Linguistic Landscape Practice: The case of Language Status in Oromia, Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study of Linguistic Landscape (LL) examined how languages on signs in Oromia towns reflect the actual status of competing languages. The specific objectives were identifying the status of the languages in the language use domains of governmental and nongovernmental signs; the methods involved in marking status by the LL actors and the role each plays in the construction of the linguistic landscape. The study was conducted within the framework of pragmatism employing mixed methods. The urban environments (Adama, Jimma, and Sebeta) and key informants for the interview were purposively selected.   Photographic data of signs (monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual, 1500 in total) were collected from downtown areas. Then, the data were organized and analyzed using an analytical tool, geosemiotics.   According to the data, the status of languages in the LL as they appear in public space, and how this is reflected on signs, Amharic, the federal working language, has significant visibility and more dominance in the whole semiotic characteristics than Afan Oromo, the official working language in the towns and in the region.   The status markers of languages on signs are the presence and absence of languages from the signs, de-emphasizing of language/s in relation to the other language/s, and the amount of information provided in each language on the signs. Hence, the government should practically reflect the equality of languages, and the official status of the regional language should have fair visibility at least in the context of the region.

*Keywords: /*Afan Oromo/Amharic/Geosemiotics/Language/Linguistic landscape/Status/

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the Study

The study of Linguistic Landscape (LL, hence forth) refers to "research about the presence, representation, meanings, and interpretation of language displayed in public places, [and this] has become a dynamic area of research in the past decade" (Shohamy, 2012, p. 538). With this basic scope, this study focuses on Oromia national regional state in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Post 1991 Ethiopia is officially a multilingual country which [is] divided in to decentralized federal states that are administered in their own preferred official working languages. Subsequently, many of the languages of the country that had been remained oral for long time were transformed into written form including public spaces. Since then (the regime change), language use in public spaces, among other domains, has become a concern in Ethiopia, not only for communication on signs, but also for language status and ideological concerns. According to Landry and Bourhis (1997), language selection in the LL has an informative and a symbolic purpose within the environment where it is used.

The focus of this study is the national regional state of Oromia, the largest federal states of Ethiopia that also includes the heart of the country, Finfinnee (Addis Ababa). Finfinnee is the official name of Addis Ababa, as used by Oromia government [the national regional state of Oromia] and the Oromo people. From the total population of Ethiopia, Oromia's share is 40% (Lanza & Hirut, 2009, p. 192; 2014, p. 57). The Regional State of Oromia, is located between 3 and 15 degrees North latitude, and 33 and 40 degrees East longitude (Jeylan, 2006, p. 256). Oromia is further divided into zones, special zones, and towns. The three towns (Adama, Jimma, and Sabeta) selected for this study are found in this region. They are the only towns with the status of specialzone in the region because they are more urbanized.

The official working language of Oromia is Afan Oromo. It has also become a medium of instruction in elementary schools (kindergarten to grade 8) and college of teachers' education. Afan Oromo is also taught as a school subject from kindergarten to preparatory level. Moreover, Afan Oromo teachers have been trained starting from Diploma level to Masters in different colleges under the region and in the universities of the country. A PhD program is also underway at Wollega, Addis Ababa, and Jimma Universities. Afan Oromo is written with a modified Latin alphabet, called Qubee, which was believed more suitable to represent the Oromo phonemic system (Amanuel, 2012, p. 219).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

How much languages on signs reflect the status of languages, and how the actual language practice in LL represent the true intention of the Oromia regional government needs investigation. Whatever is declared concerning the use of languages by government, the actual practice cannot be illuminated without looking into what is visible and practiced on the ground. Hence, government and other key actors in the LL practices and the results of the practice are worth studying. Almost no attempt has been made to analyze the interaction between signs and sign owners and LL actors particularly in Oromia regional state, in Ethiopia. At global level, as Gorter (2005) observes, one of the main research interests of many scholars should be on language status and multilingualism issues from the perspective of LL. Though the study of LL in Ethiopia has started a decade ago (Lanza and Hirut, 2009), so far no one has focused on how the status of languages are illuminated. Therefore, this may help other researchers to take this direction in other national regional status where the official working language is different. In this regard, the few studies conducted in the area of LL in Ethiopia have centered on ideology, attitude, indexing modernity and ethno-linguistic vitality and policy gap.

At Oromia Regional level, a few studies have attempted to investigate sociolinguistic practices based on the new approach of LL, which is objectively investigating the status of languages as observed out in urban environments. Alemayehu and Takele (2016) attempted to investigate the ethno-linguistic vitality of the languages used on signs in the LL of some selected towns Adama, Jimma, and Sabeta towns, which are also the focuses of the current study. However, the researchers' focus is far from the current one. The emphasis of the current study is on the status of the languages in the LL of these towns as used by individual business owners, government, religious institutions, and other bodies, regardless of the official recognition of the status of the languages in these specific towns and the whole region.

In fact, the issue of ethno-linguistic vitality is about the strength of a language investigated from the perspective of social psychology directly related to language maintenance and shift of sociolinguistics. Hence, Alemayehu and Takele (2016) used ethno-linguistic vitality score and critical discourse (material discourse) analysis as an analytical tool to determine the languages in a better position to withstand language shift in these dynamic urban environments. On the other hand, the study on language status based on LL aims to investigate the actual status (de jury) of the languages in the selected towns, based on geosemiotics as an analytical tool as explained below under section 2. This analytical tool is the latest development in sociolinguistics and it is used to investigate all semiotic aggregates in the LL, not just languages visible on the signs. Besides, the current study went beyond the region to collect qualitative data and involved the Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism and Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau to get insights on their role in shaping the status of languages in the LLs. Therefore, the current study differs from the former one in its objective, (ethno-linguistic vitality vs. language status), scope, theoretical framework, methodology, and slightly the study area.

