



## STRATEGIC POSITIONING OF MULTIPLE LANGUAGES IN THE VIRTUAL LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

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### INTRODUCTION

Being able to communicate in multiple languages is an innate ability of humans. This multilingual communication is prevalent not only among people during day-to-day conversations, but is also becoming increasingly common within workspaces. Multi-National Companies and local organizations alike that employ people who speak a variety of languages have begun to understand the power of languages on their business.

Piller (2001), in her research on identity construction in advertisements, analyses how companies in Germany use bilingual advertisements for promoting their products based on the power and linguistic command associated with mixing the two languages. Companies attempt to create a self-identity that appeals to the bilingual reader (in the case of this paper, multilingual customers visiting a social media page) and also shape the consumer's identity in the process. Even though some companies declare English as their corporate language, at operational level the system is not rigid according to Lüdi, Höchle & Yanaprasart (2010). Maintaining a flexible language policy or adopting policies based on the expectations of the consumer and the requirement of the business seems to be a viable option.

While numerous studies have been conducted exploring the language policies and practices in multi-national companies in terms of specific language use like telephone communication, meeting room language and business promotion, none of the studies explored how companies represented their identity in social media platforms. As the fastest growing media where businesses meet their consumers and interact with them beyond regular working hours, an analysis of multilingual presence in the digital realm has been seen as significant in this study.

The objectives of the study are:

- To understand how the management of a company utilizes the digital linguistic landscape to create its identity
- To analyse the co-constructed impact of multilingualism in posts on users in the shared space

### METHODOLOGY

In order to ascertain the impact of multilingualism in service sector in Sri Lanka, a mixed method study utilizing ethnographic data collection tools was conducted in an urban city. This study explored the strategies used for communication by the management, staff and the customers who come together for the purpose of business transactions. The study comprised of extensive field observations in multiple branches of the company that sells eyewear products, interviews with selected participants, questionnaire that elicited language use and perception of the staff. As a part of this larger study, the linguistic positioning of the management in representing themselves both in their physical office space in the form of the public notices and in the online space by collecting the photos posted on the company's social media page was also analysed.

This paper specifically focuses on how the virtual linguistic landscape was utilized to represent organisational identity, thereby shaping the pattern of communication of those who use the shared space. An integrated approach that combined aspects of ethnography and linguistic landscape that looks at data existing in the digital realm was needed. While ethnography as a research method attempts to understand communication behaviour of people

in their natural setting, which is then interpreted by the researcher, linguistic landscape turns attention to the language use in public signage. An additional digital aspect as in the case of this paper, requires to study the use of online public space to reach customers and observe their language behaviour. Maly and Blommaert (2019) have proposed a methodological development that infuses all these elements and named it Digital Ethnographic Linguistic Landscape Analysis (ELLA 2.0) which has been adapted as the framework in this paper.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Within the branches of the company located in the capital city, one language, English, could be distinctly noticed. Informational messages from the management namely public notices and details about the products were predominantly in English. A handheld computer tablets saying “HOW WAS OUR SERVICE?” was installed in strategic locations so that the customers could give feedback on the service received. All the name boards, information about the location of various departments were displayed in English. Posters saying “CLEARLY COMFORTABLE” and “THIS IS WHAT FAST LOOKS LIKE” were displayed in bright, beautiful colours for the customers to see as soon as they enter the store. This could be because English has been envisioned as the language of power and expertise, Piller (2001). The company seems to have channelled high quality and internationally competitive standards by using English.

On social media platform, even though this dominance of English language continued, much more flexible use of language could be observed. Figure 1 details the proportion of languages. More than 50% of all the images were in English, while 23% of the images had a mix of English along with Sinhala and Tamil in them. This indicates an indirect influence of English, but with an added aspect of localization. While Sinhala only images were at 16%, display of Tamil only images were at minimum, sharing only 2% of the total screen space. Despite low representation, a deeper look at the data revealed a strong socio-cultural link with the local languages.

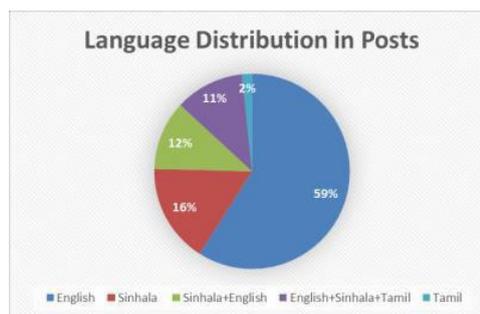


Figure 1: Language Distribution in Posts

### Brand Identity

Images taken from the company’s social media page were categorised based on the weightage given to the purpose. The three categories identified were: images for sales purposes, services rendered (e.g., free eye camps) and public messages (e.g., Mother’s Day, Father’s Day and New year wishes etc.). English was seen as the most preferred language for branding of the company products.

