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Multilingualism and language commodification in the public signage of Moscow

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Abstract
Linguistic landscape remains an important semiotic resource for tracking socio-political changes and the shifting power dynamics they entail, particularly in contexts marked by superdiversity. As the largest urban center in Russia, Moscow is a multilingual and multicultural city shaped by its unique historical, political, and socio-economic context. However, despite the city's central role in understanding the complexities of post-Soviet Russia, research on its linguistic landscape remains limited, particularly in relation to its stratification amidst monolingual policies, the increasing visibility of English, and active migration patterns in recent decades. This study aims to analyse how the layered linguistic landscape of Moscow reflects patterns of multilingualism, language commodification, and the selective visibility of minority languages. A dataset of 513 photos was compiled between 2022 and 2024. It was analyzed combining ethnographic and quantitative approaches, identifying three key layers in Moscow's linguistic landscape. The analysis reveals a selective and transient accommodation of multilingualism in official policies, which, while allowing multilingualism in some contexts, largely reaffirms Russian as dominant. While semiotic diversity in bottom-up signage presents a grassroots counterpoint to official practices, Central Asian languages have quite limited visibility in top-down signage. Findings highlight the need for a more inclusive linguistic landscape that reflects the city's diverse population, as well as stable top-down policies to sustain the city's global aspirations.

Keywords: *linguistic landscape*, *Moscow*, *ethnographic linguistic landscape analysis*, *superdiversity*, *language commodification*, *immigration*

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Многоязычие и коммодификация языка в общественных вывесках Москвы

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Аннотация
Языковой ландшафт остается важным семиотическим ресурсом для отслеживания социально-политических изменений в распределении власти, особенно в условиях сверхразнообразия. Москва, как крупнейший мегаполис России, представляет собой многоязычный и мультикультурный город, сформированный уникальным историческим, политическим и социально-экономическим контекстом. Однако, несмотря на центральную роль города в понимании сложностей постсоветской России, исследования его языкового ландшафта остаются ограниченными, особенно в последние годы, на фоне моноязычной политики, растущей видимости английского языка и активных миграционных процессов последних десятилетий. Цель данного исследования — проанализировать, как стратифицированный языковой ландшафт Москвы отражает практики многоязычия, коммодификации языка и избирательной видимости языков меньшинств. Корпус из 513 фотографий, собранных в 2022–2024 годах, был проанализирован с использованием этнографического и количественного подходов; в результате были выделены три ключевых уровня языкового ландшафта Москвы. Анализ показывает выборочную и временную допустимость многоязычия в рамках официальной языковой политики, которая в целом подтверждает доминирование русского языка. В то время как семиотическое разнообразие неофициальных вывесок представляет собой низовую альтернативу официальным практикам, языки Центральной Азии имеют крайне ограниченную видимость на официальных вывесках. Результаты подчеркивают необходимость более инклюзивного языкового ландшафта, отражающего разнообразие населения города, а также стабильной официальной политики, поддерживающей амбиции Москвы как глобального мегаполиса.
Ключевые слова: *языковой ландшафт*, *Москва*, *этнографический анализ языкового ландшафта*, *сверхразнообразие*, *коммодификация языка*, *иммиграция*

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1. Introduction

Using the linguistic landscape (henceforth LL) as a toolkit for tracing the complexities of contemporary society has continued in recent years, focusing on such cases as the shifts in LL during the COVID-19 pandemic (Marshall 2021, Hopkyns & van den Hoven 2022), changes in LL in response to political upheaval

(Debras 2019, Byrne & Marcet 2022), and the evolving nature of *virtual linguistic landscapes* captured through geotagged content (Hiippala et al. 2019). Due to its ever-changing nature, influenced by socio-cultural and socio-political factors, LL remains an important semiotic resource for tracking societal transformations and the shifting power dynamics they entail, with the distribution of linguistic signs revealing not only the (in)visibility of certain languages in a given space but also social hierarchies, identity negotiations, and the interplay of local and global influences (Pavlenko 2017, Pütz 2020).

A critical aspect of contemporary changes—whether social, economic, political, or cultural—is their emergence against the backdrop of *superdiversity*, a term coined by Vertovec (2007) that refers to an unprecedented level of population diversity driven by contemporary immigration patterns and globalization. Its roots can be traced back to the post-1989 geopolitical context, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and, a few years later, the Soviet Union, giving rise to new migration patterns and the increasing superdiversification of cities worldwide (Maly 2016). While the superdiversity of contemporary society has made the sociolinguistic realities analyzed in LL studies increasingly complex (Van Mensel et al. 2016), according to Blommaert (2013: 3), this complexity has elevated LL studies to a privileged position for detecting the intricate features of superdiversity, with their unique focus on physical space that is "never no-man's-land, but always somebody's space; a historical space, therefore, full of codes, expectations, norms and traditions; and…power".

The purpose of this study is to examine how the layered linguistic landscape of Moscow reflects patterns of multilingualism, language commodification, and the selective visibility of minority languages in relation to the city's top-down policies and bottom-up practices. As Blommaert (2013) notes, public space is not uniform but inherently layered and segmented, with signs demarcating areas and audiences that range from vast to microscopic. As the largest urban center in Russia, Moscow also represents a stratified public space, shaped by the contrast between monolingual language policies and the multilingual realities of its superdiverse population. In the post-Soviet period, official policies maintained Russian as the dominant language, but the increasing presence of English in both top-down signage (produced and regulated by official institutions, e.g., street signs) and bottom-up signage (grassroots signage created by businesses or individuals, e.g., shop signs) has revealed its commodification as a marker of modernity and global alignment. Simultaneously, minority languages, particularly those of Central Asian migrants, face varying degrees of visibility depending on the socio-economic function of specific spaces.

However, despite the city's central role in understanding the changes and complexities of post-Soviet Russia, research on its linguistic landscape remains limited (cf. Pavlenko 2009, Fedorova & Baranova 2017, Kibrik et al. 2024), particularly in relation to its stratification amid monolingual policies, the increasing visibility of English, and shifting migration patterns in recent decades. By adopting

a blend of ethnographic and quantitative approaches, this study identifies three prominent layers in the LL of Moscow, focusing on how multilingual signage reflects and reproduces power dynamics, cultural commodification, and linguistic hierarchies. Specifically, it addresses the following questions:

1) What are the prominent layers that constitute the LL of Moscow; what roles do they play in the commodification of languages and the creation of multilingual spaces?

