

Linguistic Landscape of a North-East India Town: A Case Study of Sivasagar

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Abstract

Linguistic landscape refers to the study of the languages that are seen in the public spaces of a given area. It is a way of observing the language use in a particular region and the visibility of different languages. Linguistic vitality, which refers to the strength and status of a language, is also studied through the process of linguistic landscape analysis. The study of the linguistic landscape of Sivasagar town focuses on identifying the languages that are visible in public spaces, such as signs, advertisements, and street names. It aims to determine the dominant languages and the representation of other languages in the town's linguistic landscape. By analysing the languages seen in the town's public spaces, the study provides insights into the linguistic diversity of the area and the relative status of different languages. The data has been analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings suggest that English is the major language found in the linguistic landscape, followed by Assamese and Hindi. Other languages are not visible in the landscape.

Keywords: Assamese, North-East, linguistic landscape, language vitality, Sivasagar

1. Introduction

Linguistic signs are visible everywhere, especially written language, such as street names, road signs, graffiti or murals, storefronts and shop windows, commercial billboards, posters, etc. These signs are used by companies, the government or individuals for advertising or marketing purposes like promotion of new products in the market, making the public aware about a new scheme, etc. Of late, however even researchers have shown a keen interest in studying the linguistic texts that are present in the public space (Gorter, 2006). The visibility of written languages in the landscape is called as 'linguistic landscape.' According to Landry & Bourhis (1997) linguistic landscape is thus defined as:

The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings

combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration (Landry & Bourhis, 1997).

Gorter (2006) stresses on this point and adds that linguistic landscape studies the ‘use of language in its written form in the public sphere.’ Furthermore, he mentions that with recent developments in technology, linguistic landscape also includes the study of language on new signs such as electronic flat panel displays, electronic boards and message centres, foam boards, LED neon lights, interactive touch screens and scrolling banners (Gorter, 2013). Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) defines linguistic landscape as ‘any sign or announcement located outside or inside a public institution or a private business in a given geographical location.’ According to Motschenbacher (2020), linguistic landscape is the study of signs that influence the public realm on a social, political, cultural, or economic level. The written language visible in the landscape marks as a boundary of linguistic territories. The speech communities in a particular place uses their native language in signs to show their identity.

The linguistic signs in the landscape are of different types. Landry & Bourhis (1997) classified the signs as ‘government’ and ‘private’ signs. Later Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) renamed the ‘government’ and ‘private’ linguistic signs as ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ signs respectively. The ‘top-down’ items are those that are published by administrative agencies, such as public institutions, signs on public property, street names, and public announcements, whereas, items that are developed by individual social actors, such as shop owners and private businesses, such as store names, private company signs, and private announcements, are referred to as ‘bottom-up’ items (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Begum & Sinha, 2019). Generally, top-down signs are formed in accordance with the dominant language and culture of the region, whereas, while making bottom-up signs, individuals have some liberty to use their own language (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006). As top-down signs are issued by the local or central government bodies, they are mostly written in the official language to be in solidarity with the public. So, by looking at top-down signs, one can understand the linguistic situation in a particular place. In the case of bottom-up signs, individual actors have their own liberty of using the language of their choice, as these signs are considered to be a part of the individual’s freedom of speech (Landry & Bourhis, 1997).

Basically, there are two functions of linguistic landscape studies: Informational function and symbolic function (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). The linguistic landscape’s informational function is that linguistic landscape serves as a way to identify and distinguish the geographical area inhabited by a specific language community and set the boundaries between the language group and others. The consistent use of one language within the territory can lead to well-defined language borders between neighbouring language communities. The linguistic landscape holds symbolic significance as the presence or absence of a language on public signs can influence the emotions of a language community member within a bilingual or multilingual environment. The representation of languages in public spaces symbolizes the power dynamic between competing language groups, both within the group and between groups.

