bottom-up signs incorporate a wider range of linguistic codes, reflecting the multilingual nature of the community. The dominance of English in both categories highlights its role as a prestigious and widely used language, while the presence of local languages in bottom-up signage reflects the community's cultural and communicative needs.

Monolingual English in Top-down Signs

English was found to be the most dominant language in the linguistic landscape, with 47 occurrences (77.05%) in top-down signs. The overwhelming use of English in top-down signs suggests a standardization of language in public spaces, reinforcing its role as a prestigious and widely understood medium of communication.

Figure 5

PLL-70: No Parking Anytime (Source: Fieldwork in Doña Vicenta Park, 2025)



Figure 5, PLL-70, “No Parking Anytime” sign conveys a clear and direct prohibition using English in a bold, imperative manner. The sign can be found in the back area of the park, where trees and other signs are also located. The phrase “No Parking Anytime” reinforces the urgency and strictness of the rule, ensuring that drivers understand that parking is prohibited at all times. Additionally, the presence of a logo below the message itself lends authority to the sign, indicating that the rule under *Lungsod ng Dabaw* is enforced by local governance. Unlike more specific regulations that may mention vehicle types, such as motorcycles or cars, this sign applies to all vehicles, thereby avoiding ambiguity and ensuring compliance.

These signs, despite their brevity, play a crucial role in regulating public behavior, ensuring safety, and maintaining order in public spaces. Their exclusive use of English highlights the language’s dominance in official and public communication, particularly in areas frequented by multilinguals. Additionally, according to the 2023 EF Proficiency Index, Davao City has the highest English Proficiency among all cities in Mindanao (Patumbon, 2023). As a result, local residents generally have a better understanding of English, making it easier for them to read and comprehend signs written in the language. Furthermore, placing most of these signs in high-traffic areas ensures their effectiveness in guiding individuals. The use of monolingual English aligns with the broader linguistic landscape of official signage, where English serves as the language for governance, regulation, and linguistic imperialism.

Monolingual English in Bottom-up Signs

Monolingual English is the most prevalent linguistic code among bottom-up signs in the linguistic landscape of Davao City parks, accounting for 69.64% of the total bottom-up signs, with 39 occurrences. According to Fortuna (2023), the concept of a global village has influenced traditional values and future outlooks, thereby reshaping societal perspectives. Therefore, the impact of globalization on language and culture is evident across all areas of life, and the strong presence of monolingual English in bottom-up signs reflects global influences, where English is associated with modernity, professionalism, and economic opportunities.

Figure 6

PLL-61: Turn off Your Engine (Source: Fieldwork in Doña Vicenta Park, 2025)



Figure 6, PLL-61, is clearly a bottom-up sign placed by “Dona Vicenta Village Homeowners,” as written below the sign itself. The “Turn Off Your Engine” above the sign is a directive aimed at promoting environmental consciousness. The sign explicitly states that the area is a “Clean Air Zone,” aligning with initiatives aimed at reducing vehicular emissions. The use of English makes it accessible to both locals and foreign visitors who drive in the vicinity. Thus, the sign is placed on a parking space near a residential area, emphasizing community-driven efforts to maintain air quality.

Figure 7

PLL-52: Rose refreshment store (Source: Fieldwork in Magsaysay Park, 2025)



Moreover, in Figure 7, PLL-52, this type of sign is clearly visible in stores that offer economic distribution within the park. The sign “Rose Refreshment Store” prominently displays the business name in English at the center, indicating its accessibility to a broader audience, including locals and

tourists. The use of “refreshment” suggests that the store specializes in selling beverages and light snacks, a common offering among consumers. The choice of English in this signage may reflect the commercial advantage of using a global language to attract customers. The use of English mirrors the study of Syamsurijal and Iswary (2023), where signs revealed are bottom-up signs that use English to inform visitors about the commercial spaces. Therefore, as part of the linguistic landscape, the researcher emphasized the role of signs in commercial and public spaces, catering to a diverse audience and ensuring the accessibility of the English language. Thus, the overwhelming presence of English in signage suggests an effort to standardize language use in formal and commercial spaces, ensuring that important information reaches a broad audience effectively.

