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**THE OMNIPRESENCE OF *DHIVEHI* LANGUAGE
IN THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM CITY: AN EMPIRICAL
STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

Linguistic landscape can be explained as studying perceived or actual language use in a particular environment. The city is an excellent place to cultivate the maximum use of language through the linguistic landscape. The use of languages or a specific language in a linguistic landscape of city space must be examined because it is likely to find a particular language in a specific environment. The present study considers Thiruvananthapuram Medical College Hospital (MCH), Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, as the domain and the street. The area has an omnipresence of the Divehi or Dhivehi language, the official language of the Republic of Maldives. This study analyses the type of signs found along MCH streets. The study is done under the point explained by Bloomart in 2013 that “signs will contribute to the organisation of that space by defining addressees and selecting audiences, and by imposing particular restrictions, offering invitations, articulating norms of conduct and so on to these selected audiences” (p.40). Here, the study takes an empirical approach and is a qualitative analysis methodologically. Photographs were taken from the main street near MCH and attempted to determine the function for which the Dhivehi language is employed publicly and the extent to which these signs reflect the identity of the Maldivian residents in Thiruvananthapuram city.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape, Public Sign, Language Use, Maldivian Residents, Thiruvananthapuram City

1. Introduction

Thiruvananthapuram is a fast-growing city moving towards multilingualism like any other city. This is evident when we walk through the city's sidewalk. Different languages can be visibly seen and heard in the Linguistic Landscape of Thiruvananthapuram. The motivation for the study was the appearance of an unknown script found on premises in and around Thiruvananthapuram Medical College. This created an urge in the researcher's mind to learn more about the script; thus, the idea of the current paper came into being.

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The primary motivation of the research was to see the reason behind the specific language "Dhivehi" and who the speakers were. Why is such a language appearing in the linguistic landscapes in Thiruvananthapuram, especially in the Medical College hospital region? So, understanding the presence and need of a particular language led to the present study. The paper discusses the Linguistic Landscape in the area mentioned above, focusing on the *Divehi* language, the mother tongue of Maldivian citizens. The study also tries to determine the function of Linguistic Landscape (hereafter LL) in the city space. The paper is divided into five sections to achieve the goals and to explain the current study. The first section briefly introduces the study's motivation and interest, followed by the aim and objective. The second section deals with the background of the study, which includes the explanation of the term 'linguistic landscape' and a few theories and approaches used; this section aggregates the reason for the settlement of Maldivians in Thiruvananthapuram City. The third section is about the methodological perspectives and the data collection strategies used for the study. The fourth section deals with the discussion and findings, and the paper concludes in the fifth section.

1.1. Background

1.1.1. Linguistic Landscape

The linguistic landscape is an area that can flourish and be expanded to any discipline. There are emerging ideas and theories in this field. It is also one of the areas where significant updates happen regularly. There are different methods and perspectives on researching Linguistic Landscapes. One must focus on the process, and parameters must be redefined to a concerned project rather than to that of the field (Spier & Herrera Ruano, 2021). There are different approaches to the LL study among scholars. Nevertheless, the earliest study was by Landry and Bourhis in 1997. According to them, LL is "the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings" (p. 25). To this point of view, scholars later extended this definition by adding graffiti, restaurant menus, spray-painted, maintenance holes, etc. (Gorter, 2006 and Kasanga, 2012). A semiotic linguistic landscape approach in which "language in the environment, word and images displayed and exposed in public space" is also included by Shohamy and Gorter (2009). Blommaert (2013), in his study, took a rather complex dimension where he approaches LL as "signs will contribute to the organisation and regulation of that space by defining addressees and selecting audiences, and by imposing particular restrictions, offering invitations, articulating norms of conduct and so on to these selected audiences" (40). Blommaert's (2013) idea was based on the concept of 'diversity with diversity' due to the different forms of migration. More technologically sophisticated forms of communication result in 'an escalation of ethnic, social, cultural and economic diversity in societies almost everywhere' (Blommaert 2013). Language takes a privileged place in defying the impact of super-diversity. The LL

mainly have two purposes: function and indexicality (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). He demonstrated this with his study in his neighbourhood in Antwerp, Belgium. The results show multilingual signs primarily illustrate a place's social, cultural, and political histories. These literature studies postulate that signs in public spaces tell stories about communities' complex natures and identities. The signs of immigrant groups in the society provide evidence of their presence and needs and how the city incorporates them through different means, i.e., linguistics landscape.