1.1. Literature Review

The first study of linguistic landscape studies can be traced back to Spolsky & Cooper's (1991) study of signs in Jerusalem, though there were a few studies before that (see Rosebaum et al. 1977; Tulp, 1978). Landry & Bourhis (1997) study of language in public space in Quebec is regarded as the first in modern linguistic landscape studies. Gorter (2006) discusses four cases of linguistic landscape studies in the special issue that was published in *International Journal of Multilingualism*. This issue includes Ben-Rafael et al.'s (2006) study of the diverse linguistic signs present in the Israeli-Palestinian neighbourhoods of Israel; Huebner's (2006) study of the English, Thai, Chinese, Japanese and Arabic language patterns of linguistic landscape in Bangkok; Backhaus' (2006) study of the multilingual linguistic landscape of Tokyo, Japan; and Cenoz and Gorter's (2006) study of the linguistic landscape of two European multilingual places: Basque Country (Spain) and Friesland (Netherlands). It also includes a scholarly introduction and conclusion from the editor. Coluzzi (2016) analysed the street signs in Brunei Darussalam, a Southeast Asian nation, and discovered a prominent use of Chinese language despite a lack of official support. This is due to factors such as its high prestige, literary history, practicality, and widespread usage by millions globally.

In the Indian context also, a few studies of linguistic landscape have been done, mainly focussing on the multilingual setting. Singh (2002) remarks that 'linguistic landscaping is of great significance in India and has even greater potential in many parts of the world and that it will lead to formation of an independent branch through which multilingualism can be portrayed toponymically, politonymically, ethnonymically and social psychologically.' Naik (2002) examines the social, economic, and political ramifications of linguistic landscaping in India as it relates to the country's industrial belt. Begum & Sinha (2019) examined the number of languages in the linguistic landscape of Patna and also investigated the linguistic attitude of the native residents of Bihar towards the languages.

In the context of Assam, Bharadwaz & Shukla (2018) investigated the linguistic landscape of Tezpur, a town in the northern bank of the Brahmaputra River in Sonitpur district. They found that English has a dominance over other languages in the linguistic landscape and the use of Assamese language in many signs is associated with the pride the people feel for the Assamese language.

The present study tries to study the multilingual landscape of Sivasagar district. The study focuses on exploring the linguistic landscape of the town by finding out which languages are visible in the linguistic landscape. It also addresses which is the dominant language in the landscape and the differences in the top-down and bottom-up signs.

2. Significance of the Study

India is a land of people with different cultures and traditions. Each group also have its own language. Like India, Assam, a state situated in the North-eastern part of India, also known as mini- India; because for centuries different national, ethnic, religious and linguistic and tribal

groups have been living together in this state (Srikanth, 2000). Assam is also considered as the gateway to the northeast, as it is connected by a narrow patch of land about 22 kms wide, called the Siliguri Corridor or more popularly known as the Chicken's Neck with the rest of India (Srikanth, 2000). Assam shares its border with six other north-eastern states: Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, and Tripura and two international boundaries with Bhutan to the north and Bangladesh to the south-west. There are many ethnic groups residing in Assam. They are the Ahoms, Chutias, Morans, Kacharis, Khamtis, Bodos, Tiwas, Karbis, Mishings, Rabhas, Dimasas to name a few. Linguistically all these groups have their own language which is different from one another, but Assamese which is spoken by majority of the population of the state is considered as the lingua-franca. Other than these ethnic groups, there are also people from other speech communities such as Bengali, Marwari, Gujarati, Nepali, etc. Bengali speaking population consists of the second highest population of the state after Assamese speakers.

Assam is divided into two valleys: the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley based on the state's geography, and an interesting fact is that these two regions are linguistically different. The official language of the state is Assamese in the Brahmaputra Valley and in the Barak Valley the official language is Bengali. Although majority of the Bengali speaking people reside in Barak Valley, there are Bengali speaking people residing in many districts of the Brahmaputra Valley too. Hindi speaking people are also found both in the Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley. Bodo a Tibeto-Burman language is spoken by the Bodo people who resides in parts of Nagaon, Karbi Anglong, Darrang, Sonitpur and mainly in the four districts that come under the BTAD area: Udalguri, Kokrajhar, Baga and Chirang.

