
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The power that disempowers: An analysis of how English shapes the tourism landscape of Northern Mindanao, Philippines

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| ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the functions of English as the prevalent language in the linguistic landscape (LL) of tourist destinations in Northern Mindanao, Philippines. It builds on Bourdieu's language capital theory and Boudon's theory of rationality to uncover the informational and symbolic functions of English. The data consists of 310 signage from various destinations in the region and was analyzed using thematic content analysis. The findings revealed that English is considered a powerful language in communicating informational content, underscoring its crucial role in tourism. Beyond its dominance in fulfilling informational functions lies its linguistic power to disempower local languages as reflected in the absence or minimal presence of Cebuano, the community's lingua franca, in the LL. This study concludes that English performs a crucial role in building a tourism that is modern and globally accessible. However, there is a need to consider the invisibility of local and indigenous languages in its LL to foster cultural authenticity and representation in shaping the region's tourism identity. Future LL research may examine the impact of using multilingual signage as tourism continues to expand in Northern Mindanao. While English undoubtedly plays a vital role in facilitating tourism, critical reflection is needed to ensure that its use does not come at the expense of local languages and cultural authenticity. Future tourism planning and policy must find ways to integrate local languages meaningfully into the public LL, thereby fostering both global engagement and local empowerment. Such efforts will contribute to more culturally responsive and linguistically inclusive tourism practices in the Philippines.

| KEYWORDS

tourism signage; language hierarchy; language identity; lingua franca; linguistic landscape

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The linguistic elements in signage, also known as linguistic landscape (LL), offer a rich field of information for sociolinguistic inquiry. In tourism spaces, LL reveal language choices and their underlying meanings that will not only shape tourists' experiences but also represent the sociocultural dynamics in the community (Lu et al., 2019; Salim et al., 2012). The essential role of language as a medium for tourists to understand and communicate while staying in the tourist destination cannot be underrated. Tourists find it difficult to navigate an unfamiliar place, especially if the language used in signs is foreign (Kallen, 2009). Often, tourist destinations use English, the global language, to enhance accessibility in the destinations. When the LLs use a language that is easily understood, destinations become adaptive to the linguistic needs and preferences of visitors. However, when LLs are dominated by English for its global communicative reach, it can also create a linguistic environment that positions English as the most powerful and prestigious language, marginalizing local and indigenous languages in the area. In some instances, the LL also reveals the relations and tensions between the languages on display, while others illustrate the wide use of English in signs due to globalization (Finzil, 2012). Thus, the LL serves a dual function in tourism spaces by providing informational content and symbolizing social hierarchies and cultural values (Peng et al., 2021; Spolsky, 2009).

Previous LL studies consistently showed the prominent use of English in tourism spaces (Anderson et al., 2020; Cenoz & Gorter, 2009; Hadiati, 2023; Lin, 2024; Lu et al., 2019). English, as a global lingua franca, is the preferred language in tourism because of its

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ability to cater linguistic diversity of international visitors. This pattern is also evident in tourist destinations in the Philippines. Mendoza and Bernardo (2025) found the dominance of monolingual English signage in two significant destinations in Northern Philippines. Ambion (2023) also reported that English is prevalent in signage for coffee product advertisements and emblematic structures, while local languages occasionally appear, reflecting efforts to preserve local identity. Such practices, where signage makers and readers often favor English, marginalize local and indigenous languages in the process (Eclipse & Tenedero, 2018; Manalastas & Auxtero, 2024). It creates a linguistic environment that prioritizes marketability over cultural representation.

