Language, Space, and Cultural Identity in the Bilingual Landscape of Amman

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Arabic and English are symbolically and visually represented in commercial signage across Amman, with particular attention to the interaction between language variety, visual design, and spatial placement. Despite growing interest in bilingual landscape research, Arabic-dominant urban contexts interspersed with English, such as Jordan, have received comparatively little attention, especially regarding how visual signage contributes to the construction of cultural identity in a globalised city. Drawing on Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotic framework, this study adopts a qualitative linguistic landscape approach, using photographic documentation of storefronts and billboards from major commercial streets in Amman. First, the analysis illustrates how street signs function not only as channels of communication but also as semiotic resources through which identity, belief, and cultural context are expressed. Second, the findings reveal a semiotic distinction between local (informal) Arabic and English languages on shopfronts, which target local and immediate interaction, while the use of Standard Arabic alongside English or Romanised Arabic on billboards aims at a broader, more cosmopolitan audience. By focusing on Amman's bilingual signage, the negotiation of cultural identity through Arabic and English public space interactions that construct multi-layered, globally- informed urban communication forms can be presented.

Keywords: Arabic and English signage; bilingual landscape; geosemiotics; Jordan; language and identity

INTRODUCTION

The present study draws on Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotic approach as its primary analytical framework to examine the multimodal construction of meaning in the commercial and bilingual (Arabic and English) signage in Amman. Geosemiotics is used as it offers analytical tools that enable the examination of how language is anchored in material space through practices such as code preference, spatial arrangement, and interactional order. The present study is motivated by the notion of cultural identity, which has long been a central concern in cultural studies and social theory. It is shaped by a range of factors, including language, religion, history, and other social forces (Mercuri, 2012; Shaikh, 2024). For context, in Jordan, Arabic is spoken in three main varieties, namely, colloquial Arabic, which is used in daily interactions, Modern Standard Arabic, which is employed in formal contexts, and Classical Arabic, which is primarily associated with religious texts. English, however, is widely used across sectors such as business, education, tourism, and medicine. The prominence of English stems not only from its global and national functions but also from its historical association with colonial influence (Hamroyeva & Musayeva, 2025; Seargeant, 2021). Each of these language offerings contributes in distinct ways to national identity and cultural expression (Al-Azzam et al., 2008; Ryding, 2005). By focusing on Arabic

and English use, these language varieties shape cultural identity in Jordan and can be seen as a response to the linguistic and cultural pressures of globalisation (Alomoush & Al-Naimat, 2020).

Against this linguistic backdrop, language in public spaces acquires layered symbolic meanings. For example, Shohamy and Abu Ghazaleh-Mahajneh (2012) observe that the translation of signs from Hebrew into Arabic conveys notions of "empowerment, symbolic meaning, and respect" (p. 100). Arabic can function both as a practical means of communication and as a symbolic marker of state identity. In Jordan, its status as the official language ensures extensive use by minority groups in most areas of daily life. Within this sociolinguistic context, Roman script and English are often used by younger, educated, and upper-class groups to signal modernity and social status. As a result, language in public space, often conceptualised as the linguistic landscape (LL), plays a key role in constructing cultural identity and negotiating social meaning (Ben-Rafael, 2009). Despite the central role of Arabic in shaping local identity, its interaction with English reveals multilingual urban communication across social, spatial, and semiotic layers. This approach, as we shall see later, highlights how English signage organically responds to urban environments' intended audiences, and how billboards in Arabic function not only as communicative tools but also as symbolic acts.