2) How do Moscow's top-down policies on the LL influence the visibility or marginalization of minority languages?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to contribute to the growing LL research by uncovering how Moscow's linguistic landscape mediates issues of inclusion, identity, and power in a superdiverse urban environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Ethnographic Linguistic Landscape Analysis

In the early stages of LL studies, a key analytical approach involved examining the geographic distribution of signs to quantify, categorize, and map them (i.e., *distributive approaches*, Van Mensel et al. 2016, e.g., Backhaus 2006, Barni & Bagna 2008, Zhang et al. 2020). Over time, the analytical framework of *geosemiotics* (Scollon & Scollon 2003), which considers the potential meanings produced by public texts in relation to socio-cultural factors and emphasizes *discourse in place*, has gained increasing attention in LL research, with studies (e.g., Leeman & Modan 2009, Blommaert 2013, Rasinger 2014, Lou 2016, for an overview, see Barni & Bagna 2015) increasingly adopting qualitative and ethnographic approaches. Rather than merely counting and mapping multilingual signs, the analysis of signs started to give attention to the symbolic use of colors, icons, images, sounds, and the dynamics of who resides in the area and how people interact with a given sign (Barni & Bagna 2015).

At the same time, the limitations of solely distributive approaches have become more apparent, with suggestions to also adopt approaches that "provide deeper understandings of the context, including the production and reception of signs" (Weber & Horner 2012: 179). In a similar vein, Blommaert and Maly (2016) critiqued the distributive approaches for inadequately explaining how the presence and distribution of languages relate to specific social groups and their interactions within particular spaces. They advocated for a closer examination of "the patterns of social interaction in which people engage in the particular space" (2016: 199), emphasizing the analysis of individual signs to understand their meanings in detail (cf. Scollon & Scollon 2003) and their connections to broader discourses.

It is now well known that in the structuration of LL, several factors are likely at play, as argued by Ben-Rafael (2009), including the aspiration to use of LL items as identity markers for certain groups, and power relations that determine the differential use of linguistic resources in LL. Since it is difficult to grasp an

understanding of how such factors work through quantitative methods alone, Blommaert and Maly (2016) further proposed *ethnographic linguistic landscape analysis* (ELLA, see also Blommaert 2013) as an alternative approach, which pays greater attention to individual signs and their combination with others as distinct layers (Maly 2016). Within this framework, public spaces are viewed as normative environments influenced by power and regulation. Signs reflect the relationships between producers and addressees, conveying normative and regulative messages, which can be deciphered through qualitative in addition to quantitative investigation. Using ELLA, a sign can be analyzed by considering three key 'axes' (Blommaert & Maly 2016: 199–200):

(i) Signs point to the past, revealing the sociolinguistic conditions under which they were produced.
(ii) Signs point to the future, indicating their intended future impact on specific audiences.
(iii) Signs also point to the present, where their placement and relationships with other signs are important.

In extending the analysis of timelines into the past and future, Blommaert and Maly (2016: 200) view signs as "deployed in a field that is replete with overlapping and intersecting norms (…) and not just the norms of a here-and-now, but norms that are of different orders and operate within different historicities". As a case study, they applied ELLA to the urban working-class neighborhood in Ghent, Belgium, uncovering the layered character of the district. Each layer was analyzed in terms of its historical context and the district's demographic composition, which encompasses homeowners, shopkeepers, both long-standing and recent immigrants, and visitors from the city's outskirts. ELLA facilitated an investigation of the layers that remained relatively stable over time as well as those that changed rapidly, revealing how various groups within the district organized the semiotic 'infrastructure' to meet the diverse needs of different communities in a stratified manner.

One key premise of ELLA is its comprehensive approach to public signage, which enables an ethnographic observation that goes beyond mere counting and mapping. Instead, it focuses on understanding who communicates what messages, to whom, and with what intent. In this sense, ELLA can be viewed as oriented towards identifying, through a meaning-making process of individual signs, layers of public signage that reflect the integration of different social groups into a superdiverse environment (see Maly 2016).

Together with these, while ELLA and ethnographic approaches in general have gained increasing attention in LL research, quantitative studies are still, as argued by Amos and Soukup (2020: 56), "capable of capturing and explicating details regarding the appearance and context of LL signs and their function in public space, by their power to throw into relief general patterns and trends of distribution and co-occurrence". Thus, quantitative approaches still remain relevant in LL studies, particularly when considering that a key focus of LL research is to interpret

meaning through what is (in)visible (Blackwood & Amos 2024). Cities are increasingly evolving into "showcases" where languages reflect diverse choices at both individual and policy levels (Barni & Bagna 2015: 9). In these urban environments, where visibility opportunities are limited, and where various languages compete for visibility influenced by a complex range of factors (Ben-Rafael 2009), quantifying which languages are visible and which are not can therefore provide valuable insights into the semiotic structure of a city, although drawing definitive conclusions about ethnolinguistic vitality of the observed languages solely from visibility remains difficult (see Van Mensel et al. 2016).

Aligning with recent studies that have utilized both quantitative and qualitative methodologies (e.g., Suuriniemi & Satokangas 2021, Morlan & Byrne 2023), this paper first draws on the ELLA framework (Blommaert 2013, Blommaert & Maly 2016) to examine how various signs structuralize into distinct layers within the city's LL and how multilingual spaces are created, and second, employs a quantitative, distributive approach to analyze the extent to which individual languages manifest (in)visibility in the city.

2.2. Background information

Fedorova and Baranova (2017) analyzed the sociolinguistic situation in Moscow, showing how cultural values, stereotypes, and linguistic patterns reflect historical and social dynamics. Their study focused on Central Asian labor migrants (a substantial yet linguistically marginalized group), and demonstrated how official institutions uphold Moscow's monolingual image by ignoring migrants' linguistic challenges—evident, for instance, in the fact that official websites intended for non-Russian-speaking migrants are available only in Russian. Moreover, many Muscovites perceive migrants as having 'poor Russian' skills, overlooking that Russian is not their native language.