The dual function of English in communicating information and as a form of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) raises crucial questions about language visibility and invisibility, which implies a linguistic struggle for local and indigenous languages in tourism spaces. Hence, analyzing the linguistic elements in tourism signage can uncover any linguistic hierarchies or sociolinguistic inequalities that may exist in the LL of Northern Mindanao tourism. This region, known for its booming tourism, is multilingual in nature with local and indigenous languages, such as Cebuano, Higaonon, Binukid, Subanen, and Maranao, spoken by its people (Bonifacio et al., 2021). By analyzing the functional and symbolic functions of English, this study looks into the corresponding visibility or invisibility of the local and indigenous languages in its LL. This study argues that the language used in the tourism spaces in Northern Mindanao holds communicative functions and symbolic messages that are tied to power, identity, and cultural legitimacy. In an English-dominated tourism landscape of a multilingual region, this study aims to uncover the implications of English dominance for local language vitality and cultural representation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Linguistic Landscape in Tourism Contexts

The linguistic landscape (LL) reveals the language use in public areas like tourist destinations. As language use can be influenced by the LL or elements of the LL (Cenoz & Gorter, 2009), the LL can represent a language that is shaped by local culture, values, history, language policies, and ideology (Ben-Rafael et al., 2010; Garvin, 2010). In the tourism context, the LL can be a communicative tool and a symbolic marker of identity and power. Previous studies have shown how LL contributes to the shaping of the social space, the marginalization of local languages, and the representation of cultural hierarchies (Bolton et al., 2020; Gorter, 2006; Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Van Mensel et al., 2016).

LL studies in tourism reported a consistent pattern of English dominance in either monolingual or multilingual signage (Anderson et al., 2020; Hasni et al., 2022; Maraf & Osam, 2022; Rastitiati, 2023). In Cambodia, English predominates in Phnom Penh hotels to meet international demand (Lin, 2024). Similarly, English has the highest frequency in monolingual signage in Phuket's tourist destinations. Pathanasin (2022) reported that English has become the go-to language of modern communication, while local languages, such as Hokkien, are marginalized. In destinations with multilingual signage, the use of English is symbolic of its power and prestige (Al-Sofi, 2024; Hadiati, 2023; Hazaea et al., 2024). In Indonesia, English helps in easy navigation, while local Indonesian languages retain local identity (Rastitiati N., 2023). In the Philippine context, LL studies also reported the dominance of English in the LLs of cities and provinces like Manila, Baguio, and Marinduque, often at the expense of local languages (Luna, 2023; Mendoza & Bernardo, 2025). According to Manalastas (in press), the prevalence of English reflects colonial legacies and linguistic stratification in the Philippines. Although recent studies show efforts to include local languages, policies on local signage remain inconsistent (Mundiz & Tarusan, 2024).

While the use of English is often credited for its global communicative reach, such linguistic environment often reflects socio-political implications, revealing which languages and identities are publicly recognized. As LLs serve informational and symbolic functions, LL scholars have consistently advocated for inclusive multilingual signage that caters the linguistic diversity as well as ensures accessibility for all visitors. The present study shall look into this concern by examining how English operates informatively and symbolically in the tourism spaces of Northern Mindanao in the Philippines.

2.2 Northern Mindanao and Its Linguistic Profile

Northern Mindanao is strategically located in Southern Philippines, occupying the northern coast of the Mindanao island. Its strategic geographical location, offering diverse landscapes, pristine beaches, and abundant natural resources, makes it a popular tourist destination (DTI, 2025). The region comprises the provinces of Bukidnon, Camiguin, Misamis Occidental, Misamis Oriental, and Lanao del Norte.

The linguistic profile of the region is shaped by dominant regional languages, indigenous languages, and the global influence of English. Cebuano Visayan (CV) is the principal lingua franca, being spoken widely across diverse ethnolinguistic communities (Dreisbach & Demeterio, 2020). Based on the 2020 Census, CV is spoken in over 4.2 million households nationwide, with around 804,720 speakers in Northern Mindanao alone (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023). However, indigenous languages in the region, such as Binukid, Higaonon, and Subanen face serious challenges. While heritage programs have slightly improved conversational competence in Binukid, younger generations are using it less outside family settings (Bonifacio et al., 2021).

Higaonon, spoken by about 30,000 individuals, and Subanen, spoken in Misamis Occidental, are increasingly marginalized by the dominance of CV and broader sociocultural pressures (Cajetas-Saranza, 2016).