Furthermore, Alemayehu and Wondwosen (2019) investigated the LL of the same cities focusing on policy discord in relation to the actual practice. As policy document for data, the Federal government and the Oromia regional constitutions stating about language use were used. Particularly, the federal outdoor advertisement proclamation (endorsed in 2012) that precisely puts direction on the how of language use on signs in the LL was the core of the data analysis. As theoretical framework, sociological theories, particularly presentation of self, good reasons, power relations, and collective identity were used. The finding of the study revealed that there was policy discord and incongruence in the cities. Yet, there is no study that used signs and other relevant data sources to investigate the status of languages as objectively visible from signs.

This study is therefore intended to fill such a research gap. It analyzes the languages on signs and uncovers the status of languages in the towns, vis-à-vis the official working language of the region, Oromia. Based on the background issues and gaps presented earlier, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is the status of the languages on signs in the towns as reflected both on government and non-government signs?

2. How does language use on signs in the towns reflect the status of different languages?

3. How are the regional and the federal governments playing their role to implement status of languages as per the policy?

2. Conceptual Framework

Scholars of language planning usually distinguish between two different types of language planning. One that is concerned with improvingthe language itself (corpus planning), and the second that focuses on the context of language use (status planning). The status planning goes with the relative position of one language in relation to another language. In the context of LL, the status of languages is examined from the languages practically observed in a given environment, as a true language policy is reflected not in its management, but in its practice (Spolsky, 2004). As a result, "The status of languages has therefore been regularly a reason of political debates" (Marten, Landina, Poseiko & Murinska, 2012, p. 290).

The texts on the signs, constructing up the LL may perhaps be monolingual, bilingual or multilingual, revealing the variety of the linguistic groups inhabiting in a specified area or region. Yet, preferring one code over the other is not at all the outcome of a random result (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Therefore, the linguistic code preferences and visibility in the public area serve to index broader public and/or governmental position towards different languages and their speakers' status (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 26). Accordingly, the dominance of one language may herald the relative status and power of not only the languages spoken in the area, but also the community speaking the languages regardless of demographic majority or minority issues.

Pioneering scholars in this area (LL) who tried to build theory of language status and choice in LL focus on a literacy perspective. According to Gorter (2013, p. 196), preference models are based on three conditions: (a) sign writer's skill, writing a sign in a language you know, (b) presumed reader, writing a sign in the language that can be read by the public, and (c) symbolic value, writing in your own language or the language you want to be identified with. However, the most important factor that can influence these conditions is the language policy (Spolsky, 2004).

As a theoretical framework, Geosemitics is preferred for this study. It is the latest development in semiotics. Specifically, for analysis of languages (symbolic signs), iconic and indexical signs geosemiotics was coined and developed by Ron and Suzi Scollon, for studying ''discourses in place'' (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, p. 1). They developed geosemiotics by combining the elements of geography, the study of places, with semiotics, thestudy of sign systems.

Geosemiotics views the presence and/or the absence of signs from LL, how one language is de-emphasized or emphasized through positions on the signs, bright colors, font sizes etc.   Hence, it enables to see status marking issues on signs based on the data from the LL. This framework helps not only to interpret the content, order, organization, layout, and structure of signs, but also to look how signs are tied to a specific social, political, historical, and cultural context. Therefore, this theoretical framework is used in this study to critically analyze how languages on signs reflect the status of languages and how one language is favored over the other. So far, as LL research and the studies that used geosemiotics as a theoretical framework are relatively a few scholars have not pronounced about its limitations.

3. Methodology

As an overall approach, pragmatic approach and mixed methods were used in this research due to the fact that as they help to investigate the perceived research problem in an achievable manner without magnificent constraints on methods to be used.

The three urban environments (Adama, Jimma, and Sabata towns) were selected based on purposive sampling methods because they comprise more residents than any other towns in Oromia. They are

relatively better commercial cities that would be an asset for language use on signs for a better business communication. In fact, LL as a research approach solely focuses on cities as its object of investigation (signs) is dense there. As the official government data shows, the selected urban centres are sociolinguistically so diverse, and this makes the LL study feasible. According to Ethiopian Statistical Agency, (2007) the total population of the town was 120,960 during the time. From these, Oromo (46.70%), Amhara (17.1%), Dawuro (10%), Gurage (6.4%), etc. were the major linguistic groups. Ethiopian Statistical Agency (2007) also confirms that the total population of Adama city was 222,212, where Oromo (38.6%), Amhara (34.22%), Gurage (11.8%), and Tigrie (3.3%) etc. are living together. In the same way, the etno-linguistic variety of sebeta city is not much different. These towns are the right context for LL research, from the perspective of language status and how the status is moulded in the current sociopolitical and linguistic contexts, as (1) they are populated with diverse linguistic groups, (2) the majority of their inhabitants are Afan Oromo speakers, and (3) the regional official working language is Afan Oromo. Similarly, down towns market areas and major roads were purposely selected to collect the photograph of the signs. As Backhaus (2007) states, signs are ubiquitous around market areas that the sampling and data collection should focus there, based on purposive sampling methods. In this study, all signs that are large enough to capture on camera were recorded from the selected streets. Besides, data were collected from LL actors such as sign owners (public institutions and private), sign writers, and concerned government bodies through in depth interview to investigate their reactions to the written linguistic signs of the towns.

Accordingly, signs along the streets were photographed until sufficient data were obtained based on saturation level, as the data is qualitative, and some signs were passed over without photographing due to some redundancy, or similarity of the signs. One thousand five hundred (500 from each town) signs were collected and analyzed after converted to quantitative figures. Furthermore, in depth interview data were obtained from 17 key informants who were considered LL actors. The languages of the interview were Amharic and Afan Oromo based on the language proficiency of the respondents. Then the interview data were transcribed and translated.