Historically, Moscow has been the economic and administrative center of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation. Its strategic importance, especially after the 1917 October Revolution, spurred population growth through industrialization and economic diversification. Soviet multiethnic policies attracted diverse ethnic groups, reinforcing Moscow's multicultural nature, with Russian as the lingua franca (Pavlenko 2013). The 1991 Soviet collapse triggered economic and socio-political crises, with high unemployment, poverty, and inter-ethnic conflicts across former Soviet republics. This led to continuous refugee and migrant influxes into Moscow.

Today, Moscow stands as the most populous city in Russia, holding federal significance and representing the largest urban area in the Russian Federation by population. According to the 2010 Census, the population of Moscow was 11,503,501, whereas the Federal State Statistics Service reported a population of 13,010,112 in 2021 (Census 2021). Additionally, according to the Census (2021) representatives of 174 ethnicities, with the vast majority being Russian, reside in Moscow. The overwhelming majority (9,594,657) reported to have Russian as their

mother tongue (Census 2021). At the same time, 237 languages were reported as mother tongues spoken by the residents of Moscow.

The population growth in Moscow and its urban agglomeration is closely linked to migration. Over the past three decades, internal and external migration to Moscow has been particularly active, driven by the city's steady development and the emergence of new sectors such as real estate, finance, and entrepreneurship (see Kibrik et al. 2024). Consequently, Moscow has become economically attractive to both internal migrants and those arriving from abroad, often with limited or no fluency in Russian, thus enhancing its status as a modern and cosmopolitan city (Koryakov 2017). In 2012, Moscow doubled in size due to its geographical expansion to the southwest, incorporating 148,000 hectares of new land and becoming one of the largest cities globally. Therefore, it is crucial to examine Moscow as a superdiverse city where multiple languages are spoken across various ethnic communities in order to address challenges related to majority language (Russian) acquisition, cultural adaptation, and the preservation of ethnic languages and cultures.

Russia's language policy emphasizes the primacy of the Russian language as the state language while also acknowledging the linguistic diversity of its ethnic groups. According to the Constitution of the Russian Federation (1993), republics within the Federation are granted the right to establish their own state languages alongside Russian, supporting the preservation of minority languages. However, the practical implementation of this policy has faced significant challenges. In 2018, new legislation made the study of native languages in public schools optional (Federal Law 2018), raising concerns about the decline of minority languages, many of which are already endangered (Grenoble 2020).

While the Russian government officially supports multilingualism, local policies might not always effectively address the multilingual realities of the population. The LL in Moscow serves as a 'microcosm' of such dynamics, warranting closer examination to understand the interplay between the declared and actual policy, language use, and the (in)visibility of languages in local contexts (see Baranova & Fedorova 2019, Kibrik et al. 2024).

3. Data and methodology

In line with past LL research (Ben-Rafael 2009, Blommaert 2013, Van Mensel et al. 2016, Amos & Soukup 2020, Pütz 2020), we analyse the LL through the concepts of *power*, *identity*, and *inclusion*/*exclusion*. From this perspective, a language's *power* is understood as its differential capacity to claim space and visibility in the urban landscape. This capacity can be assessed through several markers, including the language's presence across a range of contexts and geographical locations; the materiality of the sign, whether fixed and expensive (e.g., a monument) or temporary and inexpensive (e.g., a handwritten note); and its positioning relative to other languages in a multilingual sign (based on code hierarchy, colour, and font size).

We understand *identity* in the LL as negotiated and projected through deliberate linguistic choices on signage. This negotiation can involve constructing an ethnic brand identity for commercial appeal or asserting a migrant community's cultural presence in a location. How a language is used, and the extent to which its arrangement targets a general versus a specific audience, can reveal what *identity* a sign prioritizes indexing. Analysing these dynamics of *power* and *identity* allows us to better understand mechanisms of *inclusion* and *exclusion* in the LL. This is especially possible by contrasting top-down and bottom-up representations. For example, if a language has a notable presence in bottom-up signage (demonstrating the power to be visible and/or reflecting specific identity markers) but is absent from top-down signage, this may indicate its institutional exclusion.

The *power* of a language and the spectrum of *identities* it performs in a LL can be better understood by considering its varied and heterogeneous reality. We therefore analyse variety of contexts, each carrying different significance. For example, ethnic restaurants may reveal community-level power and identity dynamics, malls may reveal commercial-level implications, and migration centres may reveal institutional-level implications. In our analysis of language displays, we therefore pay close attention to the role of specific contextual details.

3.1. Sampling strategy and data collection

Moscow's metro stations are useful in mapping the areas of interest in a systematic manner. Beyond serving as transportation hubs, they function as important socio-geographic markers that include areas with different functions: central hubs such as Arbatskaya and Tverskaya, residential areas like Kon'kovo and Novye Cheryomushki, commercial centers including Belorusskaya and Kievskaya, and peripheral districts such as Vnukovo and Kotelniki.

To ensure geographical and socio-economic diversity, photographs were systematically collected from 31 different metro stations (see Appendix I for a map of Moscow metro stations**)**. This sampling strategy enabled us to capture both high-density central spaces and lower-density peripheral areas, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the LL across Moscow's urban fabric. Each data collector was assigned to a specific region (north-east, north-west, south-east, or south-west) and tasked with gathering data around metro stations within their designated area. The primary sampling criterion was to identify and photograph multilingual signs that stood out and held potential interest for qualitative analysis. Underrepresented languages in the LL were photographed whenever encountered, while less emphasis was placed on English, a commonly observed language in the LL. Data collectors were instructed to photograph English signs, especially if they were relevant for qualitative analysis (e.g., multilingual English signs or those involving stylization, etc.). Monolingual Russian signs were not photographed.

A dataset of 513 photos was compiled between 2022 and 2024 by the authors, with assistance from six master's linguistics students. Students participated in data collection as part of the research project 'The Linguistic Landscape of Moscow'

within the broader HSE University 'Big Project: Language Practices'. The photographs were first systematically sorted into folders based on their classification as either top-down or bottom-up signage, resulting in 253 top-down and 260 bottom-up photographs.

Top-down signs were important for gaining insights into official and institutional contributions and language policies, while bottom-up signs were of interest for understanding grassroots and commercial practices, and the negotiation of multilingualism in public spaces. Together, these categories provided a lens to examine the interplay between formal authority and everyday linguistic agency in the city's public semiotic structure.