While there has been growing scholarly interest in the linguistic landscapes of global cities (Backhaus, 2007; Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009), relatively little attention has been paid to the role of signage as a distinct visual and multimodal genre in the construction of identity in Jordanian society. For instance, recent LL research has increasingly emphasised the role of multilingual and semiotic resources in shaping urban identities, particularly in non-Western contexts (e.g. Alfaifi & Mobarki, 2025; Al-Naimat, 2025; Hopkyns & van den Hoven, 2022;), yet, despite the central role of languages in shaping national and cultural identity, firstly, there remains limited empirical research on how such a bilingual context is visually, spatially, and semiotically deployed in commercial signage in Amman, particularly in contexts where it appears alongside English (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). Secondly, existing research has often prioritised linguistic code choice over the visual and spatial dimensions of meaning-making, often lacking geosemiotics and multimodal approaches in their investigations. By lagging behind in terms of geosemiotics and multimodality, it restricts our understanding of how linguistic and visual practices in public space reflect broader sociocultural and ideological dynamics in Jordanian society (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). As such, Arabic-dominant English-speaking urban environments, especially in Jordan, remain sanitised. This study, therefore, addresses this gap by analysing commercial signage in Amman through a geosemiotic lens, focusing on how linguistic and visual resources both in English and Arabic are used to negotiate cultural identity. Specifically, this study examines how different varieties of Arabic, visual semiotic resources, and the English language are enmeshed in commercial signage, how spatial placement shapes meaning, and how a geosemiotic framework can enrich LL research in Arabic and English-dominant urban contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the mid-1990s, LL research has developed substantially within sociolinguistics. Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 25), who first introduced the concept of LL, define it as the language displayed on public signs such as road signs, advertisements, and government notices. LL is widely regarded as a useful lens for understanding the social and cultural forces shaping a particular community. More recent scholarship has expanded this definition by emphasising mobility, digitalisation, and multimodal resources in urban spaces (Hiippala et al., 2024; Napu, 2024). In this way, LL not only reflects the languages spoken in a community but also reveals shared social goals and identities. According to Ben-Rafael (2009), "presentation of self" and "collective identity" are two important approaches for interpreting signs. "Presentation of self" refers to items that render an actor "unique," while "collective identity" refers to "whom the actor belongs to and wishes to attract clients on the basis of fellowship or similarity" (p. 46). This distinction is particularly useful for understanding how community identities are visually represented in public space. This study highlights the close relationship between LL and identity, showing how public signage both reflects and shapes social and cultural identities. Recent LL studies in the Arab world have explored how Arabic interacts with English and other languages in public spaces, highlighting tensions between globalisation, authenticity, and identity (Alomoush, 2021; Alotaibi & Alamri, 2022; Hazaea et al., 2025). These studies show that Arabic signage is not being displaced; rather, it is strategically adapted to contemporary sociocultural conditions.

To explore this relationship further, the study adopts Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotic model. Within this framework, meaning emerges through three interrelated systems. Interaction order entails the social relations inferred in face-to-face interactions, such as the degree of formality or informality a sign conveys to its viewers. Visual semiotics focuses on how meaning is constructed through visual resources such as layout, typeface, imagery, and spatial arrangement. Place semiotics examines how the spatial relationships and physical location of signs influence their interpretation. At this level, three types of signs are distinguished: 1) situated signs, which are meaning-dependent on their surrounding contexts, 2) decontextualised signs, such as standardised trademarks, carrying the same meaning everywhere, and 3) transgressive signs, like graffiti, which consciously disregard spatial conventions. As Scollon and Scollon note (2003), geosemiotics integrates these dimensions to form what they describe as "place" (p. 12). This approach illustrates how spatial and social principles continue to underpin LL research. Recent studies continue to adapt geosemiotic principles to contemporary urban contexts, highlighting their relevance for analysing multilingual and multimodal signage in globalised cities (Kim et al., 2025; Lazar, 2022).

Other scholars have also made significant contributions to this area of research. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) theory of visual grammar, for example, expands LL analysis by examining how visual design shapes meaning. Although their framework is not adopted directly in this study, their work, along with broader multimodal discourse scholarship, has been instrumental in highlighting how meaning extends beyond written language. Contemporary signage has introduced new ways of displaying information, including dynamic and interactive formats. In this regard, Shohamy and Waksman (2009) argue that LL encompasses all semiotic resources within a given space, not just written language, making this especially relevant to signage's dynamic and multimodal features. Similarly, Jaworski and Thurlow (2010) emphasise the importance of incorporating non-linguistic modes of communication when analysing LL, particularly in increasingly multimodal urban environments. More specifically, signage shapes meaning not only

through written language but also through visual semiotic resources such as colour and imagery. Visual semiotic elements, as highlighted in multimodal discourse studies, play a central role in meaning-making. Likewise, signage incorporates multiple multimodal components that challenge traditional understandings of linguistic communication. As noted by Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) and Shohamy and Gorter (2009), LL signs are not limited to static texts but involve dynamic interactions of image, space, and language that reflect and transform social meanings in contemporary spaces.

The present study examines how language use and identity formation are shaped through social and communicative practices in public space. Recent research highlights the role of multimodal communication in shaping how individuals express identity across diverse contexts (Chayko, 2021; Zhang et al., 2025). Studies such as Yannuar et al. (2025) demonstrate how public signage functions as an indicator of language vitality, revealing how local languages persist alongside dominant national and global languages in multilingual urban spaces. Within this framework, the study examines Jordan's sociolinguistic context, focusing on the role of English, Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, and Jordanian Arabic in constructing identity. By analysing bilingual signage in Jordanian public spaces, the study explores how language and imagery provide cultural representation of identity. Arabic and English used in LL signage form a central part of social identity, shaped by political and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the emergence of diverse semiotic practices continues to reshape how linguistic and cultural identities are represented. Accordingly, this study explores how linguistic and visual elements interact to construct cultural meaning in Amman's LL. Through a geosemiotic approach, it investigates how signage functions as a visual expression of identity, belief, and cultural values in Jordanian public space.