Regarding data presentation and analysis, some considerations were taken into account. For quantitative analysis, some of the following basic characteristics of languages on signs were taken as a base. These were the total number of signs collected from each town, the number of languages on a sign, the total number of monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual languages on the sign, and the share of each language as presented alone or with other language/s, the proportion of linguistic diversity on government, private, and religious institutions, and etc. In other words, their geosemiotic characteristics were given priority. Issues such as identifying the languages used on the signs, the languages order of appearance on the signs, the emphasis given to the languages, and categorizing the data as top-down (signs used by public bodies) and bottom-up (signs owned by private bodies) based on the source of the signs were how the data were managed. The interview data obtained in local languages were transcribed, translated, and integrated with the results and discussion. To make more meaningful, as the data is mixed type, result and discussion were concurrently managed.

To increase the validity and reliability of data of the LL, geosemiotic categorization and converting the qualitative data into quantitative data was carefully guided per the principles of the framework. And these were proved by the expertise of the area. Hence, as mixed methods study, both dependability and transferability, and also validity and reliability were considered through all the processes.

Regarding the ethical issues, the researchers have secured ethical clearance from the concerned bodies at different levels to conduct the research. Besides, the researchers have also secured informed consent from all individual participants and only code, and no personal name is mentioned in this paper.

4. The Results and Discussion

4.1 The Status of Languages in the LL of Adama

Compared to the other two towns, Adama is the more populated city as presented under methods section; it is also a center of commercial activity anda preferred place for living and recreation. Therefore, the town has many signs owned by private business owners, governmental organizations (regional and federal), religious institutions, and NGOs. These are confirmed from the researcher's observation of the cities, because in LL research observation precedes collection of the signs. Above all, the Adama case is unique in that there is stronger municipal administration intervention than any other towns, even as compared with other towns in the regional state. Therefore, the issue of language use on a sign is more serious in Adama. This is also confirmed through the interview. One of the officials in Oromia Culture and Tourism stated in an interview why offices of Oromia should give priority to the official working language of the region as follows:

> *When we talk about this language [Afan Oromo …] it is a right given by the constitution. It is not simply based on our own interest, or it is notjust because we have a wish that this must be done. Practically, on an issue of this language [Afan Oromo], there had been a relentless struggle for long, and demanded the sacrifice of many lives. This is the issue confirmed in the constitution, and putting it into practice is a responsibility given to us by law. But, through the course of our action we have faced challenges; there were disappointed bodies* (AA, informant code).

Table 1: Quantitative data of languages on signs in Adama

	Adama Town											
	Top-down signs				**Bottom-up signs**							
Languages on Signs	Federal		Regional		Religious Institutions		Private Business		NGOs		**Total**	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	**No**	**%**
Multilingual(AfanOromo, Amharic & English)	1	0.2	12	2.4	3	0.6	124	24.8	5	1	**145**	29
Multilingual(AfanOromo, Amharic & Arabic)	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0.6	0	0	**3**	0.6
Bilingual (Afan Oromo & Amharic)	0	0	17	3.4	4	0.8	217	43.4	1	0.2	**239**	47.8
Bilingual (Afan Oromo & English)	0	0	1	0.2	0	0	10	2	1	0.2	**12**	2.4
Bilingual(Amharic&English)	5	1	1	0.2	9	1.8	26	5.2	2	0.4	**43**	8.6
Monolingual Afan Oromo	0	0	2	0.4	0	0	2	0.4	0	0	**2**	0.8
Monolingual Amharic	4	0.8	5	1	4	0.8	14	2.8	2	0.4	**29**	5.4
Monolingual English	2	0.4	3	0.6	3	0.6	13	2.6	4	0.8	**25**	5
Monolingual „Others"	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0.4	0	0	2	0.4
Grand Total	**12**	**2.4**	**39**	**7.8**	**23**	**4.6**	**411**	**82.2**	**15**	**3**	**500**	**100**

The quantitative data shows the extent to which Afan Oromo signs are practiced as compared to other languages. Compared to the other two towns, Adama is the most populated and it is also a center of commercial activity and a preferred place for living and recreation. Therefore, the town has many signs owned by private business owners, governmental organizations (regional and federal), religious institutions and also NGOs.

As Table 1 shows, most of the signs are under the bottom-up sign category, particularly private commercial business. This is also true for the other towns. As a whole, with respect to the language representation on signs found on major streets of Adama, Amharic has the highest representation; 91.4% of the signs contain Amharic: as multilingual (29.06%), as bilingual (56.4%), and as monolingual language (5.4%) when added together. It is followed by Afan Oromo, which is present in 79.6% of the cases and English in 43.60% of the signs. The two monolingual signs put under ''others'' in the above table are private Chinese signs.

From the top-down signs, there were a few multilingual federal signs observed, which is (0.2%) near to zero. Similarly, the multilingual signs were rarely used by religious institutions. Thus, the data show that the federal offices rarely use Afan Oromo, in a multilingual, bilingual, or monolingual form, but Amharic and English. However, the regional offices use Amharic in multilingual and bilingual forms. On the other hand, a significant number of private businesses use multilingual signs of Afan Oromo, Amharic and English (24.8%) and bilingual Afan Oromo-Amharic signs (42.4%) of the total signs as the private sign owners are less resistant to use the regional working language, Afan Oromo.

For example, as the following sign shows, the sign seems bilingual Afan Oromo-Amharic because the more visible part of the sign displays these two languages. But, closer examination shows that the sign is more of bilingual Amharic-English as the important details telling the service of the business were presented in these languages. There are many similar signs showing the status of the languages on signs.

Picture 1: Private business bilingual sign taken from Adama town

This photograph of basically Afan Oromo-Amharic bilingual sign is an advertisement for a shop selling eyeglasses. Afan Oromo is written at the top of Amharic to meet the requirement of the regional governments' interest that demands Afan Oromo to be written at the top. This is to mark that the working language of the region and the town is Afan Oromo. One of the main duties of the towns' workers of Culture and Tourism Office is making sure that Afan Oromo has this status on signs.