3.2. Data analysis

A mixed-methods approach was employed to analyze the dataset, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to unravel the complexities of language practices. The quantitative component provided a macro-level understanding of language use in bottom-up signs (N = 260) by systematically coding and analyzing them. This process involved identifying the languages present in each bottom-up sign (listed in order of appearance), noting the closest metro station to the sign's location, and recording its intercardinal direction relative to the city center. Additionally, presence of stylistic elements such as the use of Greek-inspired Cyrillic script or transliteration were also documented to assess how frequently the semiotic strategy of stylization was employed in the linguistic landscape.

Complementing this, the qualitative analysis focused on both top-down and bottom-up signs, examining what messages individual signs convey, whom they address, who lives in or visits the sign's location, and, when taken together with signs that share these characteristics, what distinctive layers do they constitute. In the determination of similarities of the sings, features such as text stylization, font and color variations, transliteration practices, and the presence of multiple languages on signage were also taken into account. Drawing on the ELLA framework (Blommaert 2013, Blommaert & Maly 2016, Maly 2016), it was acknowledged that signs point to Moscow's history, present, and future. Therefore, the interpretation of the meanings conveyed by signs was conducted with due consideration not only of their present conditions but also of historical factors and potential future impacts, whether socio-cultural, political, or economic.

By combining these qualitative and quantitative approaches, the aim was to bridge large-scale patterns with localized sociolinguistic practices, capturing the layered dynamics of Moscow's LL within its superdiverse urban context. The authors maintained close communication with other data collectors, exchanging field notes, photos, and ideas about what certain signs index and which layers stand out in the LL before deciding which individual signs and layers merit closer focus.

4. Results

4.1. English in Top-Down and Bottom-Up Signage

English plays a prominent role in Moscow's multilingual public signage, appearing in a wide range of contexts and ranking as the most visible language after Russian in the city (Fig. 1). From small stickers on lampposts and advertisements on billboards to signs for shops and restaurants, it is visibly integrated into the city's landscape. Observed signs often combine both Russian and English texts, feature English words transliterated into Cyrillic script, or, in some cases, present information exclusively in English using the Latin alphabet.

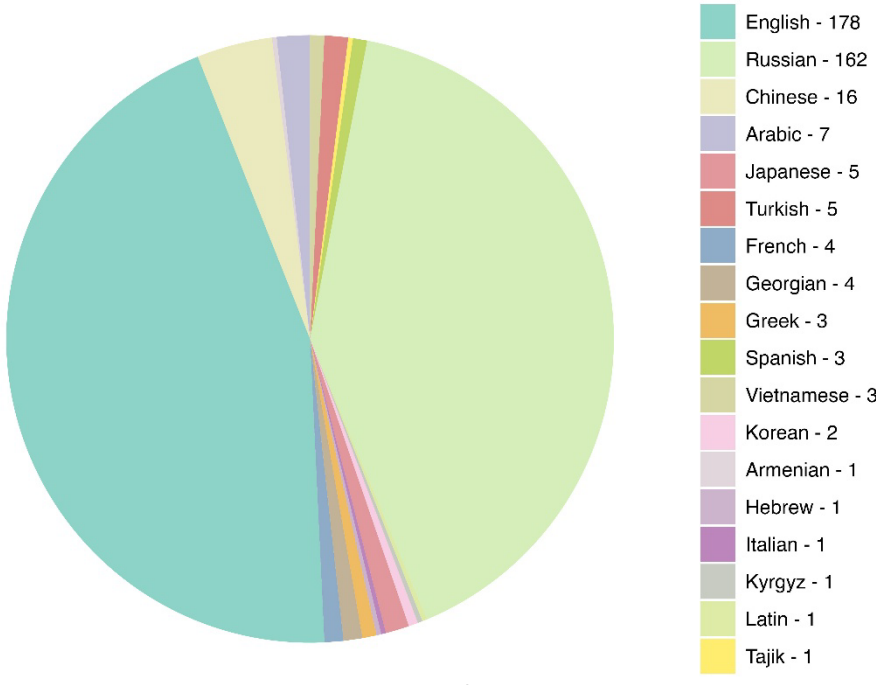

Figure 1. Languages present in bottom-up signage

A key moment in the growing visibility of English in Moscow's linguistic landscape occurred during the 2018 FIFA World Cup, a major international football event held every four years. In preparation for the influx of international tourists, authorities introduced English translations on metro navigation boards, and metro services began including English-language announcements. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, these announcements were replaced by Russian-language safety messages (see Baranova 2023) and were not reinstated afterward, indicating how the presence of English in the official signage of the city is susceptible to fluctuation depending on external circumstances.

Despite this, English has retained a relatively consistent presence in certain areas, such as on the 'blue' top-down street signs, where English translations accompany Russian text (Fig. 2). Typically, all directions in these signs are

translated into English, appearing below the corresponding Russian text, though in smaller font and not in bold. These translations are generally of high quality, though occasional inconsistencies arise — for example, the use of British English on one sign and American English on another directing to the same location. Street names are presented exclusively in Russian, while estimated walking times to the indicated locations are shown in the format 'X min'.

Figure 2. A typical top-down 'blue' sign commonly found throughout Moscow

In addition to the top-down use of English, bottom-up signage has secured a prominent place for English, with many local and foreign shops incorporating it into their signs. Among the shop signs we observed, English consistently stood out as the most commonly used non-Russian language, functioning as a *commodity* in the private sector. In many areas, one can encounter almost exclusively English signs, despite being surrounded by Russian-speaking customers and additional informational signage in Russian. This contrast is illustrated in Figure 3, where English is used for shop names, signaling its popularity and marketability, while essential information, such as the locations of nursing rooms and ATMs, is provided exclusively in Russian.

Figure 3. Use of English in Central Children's Store

The picture was taken at the Central Children's Store on Lubyanka Street, a renowned and historic department store in Moscow, Russia, primarily dedicated to children's goods. Originally opened in 1957 under the name Detsky Mir (Children's World), the store became the largest children's department store in the Soviet Union. In 2008, it was closed for renovation and later reopened in 2015. The renovation introduced an international retail environment while preserving certain elements of its Soviet-era design. As a result, it now functions as both a high-end commercial space and a symbol of Russia's transition from state-controlled socialism to a market-driven economy.