Out of the 23 images that were dedicated to product promotion, 21 of them were in English, while 2 had a mix of Sinhala in them. In addition, 6 of the 11 pictures that displayed messages related to the services offered without displaying products, were in English. In contrast, prioritising English over local languages was absent in photos showing public messages. 17 of the 26 images that wished the customers for Mother’s Day, New Year day or promoting learning and having fun used Sinhala Tamil or both in them.



Figure 2: Promoting Sunglasses

The symbolic representation of English as the language of dominance was visible in further



analysis. In more than one occasion, English fonts appear to be larger than that of Sinhala fonts in promotional pictures. When taking into account the images of people, out of the 11 occurrences, 9 of them show white Anglo-American male and female models as opposed to models of Sri Lankan origin (Figure 2).

In the use of geographical locations too, a bridge located in the United States of America has been used to display clarity of image customers will enjoy while using one of their glasses. All images showing branded frames or glasses and images of models displayed in the interior of the branches contain white Anglo-American models. In addition to that, information related to sales discount was given in English, with prominence given to percentage of discount being displayed in bold red fonts (Figure 2). Through visual imagery, the consumer is given an unambiguous message about what is important in the pictures. This shows that choice of language is intentional and expected to create maximum impact.

### Cultural identity

However, in contrast to Piller's (2001) observations, images related to culture, like wishes for the new year or while passing a public interest message, presence of selective pictures related to Sri Lanka, namely a girl in Sinhalese (a Tamil or Muslim version of this imagery could not be found) traditional dancing attire with clasped hands, children diving into a pond or playing a children's game typical to the region or the Sun and Bo leaves over-shadowed the English letters. This indicates that choice of pictures, colours and fonts is a conscious decision to localize the content.



Figure 3: New Year greetings



Figure 4: Optometry day

In one specific photograph which wishes the customers for Sinhala and Tamil New Year (Figure 3), the message appears in all three languages in identical font size. English has occupied the third position while Sinhala and Tamil occupy the first and second positions respectively, whereas in an image portraying the professional aspect of the company (Figure 4) English takes the first priority. Here, prominence has been given to the purpose of the message and sociocultural identity as a nation has been fore-fronted in one while brand image has been highlighted in the other.

### Multilingual shared space

A mix of languages could be easily observed in the posts by the organisation and the responses from the people who shared the space, especially in messages showing public interest. For instance, in a screenshot image of a comment sent in by a customer, the word 'thaththa' (dad), a Sinhala word was used in an otherwise English text. In another occasion, a message from the organisation for New Year celebrations showed New Year as 'aluth avurudu' in the image. Here, choice of local language for words that bear emotional and cultural values signified an affinity towards establishing Sri Lankan identity.

In a post directed towards children, a mix of Sinhala and English wordings were seen. This could be seen as a way of relating to the users not only professionally but also by showing approachability. The visitors' responses seemed to follow the trend, set by the organisation. In posts using only English, comments followed suit. However, public messages in Sinhala seemed to have gotten the most attention. One particular post about Father's Day



has received 33 comments in a mix of languages with 97 shares. This is a clear indication that use of multiple languages is a definite way to reach customers.

A look into the use of mono (other than English) /bi/tri lingual images shows a mixed set of results. Presence of only Sinhala or only Tamil advertisements is very limited in comparison to mix of languages. Information focused on getting in touch with the customers like announcing the birth of a New Year, national festivals, Mother's Day messages and information regarding a new branch opening are given in Sinhala with images of the Sun, birds, vesak lanterns, stupa and Bo tree which are undoubtedly linked to the land. This could be due to the cultural importance associated with the language and traditions, which showed that the company wanted to connect with their customers at an emotional level.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, an interesting combination of images, texts and colours encapsulate the company philosophy and the brand identity that is being projected. There seems to be a fine balance being maintained when it comes to negotiating brand image and Sri Lankan identity. While use of English in boosting product image expressed a sense of authority and indicated excellence in the field, any message connecting to the customers at a personal level, gave prominence to Sri Lankan values either directly or indirectly through mix of images and culturally significant colours. This is an intentional and analysed execution to attract people of all age groups, gender and social status.

Furthermore, limited posts in Tamil or mix of Tamil also shows that fact that language behaviour in social media platform is co-constructed by the nature of visitors in the space. In other words, the choice of mixing or not mixing languages depends on the level of response received from the users of the space. This pattern of behaviour is similar to what was seen in physical office spaces too.

Having a clear understanding of the linguistic expectations of the management, staff and the customers will aid in developing tailor-made language training programmes that are mandatory for any organisation functioning in a multilingual environment.

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