The region demonstrates functional multilingualism, with CV, Filipino, and English used across different domains. While CV dominates informal and household communication, Filipino and English are more common in formal education, governance, and business (Dreisbach & Demeterio, 2020). Although the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy of the Department of Education in the Philippines mandates the use of local languages in early education (DepEd, 2009), its implementation is inconsistent due to limited resources, teacher preparation, and lack of standardized orthographies (Jaca-Delfin, 2017). English, in particular, plays a growing role in tourism, where it is used for signage, hospitality training, and promotional materials, especially in destinations like Camiguin, Cagayan de Oro, and Bukidnon (Parba, 2018; Velasco, 2024). The region's linguistic ecology is therefore molded by the continued strength of CV, the expanding utility of English in formal and tourism settings, and the urgent need to support endangered local languages through sustained policy and community initiatives.

2.3 The Sociological Approach to Linguistic Landscape: Applying Bourdieu and Boudon in Northern Mindanao Tourism

Ben-Rafael et al.'s (2006) sociological framework for analyzing linguistic landscapes rests on three hypotheses of social action. These are the power-relations perspective grounded in Bourdieu's sociology, the good-reasons perspective derived from Boudon (1989), and the subjectivist perspective influenced by Goffman's symbolic interactionism. For this study, the analysis centers on the first two, as they are most pertinent to understanding the relationship between language, power, and rational choice within the context of tourism in Northern Mindanao.

From Bourdieu's perspective, language use is shaped by social hierarchies and the distribution of linguistic capital. Language is not just a communication tool but also a medium of symbolic power, reproducing social distinctions through what Bourdieu (1991) called the linguistic market. In tourism spaces of Northern Mindanao, where English appears prominently on signage despite the predominance of Cebuano Visayan and other local languages in the communities, this dynamic becomes visible. English's prevalence in the LL reflects broader structures of symbolic domination, where English is valued as a language of commerce, authority, and global modernity. These dynamics align with Bourdieu's notion that linguistic forms carry differential value depending on the field in which they are used and the habitus of the actors involved. On the other hand, the good-reasons perspective of Boudon can explain the rationality of social actions. In the context of this study, this framework can help explain why tourism stakeholders prefer to use English over other languages spoken in the community, considering the global communicative reach and economic advantage of English. English as a global language is viewed as a practical medium in multilingual spaces (Galloway & Numajiri, 2020; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009).

These sociological frameworks provide an elucidation of the dual functions of LL in the tourist destinations. The first function is providing information to tourists where English is generally the language used to facilitate transactions and activities. The second function is symbolizing an image of modernity and globalization to the extent of sidelining the visibility of local and indigenous languages in the region. The present study used these frameworks in analyzing the role and functions of English in the tourism landscape of Northern Mindanao to contribute to the growing body of literature that studies the role of LLs in mediating local linguistic ecologies and global economies (Bloomaert, 2013; Putz & Mundt, 2018).

2.4 Functions of the Linguistic Landscape

This study is anchored on the Informational and Symbolic functions of the LL (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Spolsky, 2009). The informational functions refer to the communicative function of the LL, such as giving information on directions, naming of products and services, regulatory and safety measures, and promotional advertisements. The symbolic function refers to the sociocultural meanings, such as but not limited to language prestige and power relations. The LL in tourism offers a potent area for research on the relationship between place identity, tourist satisfaction, and cultural representation (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2011). Current research also highlights how multilingual signage, and the combination of physical and digital landscapes enhance tourists' perceptions and engagement (Cifti & Cizel, 2024; Yeh et al., 2024). Digital LL, including hashtags, geotags, and online reviews, now co-construct meanings of place alongside traditional signs (Ivkovic & Lotherington, 2009; Lyons, 2019). Despite this growing body of work, there remains a gap in localized, critical studies of LL in multilingual regions like Northern Mindanao. Hence, this study analyzes signage through the dual lenses of Boudon's agency-centered rationality and Bourdieu's structural power framework to uncover how linguistic choices mediate access, inclusion, and representation. This study responds to recent calls for more nuanced LL scholarship that examines who is empowered or silenced in public texts (Bloomaert, 2013; Gorter, 2013), and how language in public spaces contributes to social, cultural, and economic stratification in emerging tourism economies.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Method

This study uses a qualitative approach in describing and analyzing data. It uses photographic signage documentation of data and qualitative content analysis to determine the informational and symbolic functions of the English language on the photographed images of signage. The analysis involved categorizing the linguistic content and identifying recurrent patterns of themes, providing insights into how English shapes tourist communication and reflects broader sociolinguistic dynamics.