1.1.2. Maldivians in Thiruvananthapuram

Maldives is an island nation in the Indian Ocean. These neighbouring island nations share boundaries in the Laccadive Sea, about 700 kilometres southwest of Sri Lanka and 400 kilometres southwest of India. The Republic of Maldives is an Islamic country. Fishing and coconut cultivation were once Maldivians' traditional jobs, and now it is more of tourism management and water sports. The Maldives is popularly known for the tourism industry. Their language, *Dhivehi*, is closely related to Sri Lankan *Sinhala*. Maldivians have adopted their language, *Dhivehi*, from Arabic, Urdu, and Hindi.

The main settlement of Maldivians in Thiruvananthapuram is because of innumerable health facilities and education. Approximately 5,000 Maldivian people settled in India, especially in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala and a major destination for education and health services. (The Embassy of the Republic of Maldives, 2018). Migration is considered one of the supportive factors for development. The Indian government has facilitated Maldivians as there is always a bilateral correlation between India and Maldives. In Maldives, the education and health care system is limited. People depend on other nations for medical treatment and higher education. Thiruvananthapuram is the nearest accessible place and easy to travel to. Sheeja Bheevi, in her study about the diaspora of Maldivians in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, found out that the migration to Kerala started in the early 90s. The best option for reducing their overwhelming challenges in transportation is for people of all ages to migrate to Kerala to avail of health services. The healthcare sector is an essential sector for both India and Maldives. India established the Indira Gandhi National Hospital in Maldives in 1995. Also, they follow the same method as the one followed in Kerala for developing the education system and literacy.

Thiruvananthapuram is a city with a set of official languages, and one of them is Malayalam, the mother tongue of most of the Keralites. One can identify multiple languages in the city space. Inclusiveness is essential in the function of other languages. The study's background shows a need and purpose for the Maldivian settlement in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, to interact with each other and the people of Kerala in the language they are comfortable with. This can be associated with studying language in a particular area or domain, which is valuable and necessary.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Approach

Linguistic Landscape refers to the visibility and silence of language on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). The current study selected the *Dhivehi* language in the MCH area of Thiruvananthapuram city. Data collection in the Linguistic Landscape involves photographing (Hult, 2009). For the study, thirteen distinct data were selected and documented along the street side of the Medical College Hospital (MCH) from Medical College Pazhaya Road to Murinjapalam Road, which stretches about 2km. It should be noted that these thirteen data were the only available signs constituting the area along with the other languages in the Linguistic Landscape of the site. Walking down the street on both sides and photographing the necessary sights, a questionnaire was also included to understand better the researcher's point of view and that of the passers-by. Subsequently, signs were categorised according to food, health, and accommodation. Signs that included text were only considered for the study. Other items, such as pictures and graffitis were not considered. It was also categorised into language patterns such as monolingual and bilingual. Out of thirteen, five bilingual signages were found. The script was in English and *Dhivehi* language. One trilingual (multilingual) signage was found, comprising Malayalam, English, and *Dhivehi*. According to Blommaert (2013), the "signs will contribute to the organisation and regulation of that space by defining addressees and selecting audiences, imposing restrictions, offering invitations, articulating norms of conduct and so on to these selected audiences". So, the present study tries to understand a particular language's function. It should be noted here that purpose is not to underpin the presence of a particular language (addressing the quantitative aspect like "how many signboards are present in a particular language) but rather to explain the function of the *Dhivehi* language in the Linguistic Landscape or "lingu-*scape*." Language categorisation according to pattern could yield only a little information, such as the presence of the language. An understanding of language's function requires a qualitative analysis, and hence, a questionnaire and one-to-one conversations with shop owners and a few passers-by⁴ were made. An analysis of the thirteen signs' data, the questionnaires and direct interviews brought to light the creators' or the shop owners' views. Most of them said that the reason behind the implementation of such signboards was for commodification purposes. Moreover, language is a barrier since they must learn Maldivian. The people from Maldives are not proficient in English and do not know anything in Malayalam, the native language of those living in Kerala. Thus, communicating and attracting people from Maldives was needed. Even though they have implemented a name board and information in the *Dhivehi* language, the initial inquiry explains that the owner or the shopkeepers do not know "what is written in the name board" but explained that they had asked the name board makers to write their requirements in the respective boards. The need was to state 'what they sell, information about the restaurant, food