According to Articles 344 (1) and 351 of the Indian Constitution that is titled as Eighth Schedule, Government of India recognizes 22 languages as scheduled languages; three of them are spoken in Assam: Assamese, Bengali and Bodo. Other than these three languages, Mishing is spoken by the Mishing community residing in the districts of Golaghat, Jorhat, Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, North Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and Majuli. Karbi is spoken by the Karbi community in East and West Karbi Anglong. Dimasa is spoken in Dima Hasao. A few languages of Tai-Kadai family such as Tai- Khamti and Tai- Aiton are also spoken in parts of the state by a very less amount of people. Tai-Ahom, the language of the Ahoms have become extinct since the 17th century, except for a few kinship terms still used by the community. Also, in some rituals like marriage it is used. It was the court language of the Ahom kingdom before being replaced by the Assamese language.

The present study tries to focus on the languages visible in the landscape of Sivasagar, a town in the Upper Assam region, which was the erstwhile capital of the Ahom kingdom.

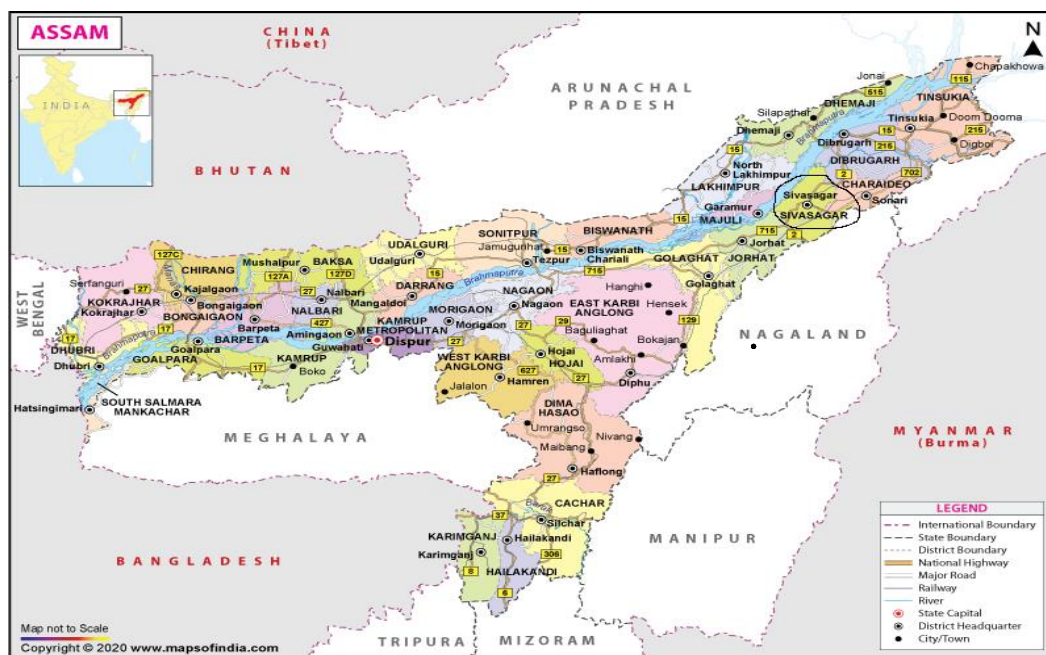


Figure 1: Map of Assam highlighting Sivasagar district.

Sivasagar is a place with a lot of historical significance. As it was the capital of the Ahom kingdom, there are many historical buildings present in the district. To its east is Dibrugarh district, and to its west is Jorhat district. The Brahmaputra River lies to the north and to its south is Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. The total population of Sivasagar is 1,151,050 (2011 census data). Majority of the people in the district speak Assamese followed by Hindi and Bengali. According to the 2011 census, of the total population of the district: 969831 people speak Assamese, 84287 speak Hindi and 30645 speak Bengali, followed by other languages like Mishing, Odia, Nepali, etc. Majority of the population of the district are Hindus, followed by Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, etc.