Monolingual Cebuano in Top-down Signs

Cebuano signs, though fewer in number, are deeply embedded in culturally significant locations, reflecting a community-driven approach to language visibility. Rubrico (2012) identified Cebuano, commonly known as Bisaya or Binisaya by the people of Davao, as the most widely spoken language in the city, with approximately one in every three residents accounting for 33.32% who speak Cebuano.

Figure 8

PLL-9: Stage Column 3 (Source: Fieldwork in Rizal Park, 2025)



Meanwhile, in Figure 8, PLL-9, the sign “*Ang presensya sa Agila maoy sukdanan*” (The presence of the eagle is the indicator) emphasizes the importance of the Philippine eagle as an ecological indicator, indicating a thriving population of eagles, which now signifies a healthy environment. These signs, appearing on the park’s stage column, written at its center in Cebuano, resonate with the local community and strengthen their sense of environmental protection. The choice to use Cebuano instead of English caters to the linguistic majority of park-goers, ensuring that the message resonates more effectively with the local audience.

Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) and Leeman and Modan (2010), as cited in Alburo (2022), stated that the language visible on city streets is influenced and shaped by various elements of the built environment. This reflects the everyday linguistic practices of the local population, demonstrating how Cebuano remains deeply embedded in the city's physical and social landscape. The frequent visibility of Cebuano in public signage reinforces its dominant role in Davao's multilingual environment.

Monolingual Cebuano in Bottom-up Signs

There were five monolingual Cebuano signs captured in various parks around the city, accounting for 8.93% in the bottom-up linguistic landscape. As bottom-up signs, they were likely created by individuals or local groups rather than official authorities that regulate behavior and convey important messages in a language familiar to the community.

Figure 9

PLL-51: Ang napulo ka sugo sa Dios (Source: Fieldwork in Magsaysay Park, 2025)



Figure 9, PLL-51, “Ang Napulo Ka Sugo Sa Dios” (The Ten Commandments of God), presents religious content in Cebuano, reinforcing the deep influence of Christianity in local culture as shown in this bottom-up sign. Its use of Cebuano rather than English or Filipino suggests an intention to reach the immediate community, many of whom are native Cebuano speakers. Written in two tombstones resembling the stone tablets in biblical narratives, the signage suggests remaining faithful to traditional religious teachings. While the placement in an open public area suggests its role in moral guidance within the community.

Spolsky and Cooper (1991), as cited in Yoel (2020), noted that the way language is used reflects the attitudes of a particular population. Davao is home to the emerging contact language known as Davao Filipino, which is currently spoken by the city's diverse ethnolinguistic groups. Cebuano remains the primary language for daily communication, especially since ethnic Cebuanos make up 74.56% of the city's population (Demetrio & Dreisbach, 2021). The use of monolingual Cebuano highlights the local identity of the community and ensures that the messages are understood by the majority of people in the area. Unlike formal, standardized government signs, these bottom-up signs reflect grassroots efforts to maintain order, communicate religious values, and regulate behavior in a way that is culturally and linguistically relevant.

Bilingual English-Cebuano in Top-down Signs

The linguistic landscape of parks in Davao City reflects a dynamic interplay between English and Cebuano, particularly in top-down signs. Unlike monolingual Cebuano signs, bilingual signs demonstrate an effort to reach both local and non-local visitors of the park. There were three bilingual English-Cebuano top-down signs found in parks, accounting for 4.92% of the linguistic landscape in Davao City's parks. By incorporating Cebuano alongside English, these signs acknowledge the prominence of the local language while maintaining the formal and widely recognized status of English.

Figure 10

PLL-40: Guinadili ang pagbilin (Source: Fieldwork in People's Park, 2025)