METHODOLOGY

This study followed a three-step methodological process involving the selection of research areas, the identification of units of analysis, and the development of a coding scheme. The analysis is guided by a semiotic framework, specifically geosemiotics (Scollon & Scollon, 2003), which foregrounds the relationship between language, place, and visual representation in public signage. This model examines how meaning emerges through the interaction of language, images, and their spatial location in the urban environment.

RESEARCH AREAS

Data were collected in December 2024 from commercial streets in Amman, including Queen Rania Street, Al-Madina Street, and Mecca Street, which were selected due to their dense concentration of signage. Following Cenoz and Gorter (2006), the study focused on areas with shared characteristics and recorded only publicly visible signs containing Arabic, with English or Romanised text included when Arabic was dominant. Signs inside stores were excluded. Photographs were taken during working hours to ensure adequate visibility of the signs.

THE UNIT OF ANALYSIS

The unit of analysis refers to the specific signs selected for examination (Cenoz & Gorter, 2006). In this study, the unit of analysis includes signage primarily in Arabic, occasionally accompanied by English or Romanised script. For analytical clarity, the examples are presented in English rather than reproducing the original Arabic. In their original form, the texts were written in either colloquial or Standard Arabic, reflecting local social and cultural nuances. Two main types were examined: billboards (large public displays) and storefront signs (smaller displays on business façades such as bakeries, pharmacies, and cafés). These advertisements included both branded products in Arabic and generic promotional messages. Due to these strict inclusion criteria, the number of analysable signs was necessarily limited. Billboards without text or logos were excluded, as were signs not primarily in Arabic. The widespread use of English in some areas of Amman also contributed to the reduced sample size (Alomoush & Al-Naimat, 2020).

The analysis focuses exclusively on commercial signs, excluding official governmental signs that use Standard Arabic for regulatory purposes. Instead, signs were sampled from the façades of commercial establishments, including stores, restaurants, and billboards. The dataset also includes tourist-related signs, typically found on billboards and sponsored by private businesses or travel agencies. Such signs are considered part of the broader commercial signage context due to their advertising function and non-governmental origin.

CODING PROCEDURE

A coding scheme was developed to classify the collected signs, drawing on prior LL research (e.g., Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). The coding scheme follows semiotic principles outlined by Scollon and Scollon (2003), focusing on how language and visual elements interact to produce meaning. Their geosemiotic framework emphasises the relationship between language, place, and visual representation in shaping social meaning.

Signs were coded according to physical attributes (e.g., size, positioning), language use, and visual features such as typography and logos. This categorisation follows established LL practices (e.g. Backhaus, 2007; Shohamy & Waksman, 2009) that classify signs based on physical and semiotic properties. Accordingly, two main categories of signs were identified: Billboards (D1)—large screens typically mounted above stores or on street poles, displaying public advertisements; and Storefront Signs (S1)—smaller displays attached to business façades like those of local shops, restaurants, or pharmacies.

In this study, the signs were analysed following established LL practices. To illustrate the analytical procedure, one storefront sign from Queen Rania Street was examined as an example. The sign displayed Arabic as the dominant language, with a smaller English transliteration beneath it. It was coded as a storefront sign (S1) and classified as bilingual, with Arabic occupying the most visually prominent position. This example illustrates how linguistic choice, visual elements, and sign type interact to shape communicative meaning.

In line with standard LL practices (e.g., Backhaus, 2007; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009), intercoder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa. The coding process involved several stages designed to ensure analytical consistency. Two coders, both graduate-trained linguists with LL research experience and proficiency in Arabic and English, independently coded a random subsample of 30 signs. The agreement was substantial, with a $\kappa = 0.82$. Prior to coding, the coders discussed the analytical framework and jointly coded a small sample to ensure consistency. Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

RESULTS

Based on the dataset described above, Table 1 summarises the distribution of Arabic signage across storefronts and billboards in Amman. Colloquial Arabic appears most frequently on storefront signs (34%, or 28 out of 82), while bilingual combinations with English are also prominent, accounting for 27% (22 out of 82). These patterns suggest distinct sociolinguistic functions: Colloquial Arabic is used more frequently on storefronts to signal informal and culturally intimate communication, whereas Standard Arabic is more common on billboards, where broader and more formal communication is required. Standard Arabic appears less frequently on storefront signs, whether used alone or in combination with English. This pattern highlights a preference for colloquial Arabic in local cultural contexts, aiming to address Jordanians in their everyday language. By contrast, Standard Arabic appears more frequently on billboards, often alongside English (42%, 33 out of 79), to reach broader audiences such as local residents, regional visitors, and international tourists.