3. Methodology

Linguistic landscape research aims at finding out the visibility of languages in the landscape of a particular place through various linguistic signs available. The purpose of the present study is to assess the prominence of various languages in Sivasagar district and to compare the differences between top-down and bottom-up signs. To analyse the signs Cenoz & Gorter's (2006) methodology is followed. According to this method, each establishment, not each sign, is considered as one unit of analysis for counting signs. This method involves counting and categorizing the signs according to their language, size, font, and placement to determine the relative prominence of different languages.

4. Data Collection

For this research photographic data have been collected from busy commercial area of the town, mainly Dolmukh Chariali, which comprises of the following streets: Temple Road, Boarding Road, GNG Road, and HCB Road. The survey of the signs was conducted in November 2022. The sampling method used for this study is purposive sampling. The rationale behind selecting this location is that this is the central part of the town, with majority of the

business, educational institutes, and the administrative offices of the district being present here, thus leading to the highest density of signs. For this research a total of 72 signs have been collected.

5. Findings

This section presents the analysis of the linguistic signs found in the linguistic landscape of Sivasagar. The authors have analysed the data both quantitatively and qualitatively.

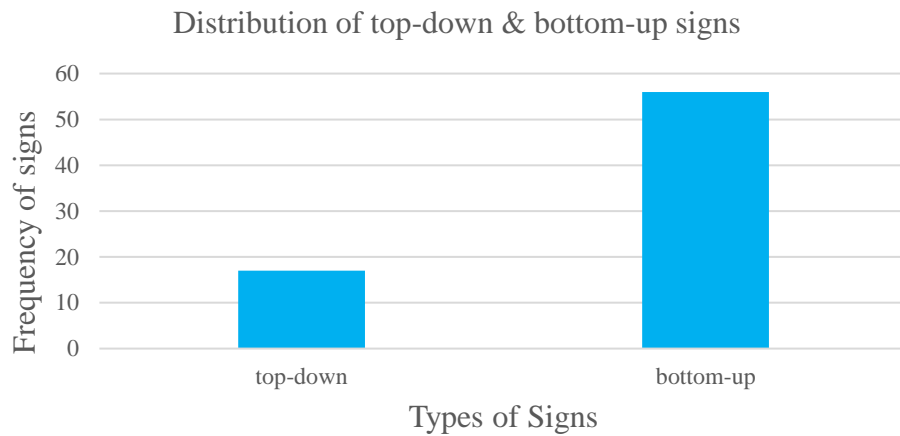


Figure 2: Distribution of top-down and bottom-up signs

In this study, out of 72 signs, 17 top-down signs and 55 bottom-up signs were found as shown in the bar diagram (Figure 2).

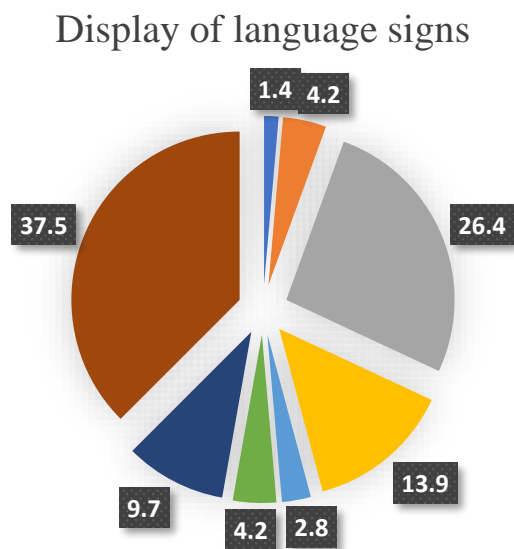


Figure 3: Languages displayed in signs (in percentage)

Based on the use of languages, signs can be mainly categorised into three types: monolingual, bilingual and trilingual.