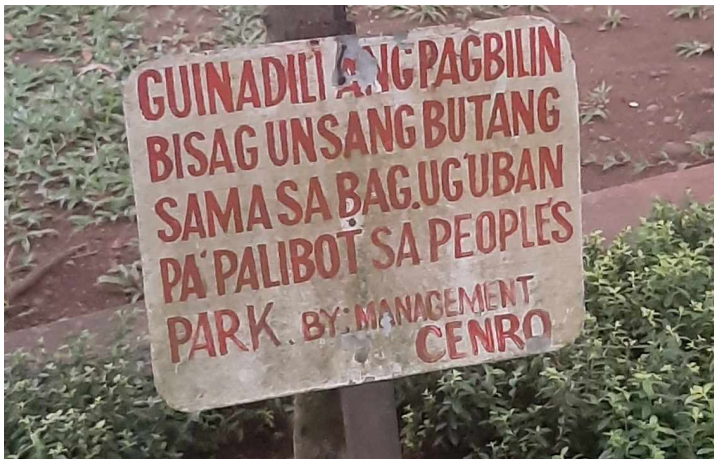


Figure 10 PLL-40, positioned within the greenery part (garden) of People's Park, serves to prohibit the act of leaving any belongings or objects within the park premises. Written in Cebuano and English, it directly targets local and non-local visitors. The phrase written at the top of the sign, "Guinadili ang pagbilin bisag unsang butang sama sa bag ug uban pa" (Leaving any items, such as bags and others, is prohibited), is structured in an authoritative yet straightforward manner, ensuring that the message is easily understood by the local community. It can be seen that it is not written only in Cebuano, as the use of English words such as "bag", "people's park", and "management CENRO" below the message emphasizes the park's diverse and community-centered management. The bilingual texts reflect the influence of bilingual governance in Davao City's linguistic landscape. Additionally, it is placed at ground level near a tree, blending into the park's natural environment while still being noticeable to visitors.

Language policy may mandate the teaching of English, but this does not necessarily reflect what happens in actual practice (Yoel, 2020). In reality, people may continue to use their native or local languages, such as Cebuano and Tagalog, especially in informal settings, at home, or within their communities. This results in a multilingual environment where English is used in formal domains (such as schools or official documents), while other languages predominate in everyday interactions, like signs that can be seen everywhere.

Bilingual English-Cebuano in Bottom-up Signs

Bilingual English-Cebuano signs have an 8.93% occurrence rate, with five instances of bottom-up signage, reflecting a balance between global and local identity. The use of both languages suggests that organizations and individuals aim to cater to a diverse audience, ensuring their accessibility for both English-speaking individuals and Cebuano-speaking locals. This bilingual approach enhances communication by using English as a language of prestige while maintaining Cebuano's linguistic relevance.

Figure 11

PLL-34: *Wet Paint* (Source: *Fieldwork in People's Park, 2025*)



Figure 11, PLL-34, located in a decorative area of the park, represents an effort to maintain the visibility of the local language within shared public spaces. It was written in both English (*Wet Paint*) and Cebuano (*Basa ang Pintura*). The presence of English is widely recognized as a cautionary sign, making it the main attraction as it is placed above the Cebuano translation of the English message. Cebuano reinforces the message for local speakers who may primarily use their native language in daily interactions.

The strategic placement of Cebuano signage in informal and community-shared settings highlights its cultural importance rather than its role in regulatory or commercial communications. Additionally, the Davao City region is historically home to the Visayan, Guiangan, and Tagabawa, who lived among neighboring groups such as the Kalagan, Bagobo, Mandaya, and Sama. Today, like many urban centers in the Philippines, Davao City is a diverse hub where various groups of people converge. As a result, the Davao language has evolved, blending elements of Cebuano, Tagalog/Filipino, and English (Demetrio & Dreisbach, 2017).

Monolingual Filipino in Top-down Signs

Unlike the English signs, which dominate commercial and regulatory spaces, or Cebuano, which is embedded in cultural areas, the Filipino signages are mainly identified in functional and environmental spaces, including entrances, plant labels, and garbage bins. Monolingual Filipino signs account for 6.56% of the signage, with four occurrences of top-down signage, indicating a limited presence of the national language in the parks' linguistic landscape.

Figure 12

PLL-45: *Nabubulok, di nabubulok* (Source: *Fieldwork in People's Park*, 2025)



Figure 12, PLL-45, located on garbage bins, ties language to public cleanliness initiatives. “*Nabubulok* (Biodegradable)/*Di Nabubulok* (Non-Biodegradable)” categorizes waste, guiding proper segregation for environmental sustainability. Unlike other signs that mix languages, this one is entirely in Filipino, reinforcing the national standard for waste segregation. The presence of Filipinos in these locations implies their functional role in promoting responsible park usage rather than serving as a dominant communicative tool. The sign’s strategic placement above garbage bins integrates language directly into an environmental action, making it an instructional sign in public.