To mark a better status, according to Scollon and Scollon (2003, p. 120), "The preferred code is on top, on the left, or in the center and the marginalized code is on the bottom, on the right, or on the margins." This view is based on place semiotics, which is one of the basic components of geosemiotics. Looking the picture at a glance, it is possible to conclude that Afan Oromo is a preferred code, not only from where it is placed in relation to Amharic, but also from the color and background of the text in Afan Oromo. But, this does not mean that the position is preferred by the sign owners in most of the cases, but by this controlling body of the government. This is the struggle between Amharic, a highly dominant language, and Afan Oromo that strives for dominance at least within its territorial domain. That is why the regional government seems committed for intervention siding Afan Oromo.

Amharic's better status and its real position becomes more obvious when important information on the sign is seen, rather than the bogus place given to Afan Oromo. Details of services are usually provided in a preferred language of communication. Hence, as it can be seen from the sign(picture 1), the

Amharic informational texts that provide lists of services such as: የፀሐይ መነፅር (solar eyeglass), የማንበብያ መነፅር (Reading eyeglass), የሐኪም ትዕዛዝ መነፅር (Physician ordered eyeglass), ሁሉንም የመነፅር ዓይነቶች እናቀርባለን (we provide all kinds of eyeglass) are presented in Amharic and also in English, but not in Afan Oromo. What the regional government attempts to control is that only the language in which the business name is written. This is what Landry and Bourhis call an ideological function of signs (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 27). On the other hand, Amharic is playing more of the role of informational function.

This shows the communication status of the two languages in Oromia towns. Furthermore, "the shop number" is also written in Amharic; this is also important information for customers looking for eyeglasses. These all considered together indicate that Amharic is the preferred language as far as communication on signs is concerned for the above sign owner, despite the fact that Afan Oromo seems the preferred code at a glance.

4.2 The Status of Languages in the LL of Jimma

Table 2: Quantitative data of languages on signs in Jimma

Jimma Town

Languages on Signs	Top-down signs						Bottom-up signs				Total	
	Federal		Regional		Religious Institutions		Private Business		NGOs			
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	**No**	**%**
Multilingual (Afan Oromo, Amharic & English)	7	1.4	19	3.8	4	0.8	74	14.8	3	0.6	**107**	**21**
Bilingual (Afan Oromo& Amharic)	1	0.2	35	7	7	1.4	145	29	0	0	**188**	**38**
Bilingual (Afan Oromo& English)	0	0	0	0	4	0.8	5	1	4	0.8	**13**	**2.6**
Bilingual (Amharic & English)	0	0	15	3	14	2.8	59	11.8	3	0.6	**91**	**18**
Monolingual Afan Oromo	0	0	4	0.8	0	0	0	0	2	0.4	**6**	**1.2**
Monolingual Amharic	3	0.6	0	0	12	2.4	47	9.4	2	0.4	**64**	**13**
Monolingual English	0	0	4	0.8	1	0.2	23	4.6	3	0.6	**31**	**6.2**
Grand Total	**11**	**2.2**	**77**	**15**	**42**	**8**	**353**	**70.6**	**17**	**3.4**	**500**	**100**

Jimma town, located to the South-West of the country at 345 kilometers from Addis Ababa, is the most heterogeneous compared to the other two towns. This is due to its vicinity to the southern nations and nationality people's region, where more than 56 linguistic groups live. Thus, the nearby ethno-linguistic groups move to the town in search of better life. Yet, the Oromo are the majority (46.7%), followed by Amhara (17.1%), and the others have 36.2% share. Compared with Adama the figure of the Oromo (38.6%) is higher in Jimma, and the figure of Amhara (34.2%) is lower in Jimma (ESA, 2007).

As Table 2 shows, the distribution of languages on signs in the town is not coherent with the above figure of ethnic compositions. From the total sample signs in the town, Amharic is present in 90% of the signs, and Afan Oromo in 62.8% of the signs, which means 37.2% of the signs do not include Afan

Oromo on their signs. This is a significant number, almost about a half. Mostly, these sign owners are religious institutions of various types, federal government offices, NGOs, and private businesses. Though officially Afan Oromo is the only language with the status of the official working language, the actual practice on the signs shows more of the interest of the sign users than the intended policy.   English is also visible on signs in 48.4% of the cases. As the data under the interview section reveal more, these are mainly due to the fact that the sign owners, and also sign writers, such as publishing companies are relatively free to use whatever language they think is important with less intervention of the municipality government. If not for communication, even the ideological and symbolic dimension of Afan Oromo in contemporary Ethiopian politics is not adequately considered in Jimma town. In other words, its actual status is visible on official documents- not on the signs in the town.

4.3 The Status of Languages in the LL of Sebeta

Table 3: Quantitative data of languages on signs in Sebeta

Languages on Signs	Top-down signs						Bottom-up signs				Total	
	Federal		Regional		Religious Institutions		Private Business		NGOs			
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	**No**	**%**
Multilingual (Afan Oromo, Amharic & English)	3	0.6	1	0.2	7	1.4	78	15.6	2	0.4	**91**	**18.2**
Multilingual (Afan Oromo, Amharic & Arabic)	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.2	0	0	**1**	**0.2**
Multilingual (Chinese, English & Amharic)	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.2	0	0	**1**	**0.2**
Bilingual (Afan Oromo & Amharic)	2	0.4	26	5.2	15	3	264	52.8	2	0.4	**307**	**61.8**
Bilingual (Afan Oromo & English)	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0.8	0	0	**4**	**0.8**
Bilingual (Amharic & English)	3	0.6	6	1.2	5	1	13	3.8	1	0.2	**34**	**6.2**
Monolingual Afan Oromo	0	0	10	2	0	0	1	0.2	0	0	**7**	**1.4**
Monolingual Amharic	0	0	0	0	11	2.2	28	4.6	2	0.4	**41**	**8.2**
Monolingual English	0	0	0	0	0	0	14	1.6	0	0	**14**	**2.8**
Grand Total	**8**	**1.6**	**43**	**8.6**	**38**	**7.6**	**404**	**80.8**	**7**	**1.4**	**500**	**100**

Sebeta town is very close to Addis Ababa, the capital of the country, and found to the west of it at 26 kilometers. Table 3 shows the distribution of monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual signs as used by different languages on sign using bodies. According to the quantitative data, Amharic has the highest representation in terms of visibility. This is without considering the qualitative dimensions of the languages on signs. Like the results of the two towns presented earlier, Adama and Jimma, the status of the three languages is similar, despite the difference in figure.