It has been found that in the linguistic landscape of Sivasagar, bilingual signs using Roman and Assamese scripts showed the highest percentage of 37.5%. It is followed by signs using monolingual Roman script (26.4%) and signs using monolingual Assamese script (13.9%). Thus, there is dominance of the use of Roman script in the linguistic landscape of Sivasagar. Signs written in Hindi (Devanagari script) is mostly seen in top-down signs. There were only 3 monolingual Devanagari signs, other signs having Devanagari script were either bilingual or trilingual. Other than these signs, only one sign in Gurmukhi script is present. Other languages like Bengali and Urdu signs are not present at all.

5.1. Monolingual Signs in the Dataset

There was a total of 33 signs that were monolingual. As already mentioned, the highest number of monolingual signs were written in Roman script, followed by signs written in Assamese, Hindi, and Gurmukhi.



Figure 4: Assamese monolingual sign

Figure 4 is the name of a shop written in Assamese script. Interestingly, the owner has used Assamese script to write English words. The words ‘optical’ and ‘power’ are written in Assamese script.

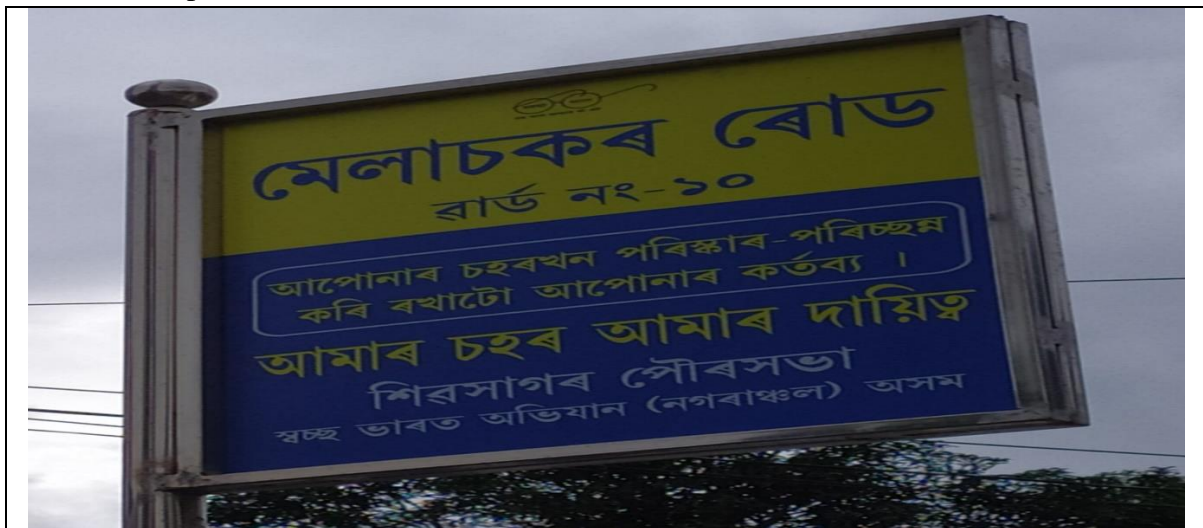


Figure 5: Assamese monolingual sign

Figure 5 is a signboard of a street name. In this figure too, there is one English word written in Assamese script. The word ‘road’ written as /rud/.



Figure 6: English monolingual sign

Figure 6 is an English monolingual road sign. In this sign, the Assamese word ‘nagar’ is written in Roman script.



Figure 7: English monolingual sign

5.2. Bilingual and Trilingual Signs in the Dataset

There was a total of 39 signs out of which 32 were bilingual signs and 7 were trilingual signs. The trilingual signs are containing Devanagari, Roman and Assamese script were mostly top-down signs and two bilingual signs having Devanagari and Roman script also belong to the same category of signs.