This transition is particularly evident in its linguistic landscape. The building, characterized by its Soviet architectural style, still displays the store's name in large Cyrillic letters above it: *Центральный детский магазин* (Tsentral'nyi detskyi magazin / Central Children's Store). However, once inside, visitors are predominantly surrounded by English-language shop names. Given that the primary audience consists of children and their parents, the prevalence of English can be seen as indexing the store's alignment with global consumer culture. However, in recent years, this alignment might be said to have been disrupted, at least to some

degree. Previously, there was Hamleys, a famous British toy retailer in the Central Children's Store, but it was closed in 2023, due to sanctions imposed on Russia. This represents only one effect stemming from economic restrictions on the linguistic landscape, although there are likely to be other changes arising from it.

The presence of English in Moscow's linguistic landscape is not limited to central areas but extends across a diverse range of locations throughout the city. In many instances, English features prominently in the semiotics deployed, as illustrated by the example of the outer window of 'SO FAR KEBAB' (Fig. 4). Located on Myasnitskaya Street (a historic area in central Moscow, once home to aristocrats, elite manufacturers, and merchants), the shop primarily employs English to present its Middle Eastern street food offerings to potential customers. On the left side of the window, a large 'OPEN' sign immediately draws attention. Below it, the 'BUSINESS HOURS' section details the operational schedule, with the days of the week also listed exclusively in English.

Centrally positioned on the door, the most prominent text, displayed in the largest font, is the restaurant's name: 'SO FAR KEBAB'. The adverbial phrase 'SO FAR', combined with 'KEBAB', creates an interesting branding strategy. Unlike typical restaurant names, which are often straightforward (e.g., 'Best Kebab' or 'Tasty Kebab') and focus directly on the product or experience, 'SO FAR KEBAB' introduces an element of ambiguity and conveys a casual, laid-back tone.

Below the restaurant's name, displayed in English, we see Hebrew and Arabic text positioned in the lower left and right corners, respectively, in smaller font sizes. These elements are placed above a longer inscription in Russian, "ближневосточный стритфуд" ('Blizhnevostochnyi stritfud' / 'Middle Eastern street food'), which provides a direct, comprehensible description of the restaurant's offerings for Russian-speaking customers. This Russian phrase serves a clear functional role, intended to address Russian-speaking customers (who are potentially the primary target audience) and to ensure that the restaurant's offerings are clearly understood amid the multilingual storefront display.

In contrast, the Hebrew and Arabic lexemes appear to be more symbolic than functional, aligning with the restaurant's Middle Eastern theme rather than serving as practical communication. The Arabic text contains the letters ط-ع-ح, which do not form a recognizable word. It seems likely that the intended sequence was ط-ع-م, forming the word طعم (Ta'am, 'taste'), with an error substituting the letter ح (Haa) for م (Meem). On the opposite side, the Hebrew word טרי (Ta-ree), meaning 'fresh', is vocalized with vowel markings. While such markings are typically omitted in everyday Hebrew writing, as native speakers can interpret the word without them, they are often included in formal settings like education, religion, or literature. This addition of vowel markings creates a juxtaposition: the formality in Hebrew contrasts with the informal tone conveyed by the restaurant's English name. However, given the typological error in the Arabic text, it is plausible to suggest that this formality in Hebrew was unintentional. The use of Hebrew, Arabic, and English adds symbolic value, even though the owners may not possess proficiency

in Hebrew or Arabic. Considering the functional message in Russian and the high visibility of English in the display, it appears that the primary target audience consists of Russian-speaking individuals, with English-speaking tourists as a secondary group.

Figure 4. Signage of the 'So Far Kebab' Restaurant

The use of English, while serving to address potential customers from other countries, often indexes a laid-back, friendly, and informal tone at the same time. This indexical value becomes more apparent when we zoom in on other signs. At the entrance of a bar located in a residential area, a sign reads, "Warning: No Stupid People". English is also commonly employed to convey a shop's dog-friendly policy or to express solidarity through English phrases as part of a commercial strategy (e.g., "#WE LOVE FRESH" in a supermarket sign, where the use of "we" creates a sense of solidarity between the business and its customers, and the hashtag evokes the feel of a social media trend). Beyond its instrumental function, English serves as a means to *add flavor* to signage, evoking a sense of global appeal, high quality product served/sold, and contemporaneity (see Appendix II for additional example). The fact that newer 'blue' signs in the city's top-down signage still

incorporate English translation alongside Russian texts points to an intention to sustain the city's orientation toward internationalization and maintain its touristic appeal. Similarly, new bottom-up establishments continue to make significant use of English, which suggests that it plays an important role in marketing and is expected to remain a desirable and recognizable linguistic resource for target audiences.

4.2. Semiotic diversity in bottom-up signage

The influence of English appears to have permeated the signage throughout the city, serving both its instrumental value in addressing a broader range of customers and its indexical capabilities in creating a friendly and modern atmosphere that helps signage to stand out. However, Moscow's linguistic landscape is shaped by more layers that reflect the city's multicultural dynamics. A substantial part of these layers consists of signs from local restaurants catering to diverse ethnic groups and customers interested in their cuisines, including, but not limited to, Uzbek, Greek, Georgian, and Chinese restaurants. In this analysis, these restaurants are grouped under a single layer defined by diversity, challenging the dominance of English in similar bottom-up signage contexts.

With their widespread presence across Moscow, the city's multicultural landscape is highly reflected in the signage of these restaurants. These signs often use distinctive colors and linguistic features to create strong associations with the cultural identity of specific ethnic groups. They cater to two distinct audiences: ethnic migrants seeking a sense of familiarity and local customers interested in exploring the cuisines of neighboring regions.

Among these establishments, restaurants called *Чайхана* (*Chaikhana*, 'teahouse') stand out as prominent cultural hubs, particularly for migrants from Central Asia, offering menus centered on Central Asian cuisines. Despite the similarity in names, these establishments are not part of a unified chain; they operate independently, offering varying price ranges, with many providing reasonably priced meals. Inside, diners often encounter a mix of Central Asian ethnic groups, and it is often possible to hear Uzbek, Krygz, Azerbaijan, and other languages spoken. The interiors of Chaikhana restaurants are richly decorated with traditional elements reflective of Central Asian cultures, accompanied by regionally inspired music. As such, Chaikhana restaurants serve as places for representing the cultures of Central Asia and fostering a sense of connection and belonging for migrants.