3.2 Setting and Context

This study was conducted across five key tourist destinations in Northern Mindanao, a linguistically and culturally diverse region in Southern Philippines. The five destinations include Dahilayan Adventure Park in Bukidnon, known for its zipline attractions and cool climate; the Mantigue Island Nature Park in Camiguin, a marine sanctuary with white sand beaches (Santos, 2022); Paseo de Santiago in Lanao del Norte, a popular coastal park featuring iconic city signage and open-air dining; Belvedere Hoyohoy View Deck in Misamis Occidental, renowned for its elevated glass walk and views of the Mount Malindang range (Progress Watch, 2019); and Divine Mercy Shrine in Misamis Oriental, a Catholic pilgrimage site with a 50-foot statue and religious facilities (Divine Mercy Shrine El Salvador, 2022). Each destination represents one of the five provinces in the region.

3.3 Data Gathering Procedure

Two criteria were used in choosing the destination to represent each of the five provinces in the region. First, the destination must be a top-visited site in the province based on travel website recommendations, and second, the presence of at least ten publicly displayed linguistic signage. These criteria ensured both high tourist activity and a rich source of signage for analysis. The linguistic signs were documented photographically using a digital camera, with only stationary and publicly visible signage included, such as shop signs and park notices. Mobile or damaged signages were excluded. A total of 310 linguistic signages were collected: 290 were monolingual English, 8 were bilingual (English-Filipino or English-Cebuano Visayan), and 12 were monolingual Cebuano Visayan. For this study, the analysis focused on the 290 English monolingual signs and the 8 bilingual signs containing English. Monolingual English signs were distributed across sites as follows: 118 from Dahilayan Adventure Park, 86 from Divine Mercy Shrine, 32 from Paseo de Santiago, 31 from Mantigue Island Nature Park, and 23 from Belvedere Hoyohoy View Deck. Bilingual signs appeared in smaller numbers, with two from Divine Mercy Shrine and six from Paseo de Santiago.

3.4 Data Analysis

The analysis focused on 298 linguistic signs, excluding non-linguistic features such as colors, fonts, and images. Photographed signs from each of the five tourist destinations were organized into separate folders to facilitate qualitative content analysis of English's informational function. The researcher first read and labeled each sign based on its explicit message, identifying recurring content across destinations. Signs conveying similar types of information were grouped thematically into folders labeled with functional categories such as identifications, announcements, instructions and guidelines, greetings, navigational directions, promotions, and safety and regulatory compliance. This systematic coding process continued until data saturation was achieved. Each theme was then described and interpreted to illustrate how English functions informatively in the linguistic landscape.

The next phase of the analysis investigated the symbolic function of English by examining its dominant presence in signs related to identifying names, safety and regulatory notices, and commercial promotion, which accounted for the largest number of signs. These were interpreted not only for their literal meaning but also for their connotative or symbolic messages. The researcher analyzed how English, as the predominant language in these signs, implicitly conveys authority, modernity, and economic prestige. This interpretive phase aimed to uncover the broader socio-cultural implications of English's visibility in the region's LL, especially in relation to local language marginalization and the projection of tourism-oriented identity.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Informational Functions

The English signage in the five tourist destinations fulfilled multifaceted informational functions. Table 1 summarizes these functions and their descriptions, including identifying names, issuing announcements, providing guidelines, stating greetings, providing directions, promoting products and services, and ensuring safety and regulatory compliance. English predominates in naming places, objects, and facilities within tourist areas. For example, signage in English, as shown in Figure 1, is used to identify facilities such as the souvenir shop and the tourist police assistance desk, helping tourists easily recognize and locate essential services. Similarly, welcome signs in English serve to orient visitors upon arrival and contribute to a more engaging and accessible tourist experience.