items available, menu details, shop's name, advertisements, etc.'. To learn about the written items and the signs, a native *Dhivehi* speaker was requested to translate and explain them in English. The sign's appearance was with a clear motive: "The immediate goal of these signs is to remain connected locally and globally through courier services, translation services, notaries, and technology" (Spier & Herrera Ruano, 2021). The corpus comprises approximately seventy words that have goals and functional utility in their messages. It should be noted that the data collected fit into the categories of food, health, services, and accommodation, which resonates with the earlier quote (ibid). The amount of data is smaller, and listing out the categories and finding the function words do not yield the functionality of the signs. The two main functions discussed in the previous studies are indexical and symbolic. The function of the LL is to index the presence of specific communities. According to Scollon and Scollon (2003), "A code may be chosen because it indexes the point in the world where it is placed." There is an Arabic-speaking community (or business or nation... this is a Chinese restaurant because Chinese are writing on the shop sign. Thus, here, we will find the function, need, and placement of all the sign boards collected. They also point out, according to Scollon, that the three systems -the code preference system, the inscription system, and the emplacement system - work together to create meaningful and socially constructed public space. He also emphasises that it gives specific identities to the people who have made them and those who read them. This is remarkably similar to the situation of the *Dhivehi* language in Trivandrum. This is further explained by the fact that sometimes language is excluded and included in the LL of the city space, especially in the top-down category, which abides by the law and policy of the state. Nevertheless, we can see a change in the bottom-up type, i.e., private signs. Hence, there is an inclusion of a language. Moreover, it shows the identity which it wants to project. Along with ideas from geo semiotics, as Scollon and Scollon (2003) suggested, the *Dhivehi* language holds significant power here, and secondly, is the English language. The discipline of the linguistic landscape is new, so there may be many methodologies and material selection; their categorisation, analysis, presentation, and conclusions still need to be clarified. Sometimes, it seems controversial; therefore, a process that suits one research might not apply to another, but it paves the way for further similar studies.

3. Discussion and Findings

From the collected data and after translating and categorising them as mentioned in the previous section, the following were the understandings inferred. The signboards are in strict categories according to the needs and functions. The primary needs of Maldivians are food, shelter, and medical access. These are provided near the MCH location, and it is dubious about being found in any other zone of Thiruvananthapuram. The same goes with the Lingua scape of the

Maldivian language. The languages or the script found on the signboards are English and Maldivian, and one sign board has a

Malayalam script on it. This adheres to the fact that Lingua-scape happens only for a particular function. Here, it is commodified and highly selective in participants, which involves only targeting the Maldivians. There is purposeful and needful creation of signs of another language in Thiruvananthapuram's Linguistic Landscape, i.e., a Lingua scape is found. This shows that the community accepts the plurality, and the creators cater for the community's needs.



Figure 1: Name of a Restaurant in Dhivehi Language

The signage is monolingual and contains only the *Dhivehi* language. The signage's content is the restaurant's name, which translates into *BG restaurant*. This clearly shows that the signage is for a particular category and excludes the others. As *Dhivehi* is a foreign language, it takes the privilege of appearing in a specific place (Blommaert, 2013). Here, the privilege is bilateral in the sense of commodification and identity. The creator uses it as a commodity and takes benefit of the privilege. The needy Maldivians find it attractive and helpful; thus, language becomes an essence of identity. Even though Malayalam is one of the main languages in the Linguistic Landscape of Thiruvananthapuram, the sign boards do not entertain the Malayalam language in this scenario. However, the *Dhivehi* language, i.e., choosing a particular language, as Scollon and Scollon (2003) mentioned.