Figure 8: Trilingual sign (Assamese, Devanagari and Roman)



Figure 9: Trilingual sign (Assamese, Devanagari and Roman)



Figure 10: Bilingual sign (Roman and Devanagari)



Figure 11: Trilingual sign (Assamese, Devanagari and Roman)

Figures 8, 9, 10 and 11 show images with trilingual signs. Each of these signs are top-down signs as they are the properties of the government. Figure 8 is a multilingual sign of the inscriptions by Archaeological survey of India of the famous Siva Temple, which is at the heart of the town. As the site is government by the Archaeological Survey of India, it adheres to the three-language policy of India. The other two images, also multilingual signs: Figure 9 is the name of the railway junction which is maintained by Indian Railways, and Figure 10 is a letter-box in front of the general post office. In Figure 9, the word 'town' from English is written the same in both Devanagari script and Assamese script instead of writing the translated term. Figure 11 is a trilingual sign (nameplate of a shop). In figure 11, the word for tea is written in Assamese /sah/ and in Hindi /tjai/, again keeping the three-language policy rule of the Indian government.

Interestingly among the bilingual signs, two signs were found using code-mixing.



Figure 12: Code-mixing (Roman and Assamese)

Figure 12 shows code-mixing, of the Roman and Assamese scripts: the word coffee which is of non-Assamese is written in Roman script and the term for house /g^hɔɪ/ is written in Assamese script. The name of the shop is written as *Coffee Ghor*, which literally means Coffee House. This is a unique way of capturing the attention of the public.

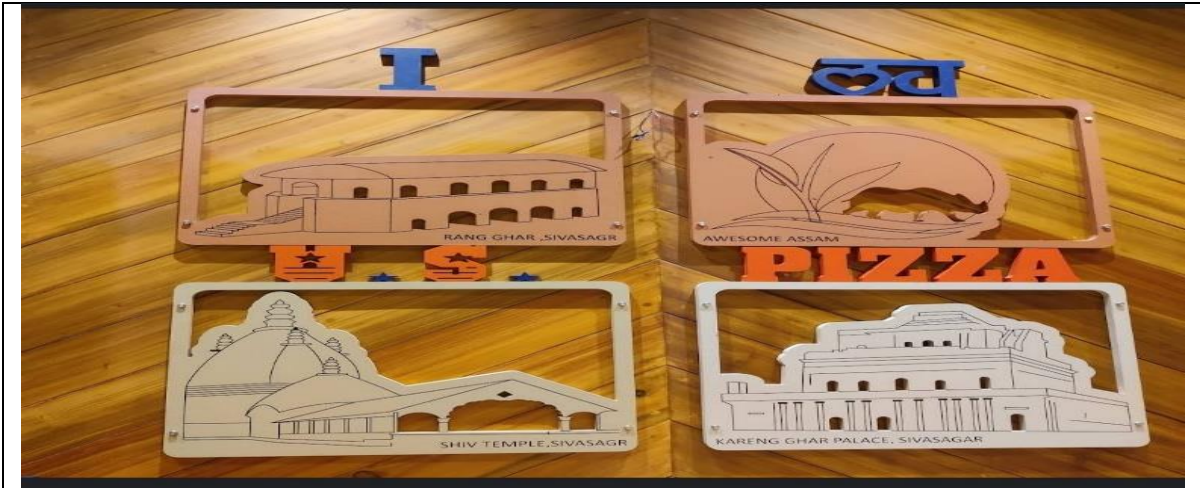


Figure 13: Code-mixing (Roman and Devanagari)

Figure 13 also shows code-mixing of the Roman and Devanagari scripts. In this image the sentence 'I love US Pizza' is written with the words I, US and Pizza written in Roman and the word 'love' is written in Devanagari script.

The other bilingual signs include shop names, posters, advertisements, mostly comprising of Roman and Assamese scripts.