Table 1
Informational Functions of English in Tourism Spaces

Informational function	Description
1. Identifying names of places, facilities, and objects	Provides names or labels for landmarks, buildings, streets, and tourist sites to help visitors recognize and confirm their locations.
2. Issuing public announcements	Communicates important notices or updates to the public, such as event schedules, changes in service, weather alerts, and government issuances.
3. Providing instructions and guidelines	Offers specific directions on appropriate behavior or usage, such as "Please fall in line," "Keep off the Grass," or "How to use a ticket machine."
4. Stating greetings	Displays welcoming or courteous phrases like "Welcome to Mantigue" or "Thank you for visiting" to create a friendly and inviting atmosphere.
5. Providing navigational directions	Indicates how to reach destinations using linguistic markers such as "Turn left" and "Exit this way" to help tourists move confidently through unfamiliar areas
6. Promoting products and services	Advertises local businesses, tours, attractions, or events to inform and encourage tourist engagement and spending.
7. Ensuring safety and regulatory compliance	Warns or instructs on safety procedures and legal rules like "No Smoking," "Emergency Exit," and "Wear face mask" to protect visitors and maintain order.

Figure 1

English signage for naming facilities



Both top-down and bottom-up signage in English communicate public announcements and government declarations, as shown in Figure 2. This aligns with Ben-Rafael et al.'s (2006) classification of signage, where top-down signs are official and bottom-up signs are informal. In the context of Northern Mindanao, English serves as a unifying language for such communications, ensuring clarity and accessibility for a diverse audience. This phenomenon supports previous LL studies in the Philippines, where English appears more often in the LL, even though the Philippines has English and Filipino as official languages. De Los Reyes (2014) had a similar result, noting that over half of the top-down signs on the LL of train stations in the Philippines are written in English, indicating that the government prefers to use English over Filipino. However, in this study, there are directives appearing in hybrid signs at Paseo de Santiago indexing Cebuano Visayan alongside their English translations, such as in Figure 3, which is indicative that the language is spoken in the territory.

Figure 2
English signage of official and public announcements



Figure 3
Bilingual Cebuano Visayan- English signage at Paseo de Santiago



Signage in English provides essential instructions and guidelines such as dress codes, registration procedures, and behavioral expectations. For example, visitors are instructed to proceed to the registration area and complete health declaration forms before engaging in activities, to fall in line to get tickets for adventure rides, and to wear appropriate clothing inside the premises of the shrine. English is also the primary language used in navigational signage, including street signs and directional indicators. Phrases like "This way" direct tourists to various amenities and facilities, enhancing the ease of movement and accessibility within the tourist destinations. Information on where tourists can park their vehicles and whether or not a parking fee is required in the tourist destination is also in English. Promotional signage in English informs tourists about available services, products, and amenities, helping them make informed choices. At locations like Paseo de Santiago, Divine Mercy Shrine, and Dahilayan Adventure Park, signs advertise catering services, function hall bookings, and personalized merchandise. One sign at the Divine Mercy Shrine promotes natural family planning services, providing schedules and contact details. Another at Dahilayan features customized t-shirts, including pricing and purchase information. In all of these promotional signage and advertisements, English is used. This shows the power of English in conveying marketing-oriented information.

English is also the preferred language for conveying information about safety and regulations in Northern Mindanao destinations. The LLs bearing information about warnings, prohibitions, public health measures, and the expected behaviors of tourists while inside the destination premises are generally written in English. An example of prohibition signs commonly found in all five tourist destinations is the "No Smoking" sign, aiming to promote a smoke-free environment and thus protect people's health. The findings suggest that English is the language of safety in the LL of tourist destinations. It is the language used to articulate a potential hazard or a desirable behavior (Prest, 2015), suggestive of the authoritative appeal and directive strength

evoked by the English language on the signs (Jazul & Bernardo, 2017). As argued by Landry and Bourhis, the dominance of a specific language on either public or private signs can be suggestive of its value and status in relation to other languages within the sociolinguistic setting (Landry & Bourhis, 1997).