Figure 2: BG Restaurant

When we analyse the lexical entry in the LL, we can see that the sign ages are functional, i.e., each signage brings out the usage. Most of the lexical terms found were related to food and shelter. According to Blommaert (2010, p.26), the integration of immigrants depends on the shared assumption whenever they settle in a new host society or environment. Here, we can see how language is essential in integrating and establishing shared beliefs. The restaurant shop menu is in the *Divehi* language (**Figure 3**). When the researcher enquired about the food and menu details, the shop owner explained that most of the menus are the staple food of Maldivians, and the name is given in their language. Other cuisines are less available at the place, and people from the Maldives prefer food that feels homely and suits their palate. Furthermore, the customers are generally Maldivians, and sometimes people⁵ other than Maldivians come to have food at the restaurant to know the taste of the food or to taste a variety of other cuisine. Nevertheless, that is rare, and the restaurant mainly focuses on customers from the Maldives.



Figure 3: Menu in Dhivehi Language

The reflection of the commodification of language, food, and culture is reflected here. Since no other language is used, the direct translation of the words in the signage seems to show the same effect, i.e., the words asked to be translated by the researcher. There were only a few recognisable English words; the rest were directly translated, e.g., "normal omelette", "vegetable omelette", and a few others were just transliterated. **(Figure 3)** The script was in English, but the words were in Dhivehi. The exact phrase and pronunciation were not considered here; nevertheless, it was important for the researcher to ask for a translation of the signage's content to clarify the language's function. Overall, Blommaert's approach enabled the researcher to observe the emerging super-diversity of the adjacent neighbourhood. According to Geo Semiotics, there are three systems of code preference here:

Dhivehi language and language apperency on the signs. Most signs have the *Dhivehi* language at the top and are preceded by English. The inscription system is highly personalised and marketed for a targeted audience, so they do not abide by rules or formats. It is colourful and attractive. The third point on geo semiotics is the emplacement system, which focuses on where a given sign is in the physical world. Here, the central location is MCH. The research proves the claim Geo Semiotics put forward. Sometimes, needs are given priority over the look and design, and the details on the board may contain more information.

Sometimes, the board is monolingual, and it acts as a directional sign board as well. This is kept near the entrance of the road. There is no language other than *Dhivehi*, and pictures of food are from the Island of Maldives.



Figure 4: Multiple Advertisements in one Frame



Figure 5: Signs that Serve as a Directional Board

4. Conclusion

Linguistic landscape cannot be an isolated aspect of human language. There is a direct connection to sociology, linguistics, psychology applied linguistics, culture studies, and anthropology (Shahzad et al., 2020). Furthermore, the appearance of a sign is not a coincidence. Though only thirteen signages were in the LL of MCH, they served a purpose. LL is an inevitable aspect of linguistics, demonstrated by the translated data showing these messages' obvious objectives and functional utility, language and the domain in which it occurs correlate. There is a consistency in the domain in which they appear related to food, shelter, medical and finance. Regarding the creator's point of view, all the signs are directed towards one targeted audience, and they prefer mostly the Maldivian community in their shops. Taking away that situation seldom creates the opportunity to displace such signboards in the given space. The presence of foreign languages shows the plurality of the LL, and city space is proceeding towards multilingualism.

Notes

1. The speakers were not selected by any means. However, they had one-to-one conversations with people walking by, shopkeepers, taxi drivers, and auto drivers in the nearby stand and a few speakers of the *Dhivehi* language, i.e., natives of Maldives.
2. Only a few pieces of data were available, and shop owners said many signages were taken down when the renovation happened. They were not replaced, but the shops are still Maldivians friendly.
3. The translation was done by a native speaker who knows English.

4. Points of view here means the point of view of the owner of the shops and not the style and design or the name board makers)
5. Passer by ^{four} here includes the non-speakers of the *Dhivehi* language and *Dhivehi* language speakers
6. (*People*⁵ *native people of Kerala or anyone who wants to try a different food sometimes visits the place*)

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