Figure 14: Bilingual sign (Assamese and Roman)



Figure 15: Bilingual sign (Assamese and Roman)

In both figures 14 and 15, although, both Roman and Assamese scripts are used, the Assamese version is just the transliteration of the English words. Here instead of using the

native terms for words such as ‘pork’, ‘house’, ‘indoor’ and ‘stadium’, the sign owners transliterated the English terms into Assamese script.

5.3. Types and Distribution of Top-down and Bottom-up Signs

Table 1: Distribution of top-down signs

Top-down signs			
Types	Unilingual	Assamese	4
		Hindi	1
		English	1
	Bilingual	Hindi and English	2
		Assamese and English	2
		Hindi and Assamese	2
	Multilingual	English, Hindi, and Assamese	5

Table 2: Distribution of bottom-up signs

Bottom-up signs			
Types	Unilingual	Assamese	7
		Hindi	3
		English	18
	Bilingual	Hindi and English	1
		Assamese and English	26

Table 1 and table 2 exhibits the types and distribution of top-down and bottom-up signs in the linguistic landscape of Sivasagar. Among the top-down signs, 4 unilingual signs are in Assamese, 1 in Hindi and 1 in English. In the case of top-down bilingual signs there are 2 signs in each set of combinations that is Hindi and English, Assamese and English and Hindi and Assamese. There are 5 multilingual top-down signs. Among the bottom-up signs, 18 unilingual signs are in English, followed by 7 unilingual signs in Assamese and 3 unilingual signs in Hindi. In the case of bilingual signs, there is only 1 sign that is in Hindi and English, the other 26 bilingual signs are in English and Assamese. Interestingly there is no trilingual or multilingual bottom-up signs.

6. Discussion

Though Assamese is the lingua franca of the Brahmaputra Valley, the reason behind the dominance of English in the linguistic landscape of Sivasagar is because of globalization and English has become the medium of instruction in most of the educational institutes. Except for the vernacular medium schools, all higher educational institutes in the district use English as the medium of instruction. Even in the case of top-down signs, the presence of English is found not only in bilingual and multilingual signs, but even in monolingual signs. But, if the order of languages is to be considered then, it can be noted that Assamese gets the top position. The language used on top or in the centre is the one which dominates the landscape. In all the

top-down and bottom-up signs, Assamese language is used and written in bold fonts or highlighted.

The use of Hindi is very less as compared to English and Assamese, though many businesses, specially shop owners are second generation Assamese speakers, most of them either belonging to Bengali, Gujarati or Marwari communities. This demonstrates the integration of these communities into the diverse Assamese culture. Though they have their own languages, including Marwari, Gujarati, Bengali, etc., yet they prefer Assamese over Hindi or any other language as the common language to use. Hindi was only found in the top-down signs like the bank names, railway station names, which are properties of the Central Government, keeping in view the three-language policy of the Indian government. In the case of state government properties, bilingual signs of Assamese and English was mostly found.

Another interesting case is that in English-Assamese bilingual signs, translation, and transliteration of English words into Assamese is common, but translation of Assamese into English is rare. English signs are mostly just transliterated and not translated, while Assamese signs are usually not translated into English, as Assamese is the widely used language.

7. Conclusion

Although the data for this study was very less, but it did show the representation of different languages in the landscape. Though Assamese is considered as the lingua franca of the state, yet it can be understood that English dominates the linguistic landscape, the reason behind this is globalization and use of English in the higher education of not only Assam but in whole of India. Another fact is that, because of the state's language policy, except Assamese and English, no other languages are visible in the landscape. It was noticed that the non-Assamese speakers mainly Bengali and Marwari community who are associated with business like traders, shop owners, etc., prefer to use Assamese rather than any other language. This is why there is absence of trilingual or multilingual bottom-up signs in the linguistic landscape. They did this in order to assimilate with the Assamese society. They even speak Assamese while interacting with their customers. During the colonial period, Bengali was made the official language of the state by the British, but after independence and after the Assamese language movement of 1950, Assamese has been the official language the Brahmaputra Valley.

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