In Sebeta city, due to its proximity to the center, there are local and global influences on daily activities of the people, and also on the languages they use on signs. However, according to the data, the influence of English is the least compared with the two towns, which are relatively far from the center. Quantitatively speaking, the gap between Afan Oromo and Amharic is also not much. The unexpected result here is that English is visible only on 26.6% of the signs. This is small compared with the other towns and its connection to the city, Addis Ababa, which is more linked to global contact.

This seems a paradox particularly in relation to rural towns like Jimma, where English is present on

48.67% of the signs. There are no significant numbers of foreign and local visitors like Adama and Sebeta, except the presence of Jimma University where the university's community including expatriates are perceived English language users. There is no special attachment to English culture, but there is a tendency of giving priority to this language at the expense of the local and regional official working languages. One of the main reasons for this is that, in Jimma almost there is no intervention that enforces the inclusion of Afan Oromo.

To save money, the private sign owners at times restricted themselves to two of the local languages, or to Amharic and English as confirmed from the interview with sign owners and the Culture and Tourism Office (CTO) workers. Given the current working language of the regional state, the demographic majority of Afan Oromo speakers in the research setting Afan Oromo should have had a better status.

Picture 2: Monolingual English private sign taken from Sebeta

What matters most in giving better status to one language is the sign owners' attitude, and this is not only among government bodies, but also among private business owners. During the data collection, we came across private sign owners who preferred English to Amharic and Afan Oromo as a means of hiding sign readers' association of the owners with certain linguistic groups. Therefore, there is a tendency of choosing English to escape the ethno-linguistic politics in the country. In addition, some sign owners think that their customers and the service the business owners provide demand them the global language for the better satisfaction of the customers. The following quote from an interviewee of nightclub owner shows how much attitude plays a role in language choice on the signs.

Golden night club is a term taken from English language. The working language in this town is Afan Oromo, and it is difficult to have an equivalent term for a business like a night club from Afan Oromo. I did not want to say Shubbisa Halkanii (night club) or Ragada Halakanii (night club), in Afan Oromo and ጭፈራ ቤት (cifferaa beet) in Amharic. As this business is open the whole night … I think this name is better to attract customers.... You don't feel comfortable like when you say it in English. The main issue is that the customers who frequently come here are youngsters and middle aged people. Couples come here and enjoy… even from distant places. According to my understanding, English language is more pleasant. It is more beautiful. That is why I preferred it to local languages (LSP (informant code), Translation).

What is visible from this sign (picture 2) is foreign in the language choice and icons displayed. Not only the use of monolingual English, but also the place given to Bob Marley, who was the reggae star, in relation to the famous local singers Tilahun Gessese and Ali Bira, elucidate importantfacts more than what the owner says. As it can be seen from the sign, the gradual spread of English is supported with the hip-hop culture and marginalizes not only the local languages, but also related local cultures. Hence, how modernity is viewed in the LL has a significant role to limit the use of multilingual signs that include the local languages.

4.4 Methods of Marking the Status of the Languages in the LLs

In geosemiosi analysis signs, the presence or absence of a language from the signs in the LL has strong implication on marking the status of a language.
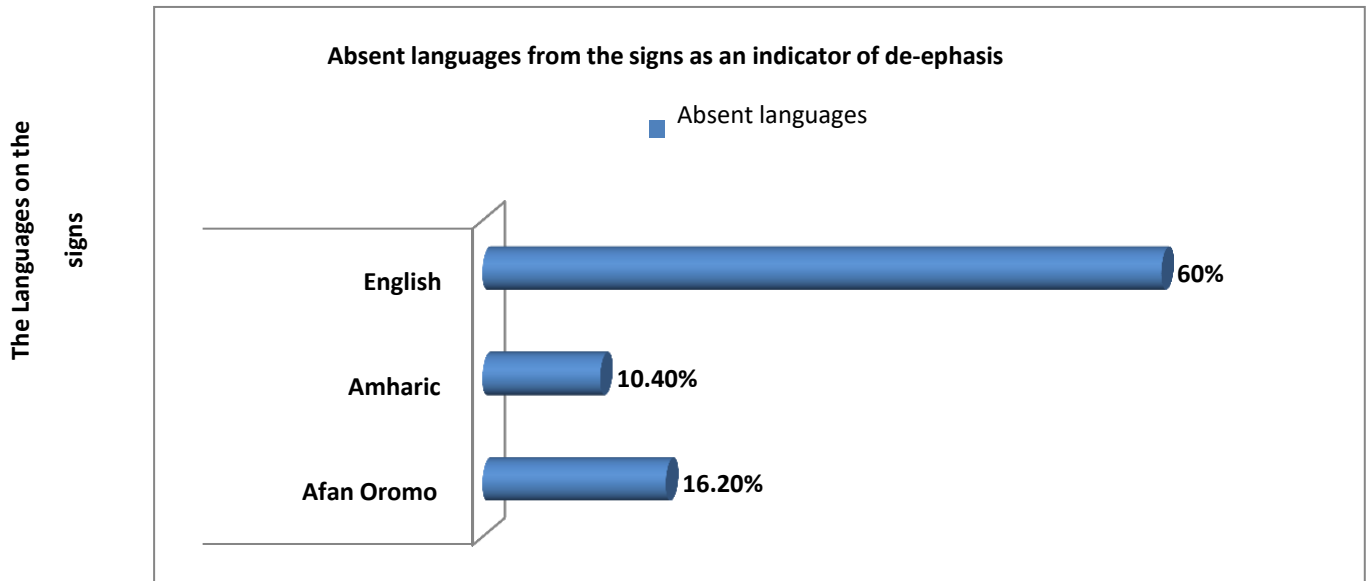
*Graph 1*: Absence of language as status marker