The role of religion emerges as an important connecting factor for the different ethnic groups visiting the Chaikhana restaurants. It is not uncommon to be greeted with the Arabic phrase 'As-salamu alaykum', especially if the staff perceives you as a member of the Muslim community. Often, the symbolic value of Arabic is immediately apparent, as demonstrated by the *Чайхана Sabr* restaurant (Fig. 5), located in a southeastern district of Moscow, far from the city center. This district is known for accommodating residents with lower socio-economic status and offering more affordable housing compared to other areas of Moscow. It was

formerly an industrial area with major factories, most of which closed down after the fall of the Soviet Union. In addition to Cyrillic and Latin scripts, the restaurant's sign features the Arabic alphabet. The word *Sabr*, meaning 'patience' in Arabic, is often regarded as an important element of Islamic teachings. Arabic's symbolic value therefore assumes a prominent role in the linguistic landscape, while also reflecting the unifying influence of religion among Central Asian migrants. The restaurant also prominently uses green in both the sign and interior lighting, which appears to be a deliberate attempt to reflect Islamic identity. Green is frequently used in Islamic art and architecture and is often associated with Islamic history and symbolism, as seen, for instance, in the flag designs of many Arab countries (Podeh 2011).

Figure 5. Signage of the 'Chaikhana Sabr' Restaurant

Other colors are also strategically used to evoke different national flags. For instance, many Greek restaurants feature signage that displays highly stylized Cyrillic letters resembling Greek script, complemented by blue and white colors reminiscent of the Greek flag. Figure 6 showcases an example of a Greek restaurant whose sign not only semiotically references Greek culture but also communicates

a direct message through its name, *ГРЕКИ ЗДЕСЬ* (‘Greki zdes’ / ‘Greeks are here’). The stylization extends beyond the sign to the restaurant’s menu on top, which mimics Greek lettering, and even to the refrigerator surfaces inside, adorned with an image of a classic Ancient Greek statue holding bubble gum, imparting a postmodern touch. The restaurant is located in a mall on Vernadskogo Avenue, far from tourist areas and the city center. The multicultural restaurant layer appears to be present throughout the city, not confined to the center or specific districts.

Figure 6. Signage of the ‘Greki zdes’ Restaurant

In a similar fashion, Georgian restaurants also feature stylized Cyrillic letters that resemble Georgian script, often incorporating red and white colors to evoke the Georgian flag. Similarly, many Chinese-inspired signs in Russian feature intricate, angular strokes that mimic the visual rhythm of Chinese characters. They often use red and white—colors deeply symbolic in Chinese culture and associated with the Chinese national palette. Figure 7 presents a collection of stylized signs from various restaurants in Moscow. Although the signs are written in Russian, they mimic the visual characteristics of scripts associated with different languages, signaling the restaurants’ connection to specific cultures and seamlessly integrating

them into Moscow's linguistic landscape while also appealing to the cosmopolitan consumer. Similarly, menus in such ethnic restaurants often feature stylized text as well, but they are still predominantly in Russian, which may suggest that Russian-speaking clients are the primary target audience.

Figure 7. Various Restaurant Signs with Stylized Designs

22,3% of the bottom-up signs were observed to have stylized texts in a way that connotes the script of a language or different cultural elements. Through their stylization, such signs demonstrate how linguistic landscapes are not static reflections of language policy but dynamic spaces where cultural, economic, and political forces intersect. The stylized adaptations in the given examples show the fluidity of language as a *resource* for constructing meaning, identity, and value in a superdiverse urban context like Moscow.

Figure 8 illustrates the spatial distribution of different languages (excluding stylizations such as Greek-looking Russian texts) spotted in the bottom-up linguistic landscape across and near various metro stations in Moscow, demonstrating the stratification of linguistic practices within Moscow's urban landscape. The map reveals clusters of multilingual signage in central hubs, where English frequently dominates as a lingua franca, and contrasts them with peripheral zones, where minority and regional languages gain at least some visibility. As shown in the figure, Russian, English, and Chinese appear across a wide range of metro stations and therefore span different socio-economic zones. Other languages, however, are limited to a small number of stations and remain largely absent especially from central locations. Similar to how the use of English in bottom-up signage reflects an expectation of its continued desirability among future consumers, the presence of other non-Russian languages indicates an anticipation of ongoing migration from different cultural backgrounds. However, their limited distribution, confined to selected locations, points to a more niche appeal targeting

specific demographic segments. Wider use of Chinese across multiple socio-economic zones, on the other hand, signals an intention to engage future audiences on a larger scale, likely driven by economic or geopolitical considerations as well.