The English names of objects and places not only mark internationalism and trendiness (Lu et al., 2019) but can also fulfill the linguistic needs of foreign tourists, where English terms are easily understood over their local language counterparts. This finding corroborates the findings of LL studies in Indonesia, Marib, Yemen, Hong Kong, and Saudi Arabia, reporting that English is the preferred language in tourism despite coexisting languages because of its international appeal and practical uses (Al-Sofi, 2024; Hadiati, 2023; Hazaea, et al., 2024; Lam, 2024; Rastitiati & Suprastayasa, 2022).

As can be seen from the findings, there is a preferential attitude toward using English to give tourists instructions. Even bilingual or hybrid signs generally contain more English words than Filipino and Cebuano Visayan languages, thus revealing sidelined languages in the LL (Finzil, 2012). The English-dominant landscape in Northern Mindanao tourism does not necessarily index the spoken languages in the community. Instead, it implies that visitors and tourists in these destinations are literate in English since most of the crucial information tourists need, like directions, instructions, street signs, and advertisements, is articulated in English. The findings suggest that signage caters more to English-literate tourists than to the linguistic reality of local communities. While English may be chosen for practical and commercial reasons, its dominance reduces the visibility and perceived value of local languages in the tourism landscape. This aligns with Eclipse and Tenedero's (2018) findings that English prevalence can minoritize other languages, reinforcing the idea that global appeal often comes at the cost of linguistic diversity.

Thus, current research across multiple contexts corroborates that privileging English in tourist LL aligns with global tourism demands and communicative clarity but also contributes to the diminished visibility of local languages. Thus, the prestige of using English in the LL can be the sign makers' "good reason" for using English over other languages. The use of English conveys modernity and international appeal, which signals economic advantage (Lu et al., 2019). Findings from Marib, Yemen, likewise highlight monolingual English signs serving symbolic and informational functions (Al-Sofi, 2024), aligning with the present observations in this study. Studies in Saudi Arabia's Abha show similar patterns, where English and Arabic signage primarily serve both practical and status-related functions (Hazaea et al., 2024), mirroring the current data on English use for regulation and wayfinding. Even urban studies, such as those on Hong Kong's tourist areas (Lam, 2024) reveal English signage asserting global identity and prestige despite coexisting languages. Findings also confirm that English is widely used for navigational and regulatory signs, consistent with observations by Jazul and Bernardo (2017) and De Los Reyes (2014) on its clarity and directive strength, and when paired with bilingual signs like those in Paseo de Santiago, reflect a strategy of localization, though English remains visually and textually dominant, often marginalizing local languages like Filipino and Cebuano.

Moreover, the findings suggest that signage caters more to English-literate tourists than to the linguistic reality of local communities. While English may be chosen for practical and commercial reasons, its dominance reduces the visibility and perceived value of local languages in the tourism landscape. Thus, current research across multiple contexts corroborates that privileging English in tourist LL aligns with global tourism demands and communicative clarity but also contributes to the diminished visibility of local languages.

4.2 Symbolic Functions

The LL in Northern Mindanao tourism is generally in English, with 93.55 % of the signage written in monolingual English, as shown in Table 2. The data shows that Cebuano, the lingua franca spoken by the majority in Northern Mindanao, appears in only 4-6% of the total amount of signage in the region's LL, while other local languages are absent. Applying Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital and Boudon's notion of rational action for economic gain, the prevalence of English in the tourism landscape of Northern Mindanao signals universal appeal, modernity, and global readiness, while often sidelining local languages. In the case of Dahilayan Adventure Park and Mantigue Island Nature Park, the English descriptors like Adventure Park or Island Nature Park alongside local place names such as Dahilayan and Mantigue (see Figures 4 and 5), are