In geosemiotic analysis, the presence and absence of a language or languages from the LL in general and from specific signs in particular has a meaning associated with communicative and/or ideological status of the languages in question (Scollon & Schollon, 2003). This issue of presence and absence is one of the major variables in LL analysis. As Graph 1 shows, Amharic is absent only from 10.4% of the signs from the total corpus collected from the three towns (1500). Next to Amharic Afan Oromo is absent from 16.2% of the overall signs. And 60% of the sign data totally excluded English from the signs. As the other side of these numerical result shows, Amharic, Afan Oromo, and English are emphasized through presence on the signs in 89.6%, 84.8% and 40% of the cases respectively.
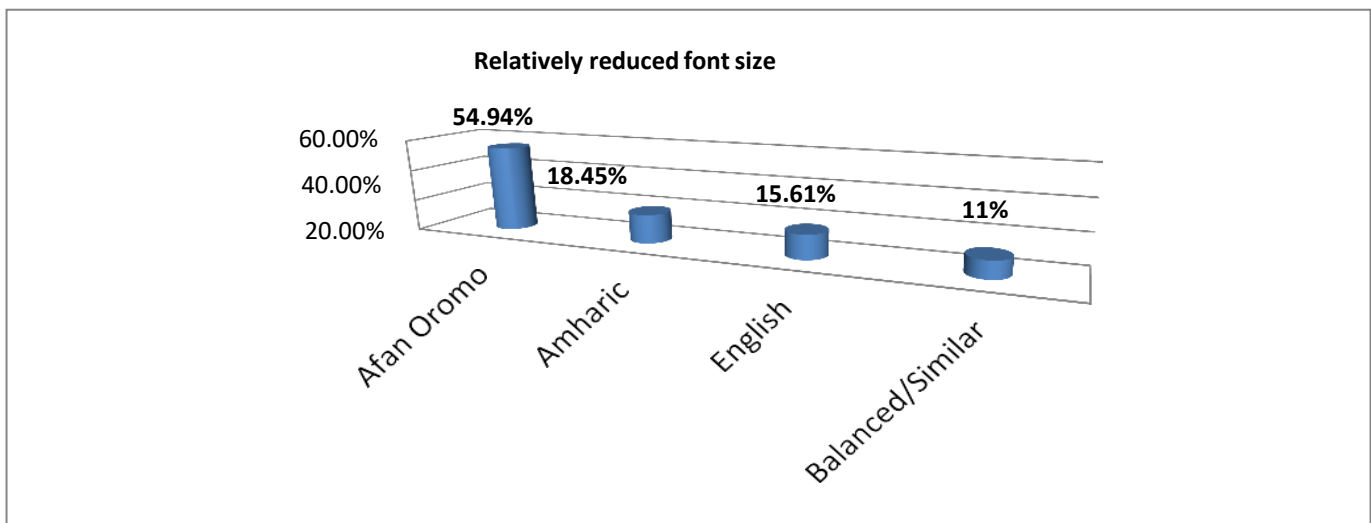
Graph 2: Reduced font size as language status marker

From the corpus of 1275 signs consisting multilingual and bilingual signs, where these three languages (Afan Oromo, Amharic, and English) are co-visible, there is a major difference in terms of their visibility of the font size among the co- occurring languages on a specific sign. Accordingly, as shown in Graph 2, 54.94% of the signs with Afan Oromo on signs in multilingual and bilingual forms were relatively in a reduced font size with a varying degree. Amharic and English on the other hand were visible in a reduced font size in 18.45% and 15.61% of the cases respectively. And 11% of the signs were with languages in balanced font size, i.e. the font sizes in which the languages written are similar. The other side of the data shows that Amharic and English were used on signs in relatively larger font sizes and this hasits own role in communication on the signs as the attentions of the readers are on the more visible font sizes.

It is also interesting to note that on public and private signs, the most frequent pattern observed are that Amharic and English were written with a font bigger than Afan Oromo. Besides, additional information that occupy the larger space were included in 67% and 11% of Amharic and English signs respectively. These additional contents could have impacted the dominance of the larger fonts.

Preferred places for the languages (upper, left and middle,

and/or a combination of the three)
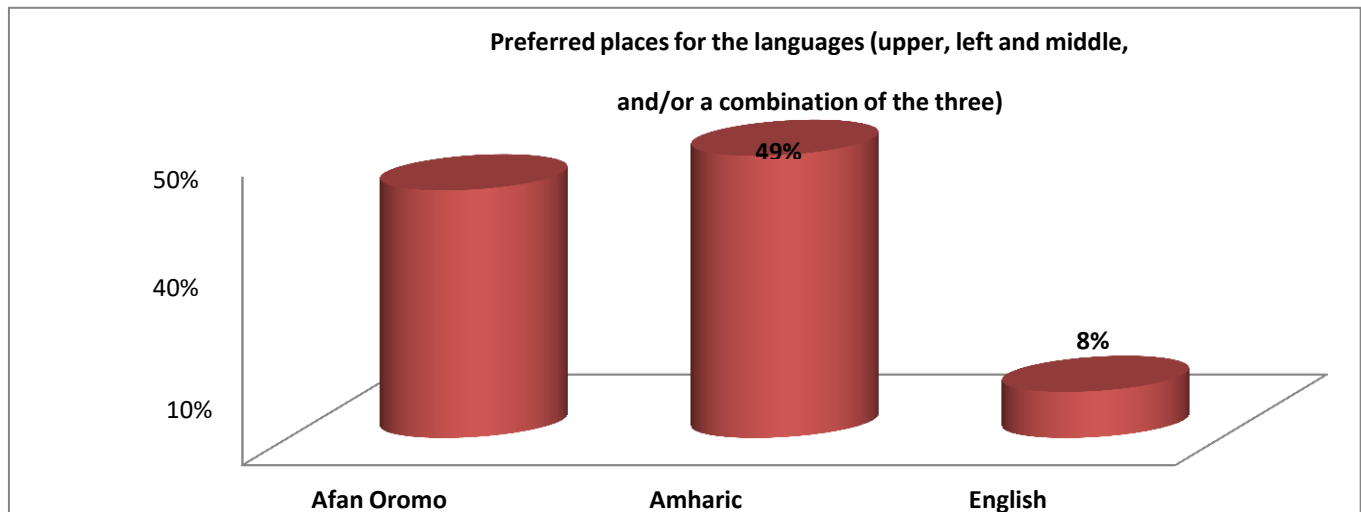
Graph 3: Preferred place as marker of language status