In Davao City, only about 3.86% of the population speaks Filipino as their main language (Demetrio & Dreisbach, 2017). This indicates that, although Filipino is the national language, it is not widely used in everyday conversations in Davao. Instead, most people prefer to speak Cebuano and other local languages, which are more deeply rooted in the city’s culture and daily life. This highlights how language use in the city reflects its unique mix of communities, rather than simply following national language trends.

Bilingual English-Filipino in Top-down Signs

Bilingual English-Filipino signs constitute 4.92% with three occurrences of top-down signage, which reflects an effort by authorities to use both the national and international lingua franca for wider accessibility. The combination of English and Filipino in official signage ensures that messages are widely understood by both local and non-local visitors, particularly those who may not be proficient in the Cebuano language.

Figure 13

PLL-28: *Bawal Magtinda Dito* (Source: Fieldwork in Osmeña Park, 2025)



Figure 13: PLL-28, positioned at an entrance, serves as a national identifier, signaling the presence of the Filipino language in public spaces while maintaining visibility for a broader audience. It includes the Filipino statement “bawal magtinda dito” above its English counterpart, “no vendors allowed.” The bilingual nature of the sign ensures that both locals and non-Filipino speakers understand the restriction. The presence of the Ancillary Service Unit (ASU) – City Mayor’s Office (CMO) further solidifies its authoritative nature, emphasizing institutional enforcement. The use of Filipino suggests that the rule primarily targets local vendors, while English extends to a broader audience, including tourists and non-Filipino-speaking individuals. Its emplacement at the entrance or a high-traffic area signifies a strong regulatory approach, ensuring that informal vending around the area does not disrupt the intended function of the space.

Given the national significance of the Filipino language and its visibility in public spaces, such as parks, its preservation remains essential. Despite its limited spatial presence, it is ensured that Filipino remains part of the linguistic landscape, upholding its role as the national language and fostering unity among Filipinos.

Government language policies can influence the languages that appear on public signs. While these policies primarily target official signage, they may also extend to commercial signs, potentially affecting economic activities (Gorter & Cenoz, 2009, as cited in Said & Rohmah, 2018). However, in the linguistic landscape of Davao City parks, the national language, Filipino, has a very limited presence. It appears mainly in environmental and functional contexts, rather than serving as a dominant medium for mainstream communication.

Bilingual English-Filipino in Bottom-up Signs

Figure 14

PLL-53: PhilRECA (Source: Fieldwork in Magsaysay Park, 2025)



Figure 14, PLL-53, represents a bottom-up linguistic landscape, as it is created and installed by a private organization rather than mandated by the government. The tent, prominently displaying the PhilRECA (Philippine Rural Electric Cooperatives Association, Inc.), serves as a temporary booth for a specific function. The slogan “*Sa PhilRECA, Protektado Ka!*” translates to “With PhilRECA, You Are Protected!” It suggests that the organization provides safety, security, or support to its members and community, potentially in the form of energy-related assistance or consumer protection. The inclusion of Filipino in the slogan indicates a direct and personal engagement with the local community, while the presence of English phrases such as “Like and follow” acknowledges the global nature of the digital space, where English serves as the primary medium of communication.

Furthermore, the sign’s placement on a tent further supports its classification as a bottom-up sign. Unlike permanent signs that dictate regulations, this tent banner serves a promotional and service-oriented purpose. This finding aligns with the study by Eclipse and Tenedero (2018), which found that the use of two languages, whether through code-switching or code-mixing, is a common practice among bilingual or multilingual speakers. Given this, it is unsurprising that Filipinos blend Filipino and English in their speech and can easily understand bilingual signs that combine English and Filipino.

Bilingual English-Spanish in Bottom-up Signs

In the linguistic landscape of Davao City, bottom-up signs created by private entities, organizations, or businesses play a crucial role in shaping public space. Among these, the use of English and Spanish in signage is particularly notable, reflecting both historical influences and modern branding strategies. However, only one example in the linguistic landscape showcases this language combination, which accounts for 1.28% of the linguistic landscape of Davao City. Its presence in bottom-up signage suggests that certain establishments or individuals may use Spanish for stylistic or branding purposes rather than for practical communication. The inclusion of English alongside Spanish ensures that the message remains accessible to a broader audience, as English is more widely understood by the general public.