Table 2
Types of Signage in Northern Mindanao Tourism

Types of Signage	Freq	%
<i>Monolingual English</i>	290	93.55
<i>Monolingual Cebuano</i>	12	3.87
<i>Bilingual (English-Cebuano)</i>	7	2.26
<i>Bilingual (English – Filipino)</i>	1	0.32
Total	310	100%

used to increase visibility, attract diverse tourists, and improve digital reach, while the local place names add a sense of local flavor. Empirical studies reflect similar dynamics across the Philippines. Mendoza and Bernardo (2025) reported that English dominates

the LL of tourist areas in Baguio and La Union in the Philippines. Local languages are rarely used, and they typically appear only to provide local flavor. Similarly, in the multilingual landscape of Cavite's Amadeo, Ambion (2023) found that English was frequently used in commercial signs linked to tourism, projecting sophistication and higher economic value. Even in historically significant locations like Intramuros, Manila, English is prioritized to appeal to foreign visitors. Filipino and regional languages, on the other hand, are limited to secondary or regulatory functions (Manalastas, in press).

Figure 4

Entrance Signage at Dahilayan Adventure Park



Figure 5

Welcome Signage at Mantigue Island Nature Park



In the case of Northern Mindanao, all signs promoting services and products, such as in Figure 6, are in monolingual English. Local languages, such as Cebuano and Higaonon, are sidelined in tourism promotion in the region. This linguistic choice symbolizes a desire to align with global tourism standards and appeal to international visitors. English, as the preferred language in promotions and advertisements, is positioned as a marker of modernity and accessibility. However, its dominance in tourism reflects the marginalization of the local languages in the region. The preference of English symbolizes the sidelining of local identities in favor of a market-oriented image. The absence of local and indigenous languages in Northern Mindanao tourism spaces signals the invisibility of local communities and emphasizes which voices and cultures are considered marketable in the tourism economy. Hence, English dominance symbolizes economic gain and cultural displacement.

Although bilingual signage exists (see Figure 6), English often occupies the top or center of signs and is presented in larger fonts, representing visual and symbolic hierarchy, relegating local languages to secondary roles or omitting them entirely. When monolingual English dominates the signage, it is suggestive of the language's elevated status in the sociolinguistic setting (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Contrary to this, bilingual and multilingual signage performs dual informational and symbolic roles in enhancing tourist satisfaction and promoting inclusivity (Hazaea et al., 2024; Rastitiati & Suprastayasa, 2022).

Figure 6

Promotional signage



Figure 7

English dominant bilingual signage



More recent research highlights the developmental benefits of incorporating multilingual signage in tourism to foster economic growth and cultural sustainability. Studies by Hadiati (2023) and Nenotek et al. (2025) demonstrate that multilingual signs, which include local languages alongside English, improve tourists' cultural understanding and promote a more authentic experience, enhancing place attachment and repeat visitation.

4. Conclusions

This study analyzes the informational and symbolic functions of English in the tourism landscape in Northern Mindanao, Philippines. The findings reveal that the LL is predominated by the English language, serving both informational functions and symbolic ones. The finding reflects the essential communicative and economic role of English in the tourism industry, but it also carries deep symbolic meaning where English reflects global prestige and utility as a lingua franca, and simultaneously disempowers local languages by sidelining them in the construction of regional identity. Drawing on Bourdieu, English operates as a form of linguistic capital that enhances the marketability of tourism destinations. Through Boudon's lens, we understand how rational decisions to use English can unintentionally reproduce linguistic inequalities. While English undoubtedly plays a vital role in facilitating tourism, critical reflection is needed to ensure that its use does not come at the expense of local languages and cultural authenticity. Future tourism planning and policy must find ways to integrate local languages meaningfully into the public linguistic landscape, thereby fostering both global engagement and local empowerment. As tourism continues to expand in Northern Mindanao, there is a need to reconsider how language choices in public signage can promote not only accessibility but also inclusivity and cultural authenticity. The present study can be a reference for future LL research on the tourism industry in the region. Researchers may explore the perspectives of public and private signage makers in choosing the language used in the signs they make. Their decision to choose a particular language for their signage, as well as the language preference of the ones reading them, may be investigated. Moreover, the present study is limited by its focus on textual analysis and the absence of perspectives from signage producers and users. Future research should include stakeholders' language ideologies and tourists' reception of multilingual signage, as well as comparative studies across regions. Such efforts will contribute to more culturally responsive and linguistically inclusive tourism practices in the Philippines.

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