The place where languages on signs are placed has a meaning associated with the status of languages and multilingual practices. This is because in visual semiotics, where a language is placed has a direct relation with a preferred language in the LL (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Usually, the upper place is preferred for a language with a better status as officially decided or perceived by the sign owners and/or regulators. As graph 3 shows, from a corpus of multilingual and bilingual signs (1275), 43% of the signs have Afan Oromo in a preferred position from the perspective of place semiotics (upper, left, and middle) on the signs while appearing with Amharic and English or with one of them. This figure is relatively higher for Afan Oromo than the previous visual and place semiotics as all the signs directly under the municipality administration and many of the private signs put Afan Oromo on the top. However, when upper, left and center positions are considered together, Amharic¨s place semiotics constitutes 49%. This result can be seen in line with the declaration of outdoor advertisement which states that the local language should come first (upper position). However, not only Amharic, but also English has the primary visibility in 8% of the signs.

Such language use practice is intentional and it indexes the relative importance of the languages within the policy of the country de jury or otherwise. In other words, when a language is written first in the top-to-down hierarchy, it generally signifies that language is powerful beyond its official status. Hence, in the LL of the three towns, this trend is the reality and numerical results show that there is a difference between public and private signs in the selection of the order and placement of languages in the top-to-down, left-to-right order, and placing on the center. There is also a difference among the categories of public (federal, regional, and religious institutions) signs and various categories of private signs. For regional government signs, Afan Oromo is in a preferred position followed by Amharic and English. For federal signs, the common sign type is bilingual with the Amharic as the most preferred language followed by English.
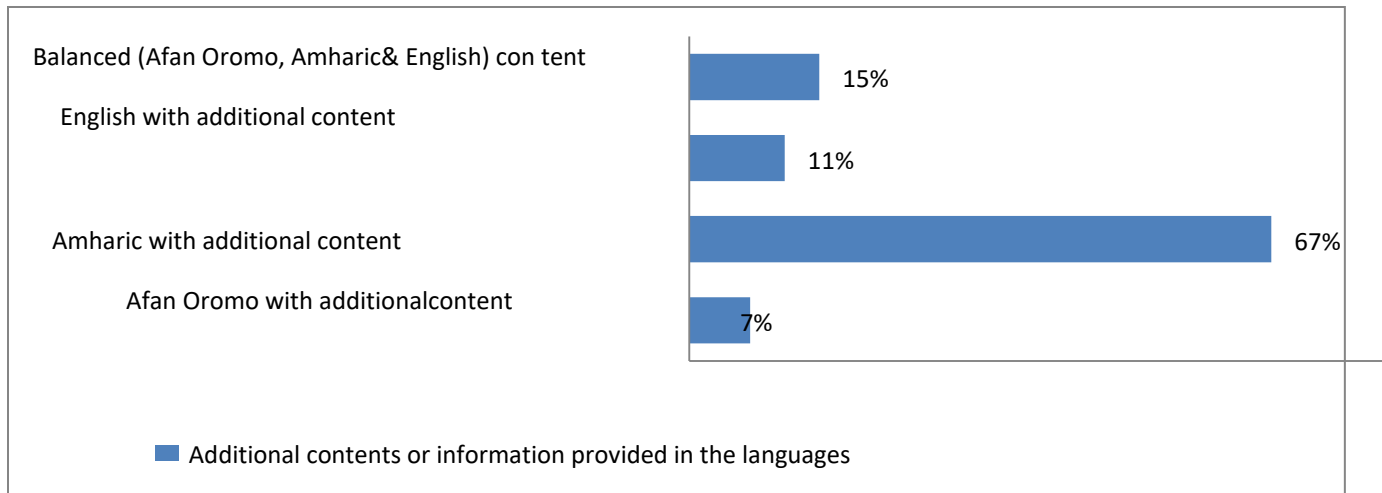
Graph 4: Additional contents as marker of language status

The issue of the equivalence of the contents of the message is important in geosemiotic analysis of languages on signs. Such consideration is also related to the multilingual and bilingual practices. Accordingly, from the languages on a specific sign, the language with some other additional information is a more preferred language. Therefore, the data from graph 4 show that from the total corpus of multilingual and bilingual signs, the great majority of them contain Amharic (67%) as additional information. This means, important details of the services and the nature of the business that the signs signify are informed to the public via Amharic.

This is followed by balanced multilingual and bilingual practice (15.21%) and English with extra message (11%) and Afan Oromo with extra message (7%). As a result, the communicative role of Amharic in the LL is highly significant compared to the two languages.