Figure 15

PLL-107: Ciudad Football (Source: Fieldwork in Crocodile Park, 2025)



Figure 15: PLL-107 represents a bottom-up linguistic landscape, as it is not government-issued but rather installed by a private group, specifically a local football club in Davao City. The presence of “Ciudad Football Club Davao” above the sign itself suggests a sport-related identity, reinforcing a sense of pride and unity among its members. The linguistic choices on the sign are particularly notable. The term “Ciudad” is Spanish, meaning “city,” and is an unusual yet deliberate choice for a club based in Davao, where the languages spoken and seen are Cebuano, Filipino, and English. This suggests an attempt to create an international image, as Spanish is historically tied to the Philippines due to colonial influence. Meanwhile, the tagline placed below “Chasing Glory, One Goal at a Time” is in English, reflecting a motivational statement that resonates with both local and international audiences, especially for their target audiences. This ensures that the message is accessible to a broader audience, including locals and non-local park visitors. Additionally, the sign is placed in the park, which resembles a sports field, making it a strategic location for athletes and passersby. This sign illustrates how a bottom-up linguistic landscape can incorporate multiple languages to construct an identity that is both local and globally appealing.

Bilingual Filipino-Japanese in Bottom-up Signs

Bottom-up signs incorporating Japanese and Filipino languages reflect the dynamic nature of local and international influences within a community’s linguistic landscape. Unlike top-down signs, which are typically issued by governments, bottom-up signs are often created by private organizations, cultural groups, or advocacy groups, allowing for a community-driven form of expression. Among these, the use of Filipino and Japanese in signage is particularly notable, reflecting both historical influences and modern branding strategies. However, only one among the linguistic landscapes features this language combination, which accounts for 1.28% of the linguistic landscapes in Davao City.

Figure 16

PLL-84: Bilingual pole (Source: Fieldwork in Crocodile Park, 2025)



Figure 16, PLL-84, is a bottom-up bilingual peace pole, featuring the languages of Filipino and Japanese, symbolizing a cross-cultural message of harmony. The written Filipino phrase “*Sana’y manatili ang kapayapaan sa daigdig*” translates to “May peace prevail on Earth”, while the Japanese text beside it conveys the same sentiment.

According to Gonzalez (2003), as cited in Tenorio (2022), during the short-lived Japanese Occupation from 1942 to 1945, English remained the primary language used in government, business, and education, despite being under the influence of the Japanese. The bilingual nature of the signs reflected the city’s linguistic diversity and cultural inclusivity, a well-known melting pot of different ethnicities and international influences. This bottom-up sign, likely to be created by a specific private group, showcases the role of the private community in shaping the city’s linguistic landscape. Placing it in public space, specifically a park named “Freedom Park”, ensures its visibility and subtly reminds the public of the importance of a peaceful society.

Trilingual English-Cebuano-Filipino in Bottom-up Signs

Bottom-up signs, created and placed by individuals or local organizations rather than official governing bodies, reflect localized linguistic practice and social norms. The two signs presented highlight trilingual communication by incorporating English, Filipino, and Cebuano, catering to a diverse audience in Davao City. However, only one of the linguistic landscapes features this language combination, which accounts for 1.28% of the linguistic landscapes in Davao City.

Figure 17

PLL-113: *Think Green* (Source: *Fieldwork in Crocodile Park, 2025*)



Figure 17 PLL-113 appears to be more structured, printed, and placed in an open park, unlike PLL-71. The sign reads “Think Green; Do Not Litter”, with the additional translations, “*Bawal Magtapon ng Basura*” and “*Ayaw Pataka ug Labay ug Basura*”. This sign effectively communicates its environmental message using three languages. The “Think Green; Do Not Litter” at the upper part appeals to a broader audience, including tourists and non-native speakers. Followed by the Filipino translation, “*Bawal Magtapon ng Basura*”, directly instructs locals in the national language, while the Cebuano phrase “*Ayaw Pataka ug Labay ug Basura*” ensures that local individuals who use the Cebuano language in the area receive the message clearly. Lastly, its structured placement in an open, accessible area emphasizes its role in conserving the cleanliness around the park.