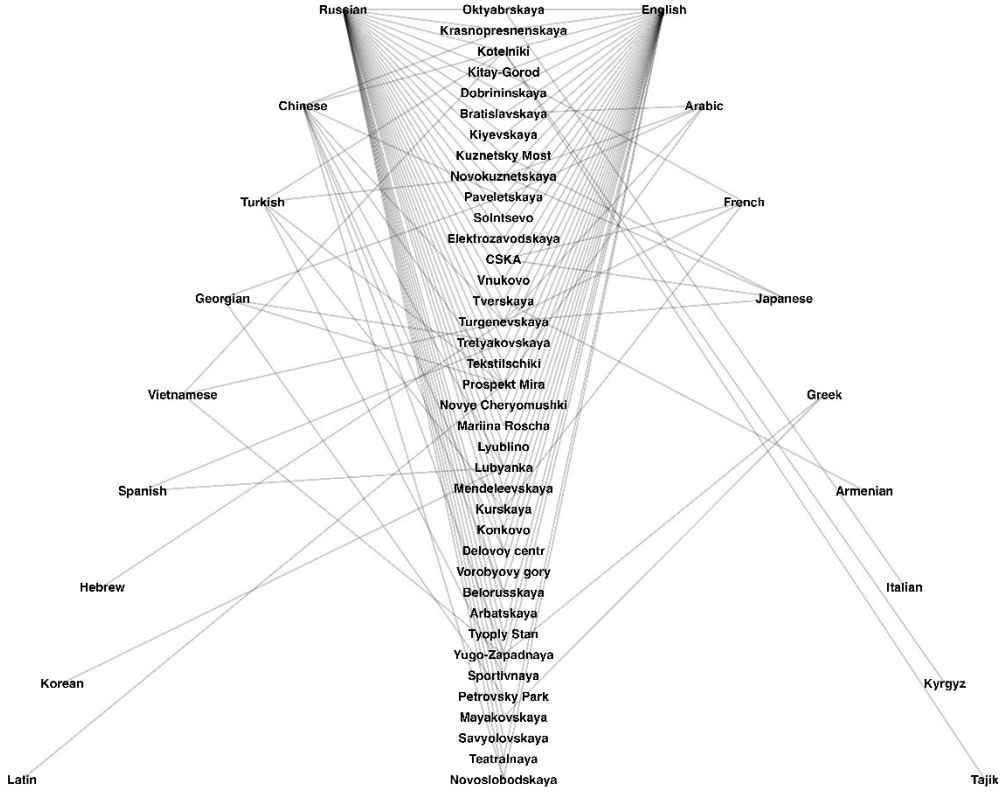

Figure 8. Languages in Bottom-Up Signage Across Places in Close Proximity to Metro Stations in Moscow

4.3. Multilingual top-down signage layer

In addition to the prevalent use of English in street signs and information boards within metro stations, Moscow's top-down signage occasionally incorporates multilingual elements especially designed to address migrants from Central Asian countries. These signs typically maintain Russian at the top, using a larger font size, with one or two Central Asian languages appearing below. While the standard red "No Entrance" template, commonly seen at metro entrances throughout the city, typically features Russian and English, Figure 9 illustrates a variation where Russian is paired with Tajik and Uzbek instead. Below the red template, however, Russian and English still appear, although conveying a different message: "Hold the door".

Figure 9. Top-Down Sign with Tajik and Uzbek Elements

The sign is located in the Lesoparkovaya metro station, situated relatively far from the city center. This station is frequently used by migrants, including those from Central Asian countries, as a transit point to the Multifunctional Migration Center, which is about an hour's bus ride away. Following amendments to the federal law *On the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens in the Russian Federation* (Federal Law 2022), all foreign students and employees staying in Russia for over three months are required to undergo medical examinations, fingerprinting, and biometric photographing. The Multifunctional Migration Center provides these mandatory procedures, along with other migration-related services, making it an important location for migrants. The information board in Figure 10 also includes Russian, Tajik, and Uzbek, providing details about various bus routes, including the route to the Multifunctional Migration Center.

Notably, this sign also excludes English. The selection of languages seems insufficient, as not all migrants are familiar with Russian, Tajik, or Uzbek; many come from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, China, and African countries. Also, a significant portion of migrants visiting the migration center are students from around the world, for whom information in English would be useful. In some cases, meso-level initiatives address such gaps, as seen in the sign inside a bus in Figure 11. The bus route operates in Drozhzhino, a southern area known for its relatively low housing costs and home to many Brazilian migrants. The sign seems to have been created by the bus driver in response to instances where passengers attempted to pay with cash instead of a card. Its tone is rather forceful, with large, colorful fonts and the use of exclamation marks. In addition to the warning in Russian and English, the sign includes a Spanish translation rather than Portuguese or Brazilian Portuguese.

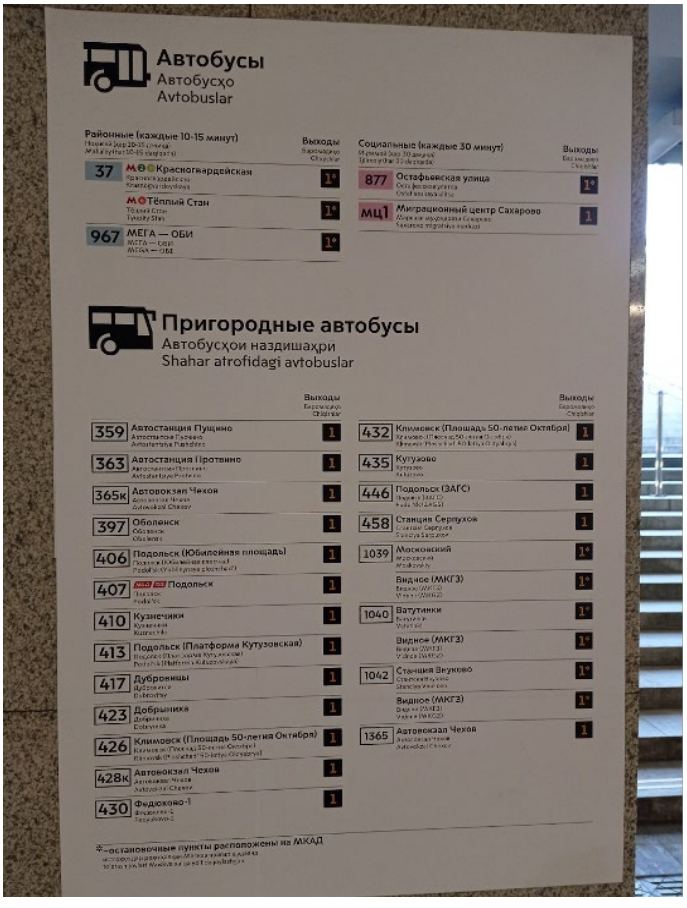

Figure 10. Top-Down Sign without English

Figure 11. Private Bus Sign Featuring Spanish and English

Overall, the analysis of top-down signage across various locations in Moscow reveals a strong emphasis on Russian-English signs. While there are instances where additional languages are included, their use remains limited in both scope and geographic distribution. Given that signs featuring languages other than Russian and English are rare, located in specific areas, and include only a limited number of migrants' languages, Moscow's language policy does not appear to be prioritizing diversification of top-down signage, and different linguistic communities are not envisioned as major target audiences for future city-wide communication efforts.

5. Discussion

The results of this study reveal the LL of Moscow as a dynamic and layered semiotic field, shaped by competing forces of its top-down policies, globalizing trends (or inevitable pressures), and grassroots linguistic creativity. Through a qualitative analysis informed by ELLA and a distributive approach, the analysis identified three prominent layers in Moscow's LL, each reflecting distinct socio-political and economic dynamics that intersect to shape the city's linguistic identity.