Bright and/or bright background used
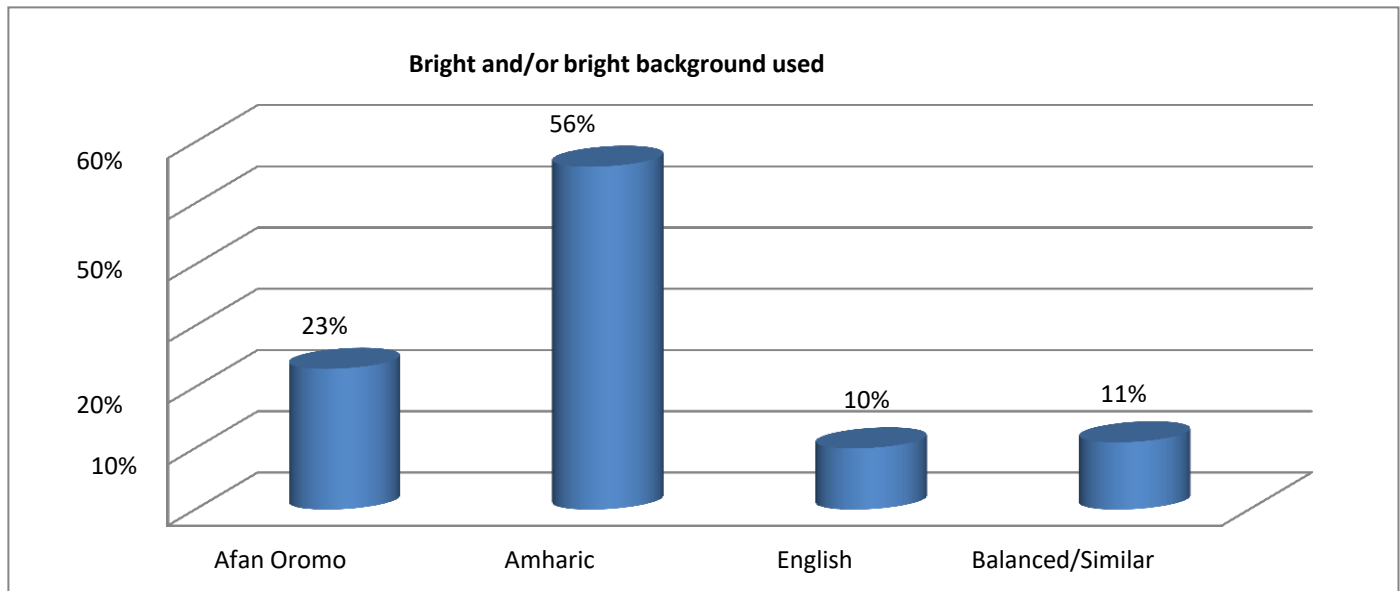
Graph 5: Bright color as language status marker

According to geosemiosis analysis, the languages on signs which are written in three colours (green, red and yellow) or on such colors, as background, marks status. On the other hand, it means the language was a preferred one by the owner. As the graph shows, from the collected signs 56% of them were written in bright color, or on bright background. Only 11% of them were displayed in a balanced form.

In general, when the five basic components of geosemiotic analysis considered, there is a semiotic marginalization of language in the LL of the three towns in general. First, this is mainly in the form of absent from the signs on the signs of federal institutions. Second, it is in the form of de- emphasizing and/or absence from the signs of religious institutions through font size and other emphasis markers. The third marginalization in the LL is in the form of choices of bright colors for preferred languages as most frequently observed on private signs. In fact, the signs of federal and religious institutions are also not free from this type of choices. The only exception to the choice of bright colors in the LL is the private share company banks, whose color choices are dependent on their corporate logos. Here, the government banks also follow similar trend as they have their own color used uniformly across the country. The fourth type of marginalization is in the form of language placements on the sign as the preferred places are reserved for the preferred language in the LL. The fifth and may be the most influential marginalization is reflected through the contents presented in each language on a sign.

4.5 Regional and Federal Governments Role on the Status of the Languages

As presented in the previous tables (1, 2, and 3), languages on signs used in domains of federal government use Amharic as primary language and English as secondary and avoid the local languages where they reside. This implies there are different statuses associated with languages under the domain of two of the government bodies working in a similar environment. On the other hand, the regional government's signs include both Amharic and Afan Oromo with favored space and place for the region's official working language, Afan Oromo. According to Spolsky (2009, p. 304), three factors are behind language choices on signs. The first one is a necessary condition, which says "write signs in a language

you know." The other two are preference conditions, "prefer to write in the language of the person you wanted to read the sign" and "prefer to write in your own language, or the language that asserts your symbolic value." Thus, the language choices of the federal offices are more of due to the necessary condition, which is their lack of skill of writing in the local language and the preference condition, which is the symbolic value with which the federal government is identified-that is Amharic.

In Ethiopia, Amharic had been serving as a national language, and even after its status is reduced to federal official working language, and to the official working languages of some national regional states such as Amhara, Southern Nations, Nationalities and People, and Benishangul Gumuz, its earlier hegemony has not that much changed. This can be observed from the results of the quantitative data presented under the preceding section.

Until the data for this study was collected, the intervention and the role of regional government had been insignificant and inconsistent across the towns under its administration. This implies that the municipality administrations work independently per their own commitments.

5   Conclusions

With regards to the first research question, that is the status of languages in the LL as they appear in public space, and how this is reflected on signs, Amharic has a significant visibility and more dominance in the whole semiotic characteristics. The five basic tenets of geosemiotic analysis and the four category of multilingual analysis confirm the findings in relation to the status. Amharic is prominently visible on most of bilingual and multilingual signs of all sign users' category such as regional and federal governments, private businesses and companies, religious institutions and NGOs considered in this study. Monolingual Amharic is used more frequently on the private and religious institutions' signs. And, it has also a better visibility as bilingual sign, sometimes with Afan Oromo and sometimes with English. Afan Oromo's role is more of an ideological as its inclusion on the signs is more of due to regional government's enforcement.

The status markers of languages on signs are the presence and absence of languages from the signs, de-emphasizing of language/s in relation to the other language/s, and the amount of information provided in each language on the signs. There is hesitation on part of the regional government to enforce the inclusion of Afan Oromo on the signs, and the federal offices residing in the towns of Oromia object the use of the official language of the region in which they are operating.

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1. Alemayehu Fekede: Collected data, developed the proposal, transcribed the interview data, interpreted the data and wrote the manuscript.
2. Wondwosen Tesfaye: developed the proposal, collected the data, transcribed the interview data, translated the data into English, analyzed the data and revised the manuscript.

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