The sign illustrates the linguistic diversity in Davao City, with English used for broader communication, Filipino as the national language, and Cebuano as the local language. The handwritten sign reflects the urgency and immediate community enforcement of social norms, while the printed one represents a more organized attempt at regulating proper behavior. Their placement in public spaces underscores their significance in maintaining order and cleanliness within the parks’ premises.

The multilingual nature of Davao City is reflected in the emergence of the Cebuano-Filipino hybrid language known as Davao Filipino. In the study by Demetrio and Dreischbach (2021), the findings reveal that both older and younger generations use Cebuano and Filipino in their everyday communication, underscoring the coexistence of multiple languages in the city. While English is generally viewed with neutrality in casual settings, the older generation tends to emphasize the use of Filipino in home environments. Despite this, Cebuano remains widely spoken across all age groups and continues to dominate in Davaoëño society, underscoring the city’s rich and dynamic linguistic landscape.

Functions of Signs in the Linguistic Landscape of Davao City Parks

The linguistic landscape of public spaces serves two primary functions: informational and symbolic (Landry & Bourhis, 1996). As the study revealed codes found in the signage, this certainly

affirms that the choice of language has a function, both informational and symbolic. In addition to providing information on something marked in public space, the choice of language also conveys a symbolic message that there are social activities in society (Syamsurijal & Iswary, 2023). Informational signs provide important details regarding navigation, regulations, and safety, ensuring that there is proper order in public and accessibility for visitors. Symbolic signs, on the other hand, contribute to cultural representation, reinforce identity, and maintain historical continuity.

Informational Function Found in the Signs

The following signs serve as the first point of interaction for visitors, establishing their rules, regulations, and placement in the park. Their strategic placement at key entry points of the park ensures that people receive necessary information before entering the recreational area. The content typically includes safety warnings, prohibitions, and operational guidelines, helping to create an orderly and secure environment within the public space.

Figure 18

PLL-26: Please transact here (Source: Fieldwork in Osmeña Park, 2025)



The sign in Figure 18, PLL-26, “Please Transact Here”, explicitly directs people to conduct transactions at the location as indicated below the arrow. This informational sign provides clear and practical guidance for individuals engaging in official transactions. The presence of the Davao City government logo at the top lends authority to the sign, indicating that it functions to inform as an official regulation and not just a suggestion. However, unlike regulatory signs that impose restrictions (e.g., parking or prohibition signs), this sign functions primarily as an informative directive rather than a rule enforcement measure.

Figure 19

PLL-61: turn off your engine (Source: Fieldwork in Doña Vicenta Park, 2025)



Figure 19 PLL-61, “Turn off your engine clean air zone,” serves as an environmental regulation rather than a parking restriction. The informational sign explicitly instructs drivers to turn off their engines, likely to reduce air pollution and maintain the park’s air quality. The presence of this sign, along with a logo of prohibition (a cross-out vehicle emitting exhaust), reinforces the restriction, visually communicating that emitting exhaust is not allowed in the area. Most of the regulatory and directional signage in the parks follows the top-down approach and is predominantly written in English. This has also been observed in Ferrarotti’s (2017) study, which highlights the role of English as a *lingua franca* and a status symbol, frequently prioritized over other languages in public signage (Inal et al., 2020).

The presence of both top-down and bottom-up signs within the park highlights how linguistic landscapes shape public spaces. While top-down signs prioritize order, individual contributions add colors to cultural and commercial significance, ensuring that there are regulated and inclusive signs in different parks of Davao City. By prominently displaying rules and restrictions, these can enhance visitor orientation by providing direction and general instructions, ensuring smooth navigation throughout the park’s premises. It not only functions as a regulatory tool but also reflects the language policies and governance structures in public spaces.

Symbolic Function Found in the Signs

The following signs serve as symbolic markers, conveying essential information and expectations to visitors through visual and linguistic cues. Positioned prominently at cultural areas, entry points, and pathways, they guide behavior, reinforce social norms, and contribute to the park’s identity.

Located on stage columns, Figures 20, 21, and 22 primarily feature the Cebuano language, emphasizing local linguistic identity and cultural pride in the park. Unlike regulatory signage, these bottom-up signs reflect community-driven expressions, often linked to the city’s history and experiences. Specifically, in Figure 21, PLL-8, the sign emphasizes the use of the Cebuano language through a bold question, “*Giunsa nato pag-amoma sa Kinaiyahan*” [How do we take care of nature?]. The sign encourages the community to engage directly and speak with the local community. This sign

symbolically makes the message feel more personal and inclusive as it actively reflects on their actions rather than just passively reading a rule or a regulation.