The first layer, *English in top-down and bottom-up signage*, underscores its widespread presence in the city's linguistic landscape and its role as a lingua franca for international audiences. Since the 2018 FIFA World Cup, policymakers have embraced rather than resisted English in public signage. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, English-language metro announcements were replaced with Russian and minority languages (see Baranova 2023) and were not reinstated. This suggests that English in official signage is subject to constant regulation and may be transient. While its presence expanded after 2018, it could just as easily recede. Thus, top-down multilingualism in Moscow remains selective, driven by external pressures rather than a lasting policy shift.

The transient nature of top-down signage aside, bottom-up signage offers a different trajectory, providing a sustained and widespread visibility of English. The rapid and widespread integration of English in bottom-up signage reflects Russia's transition from state-controlled socialism to a market-driven economy. This shift is exemplified by the Central Children's Store (Fig. 3), the largest children's department store in the Soviet Union, which has retained its historical building and its focus on primarily selling children's products, while its internal linguistic signage has increasingly incorporated English. The visibility of English appears to be spanning all across the city (Fig. 8). In addition to its commercial value, using English in shop signs (whether in tourist attractions or residential areas) often conveys a friendly and informal tone (e.g., Fig. 4), which appears to be one of the reasons why English is so widely featured in bottom-up signage.

Amid the widespread visibility of Russian and English in the city's landscape, the second layer, *semiotic diversity in bottom-up signage*, reveals Moscow's superdiverse texture. Numerous restaurant signs showcase distinctive colors and linguistic features, fostering strong associations with the cultural identities of

various ethnic groups (see also Jaworski & Thurlow 2010). These stylized signs, as seen in Figure 7, exemplify the semiotic creativity within Moscow's bottom-up linguistic landscape. They demonstrate how language is not merely a vehicle for communication but a *resource* for constructing and projecting cultural and commercial identities. Such signs operate within Blommaert's (2013) layered semiotics, where temporal, spatial, and social meanings converge. Temporally, these signs evoke the cultural histories and traditions of their respective regions (countries). Spatially, they situate these traditions within the globalized urban context of Moscow. Socially, they engage consumers by appealing to their potential attraction to authenticity and cosmopolitan eating experiences. However, this stylization also raises questions about the reduction of complex cultural identities into commodified symbols, reflecting broader dynamics of linguistic commodification (Heller 2010, Kelly-Holmes 2014). The Greek, Georgian, Chinese, and other-language inspired signs appear to commodify their cultural associations, transforming them into marketable symbols that attempt to enhance the restaurants' appeal as a form of clientele attraction.

By using Russian text to mimic other scripts, these signs often illustrate the negotiation between local linguistic norms and global cultural references. This negotiation can be seen as a challenge to the city's top-down language policies, showcasing how bottom-up actors creatively navigate linguistic diversity. In this way, Moscow's superdiversity is most apparent in these signs, which are distributed across the city, from touristic areas to 'sleeping neighborhoods' (spal'nye raiony) far from the center. The semiotics employed by these restaurants seem to evoke a sense of familiarity and solidarity, particularly for specific ethnic groups, such as migrants from Central Asian countries. Through their signage and interior designs, these establishments offer an alternative space for Moscow's migrant population.

The third layer emerges in instances where top-down signage incorporates not only Russian or English but also other languages, particularly those of Central Asian origin. Compared to the first and second layers, this layer is weaker, as such signs remain relatively rare. The occasional appearance of Central Asian languages, as seen in multilingual metro signs, for example, near the Multifunctional Migration Center, underscores the pragmatic, yet (geographically) limited, response to migration-driven linguistic realities. These signs are geographically constrained and fail to exhaustively address the linguistic needs of Moscow's diverse population, excluding languages spoken by other significant migrant groups, predominantly, from Central Asia, such as Kyrgyz or Tajik [1]. This uneven representation reinforces a hierarchy of languages, with Russian firmly at the top and others relegated to (geographically-restricted) functional or symbolic roles in specific contexts. The role of bottom-up signage in creating spaces of belonging for

[1] Along these lines the State Duma passed the law in the first reading on December 10, 2024, and in the second and third readings the following day on the prohibition of admitting migrant children to schools without knowledge of the Russian language. The law is set to take effect on April 1, 2025 (Ministry of Education 2024).

migrant communities, on the other hand, offers a partial remedy to limited visibility of these languages.

Thus, minority languages frequently lack visibility and remain underrepresented (Fig. 8) in Moscow's LL, which can, in turn, affect their perceived value and long-term vitality (Blackwood & Tufi 2015). Their vulnerability is likely to persist, especially considering that efforts to preserve linguistic diversity are often hindered by limited educational opportunities, insufficient institutional support, and a lack of teaching materials (see Grenoble & Whaley 2006, Zoumpalidis et al. 2024).

As this study is limited to a single city, its findings cannot be generalized to language policies across Russia. Further research comparing top-down and bottom-up linguistic landscapes in various regions is needed to understand the broader patterns, trends, and efficacy of national language policy, which would provide policymakers with more critical insights.

6. Conclusion

Moscow's linguistic landscape is a reflection of the city's language policies and its dynamic space where globalization and grassroots creativity intersect. It serves as a site of cultural negotiation and demonstrates the evolving connections between language, space, and identity in a superdiverse city. Through the identification of three key semiotic layers, this study has shown how multilingual signage in Moscow indexes power, identity, and inclusion/exclusion.

The findings of this study therefore highlight the importance of considering the linguistic landscape as an important site for promoting social equity and cultural inclusion in this rapidly developing urban environment. Policy recommendations based on this study can help create a more inclusive linguistic landscape in Moscow. In particular, the city's policies could encourage more consistent multilingual signage, especially in tourist areas and districts with large migrant populations. The presence of bottom-up and meso-level initiatives points to gaps that targeted policies could address. Recognizing diverse linguistic needs could foster a more inclusive urban space, support the vitality of marginalized languages, and eventually help preserve the city's cultural diversity. Future research may explore how top-down policies and bottom-up practices interact, thus, infirming the development of policy frameworks that could balance institutional accommodation of diversity with local communities' ways of expressing themselves. Expanding LL studies to cover more districts could also reveal additional layers of Moscow's complex linguistic landscape.

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