Figure 20

PLL-7: Stage Column 1 (Source: Fieldwork in Rizal Park, 2025)

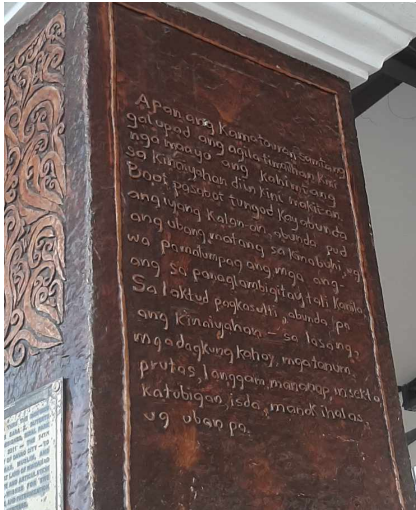


Figure 21

PLL-8: Stage Column 2 (Source: Fieldwork in Rizal Park, 2025)



Figure 22

PLL-9: Stage Column 3 (Source: Fieldwork in Rizal Park, 2025)



The study's findings are similar to Scollon and Scollon's (2003) distinction between the symbolic and indexical functions of bilingual signs in linguistic landscapes. They argue that languages on signs can either index the community they belong to or symbolize something beyond their immediate location. Similarly, in the case of Indonesian signage, according to Fakhroh and Rohmah (2018), language is not only used for informative purposes but also serves as a cultural marker representing social identity. In the context of the park, the Cebuano signages serve a comparable function, reinforcing local identity and signaling the community's cultural and linguistic ownership of the space.

Conclusion

This study explores the linguistic landscape of downtown parks of Davao City, focusing on the types, languages, and functions of signs in public recreational spaces. The analysis revealed top-down and bottom-up signs, each serving distinct roles in shaping the linguistic landscape in the parks in Davao City. Top-down signs, issued by governmental institutions, were highly standardized and primarily written in monolingual English or bilingual English-Filipino, serving informational functions such as regulation and guidance. Bottom-up signs, created by local businesses, organizations, and individuals, were more linguistically diverse, frequently featuring English, Filipino, Cebuano, and occasionally Japanese or Spanish, highlighting community engagement and symbolic cultural expression.

The study contributes to the growing field of linguistic landscape studies by demonstrating how public recreational signage, specifically in parks, reflects broader sociocultural dynamics. The findings affirm that the downtown parks in Davao City are not only physical spaces for recreation but also a sociolinguistic avenue where authority, identity, and community interaction converge. The coexistence of institutional and community sign-making illustrates how language serves as both a tool of governance and a medium for cultural and social representation. However, the notable absence

of indigenous languages in the signage highlights a significant limitation in the city's linguistic inclusivity. Despite the region's rich ethnolinguistic heritage, the lack of indigenous language visibility raises a gap about whose identities are acknowledged in public spaces.

These insights highlight the importance of adopting more inclusive language practices in urban planning and language policy. Policymakers and urban planners should consider incorporating multilingual signage, particularly featuring local and indigenous languages, to create public recreational spaces that reflect the community's cultural and linguistic diversity. Future researchers are encouraged to further investigate how linguistic landscapes impact language preservation and multilingual communication in both urban and rural areas. Expanding the study to include residential areas, business areas, and digital spaces would provide a more comprehensive understanding of linguistic representation in public domains. Particular attention should be paid to how indigenous languages are being represented or excluded from the shared spaces, and how this visibility or invisibility influences public awareness and identity.

The linguistic landscape of the downtown public parks of Davao City mirrors the complex interplay between authority and community participation. Language in public signage, as shown in this study, is not merely a medium of instruction or direction, but a powerful symbol of identity, inclusion, and visibility. These parks serve as spaces for diverse language encounters, where multiple languages coexist, interact, and sometimes compete for prominence. Recognizing and addressing linguistic inequalities, particularly in relation to Indigenous languages, is crucial for creating a genuinely inclusive public environment that represents each identity.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

AI Disclosure

The authors declare that this study was prepared without the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Therefore, this paper is original.

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