TABLE 1. Distribution of Arabic signage in the linguistic landscape of Amman

Type of commercial signage	Colloquial Arabic	Colloquial Arabic (CA) & English	Standard Arabic (SA) & English	Standard Arabic	Total
Storefront signs	28	22	14	18	82
Billboard advertising	6	13	27	33	79
Total	34	35	41	51	161

These figures illustrate how the LL accommodates cosmopolitan influences while maintaining local cultural values. Within this cultural layer, Classical Arabic, particularly in the form of Qur'anic verses or Hadith, was occasionally used in signage. The signs often include common Islamic expressions and quotes used in everyday life. These expressions typically appear as secondary elements, placed beside or beneath the main store name, rather than serving as the primary identifier, and often convey a particular value or message about the business. To further interpret these patterns, the following sections examine how language choices are enacted across social, visual, and spatial dimensions.

INTERACTION ORDER: SOCIAL AND COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS

Scollon and Scollon's (2003) model of geosemiotics defines interaction order as the way in which social relations are shaped within specific spaces. From this perspective, signage reflects how language shapes audience engagement, cultural intimacy, and levels of formality within a given setting.

On Amman's commercial streets, signage frequently features colloquial expressions that speak directly to Jordanians. Many supermarkets, restaurants, and drugstores feature multilingual signage, with a clear emphasis on colloquial Arabic. For instance, food outlet signage often emphasises freshness and indulgence, with phrases like "hot and freshly made" or "treat yourself." Cafés, on the other hand, frequently use informal questions or invitations, such as "what's your coffee?" or "drop in anytime." Hospitality-oriented businesses, by contrast, often rely on welcoming or affective slogans like "welcome in" or "enjoy the moment." Retail signage often features casual labels for everyday goods, such as "your essentials" or "things you need." Playful or relaxed brand names are also frequently observed on shopfront displays. These English

descriptions aim to preserve the communicative intent and key cultural nuances of the original colloquial Arabic. Similar signage strategies have been observed in urban contexts worldwide, where informal and playful language tends to foster customer engagement. English-language advertisements often use marked or unconventional features—such as creative wording, novelty, or humour—to attract attention and enhance memorability (Mahyuni et al., 2023).

The sign in Figure 1, for example, features a colloquial phrase translated into English ("The house is yours") accompanied by a small house symbol integrated into the logo. The small house symbol reflects values of belonging and hospitality, subtly inviting viewers to step inside.

The visual design functions not only to name the restaurant but also to symbolically invite viewers into a space of warmth and welcome. Together, text and iconography establish an informal, culturally intimate connection between the sign-maker and the local audience. Overall, these semiotic elements invite Jordanians into shared cultural practices that reinforce identity and social connection.

FIGURE 1. Restaurant sign featuring colloquial Arabic phrase and cultural iconography

Other signs also create a sense of closeness with viewers, using collective forms of address, as shown in Figure 2. On this billboard, a colloquial message is displayed and translated into English as 'If you forget us, we will not forget you.' The message uses conditional phrasing and the second-person pronoun 'you,' reflecting strategies common in English public discourse. These choices help audiences relate to the text and to one another, shaping social relations (Fairclough, 1995). By combining visuals with informal language, the sign conveys a message about continuity. It also evokes shared memory and community belonging. The large white text stands out against the saturated purple background, while faint silhouettes suggest shared identity and intergenerational connection. Rather than serving only as an advertisement, the sign appeals to social care and responsibility. This approach exemplifies visual-oriented sociolinguistic practices that are commonly observed in English-speaking contexts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

FIGURE 2. Billboard using colloquial Arabic to evoke emotional and cultural solidarity

Another example of interaction order is observed in Figure 3, which features a sign promoting a popular flatbread dish commonly associated with street food culture. As a semiotic performance, the colloquial phrase evokes sensory and cultural associations tied to everyday food practices. From an interactional perspective, the sign creates a brief dialogue: a visual cue that assumes people already know the culture and invites them to join in experiencing that custom. The sign functions as more than an advertisement—it offers a semiotic invitation to participate in shared cultural experiences and to reinforce local norms of participation.

FIGURE 3. Colloquial Arabic sign evoking cultural memory and sensory experience

Overall, the deployment of colloquial Arabic—particularly on storefronts and select billboards—serves as a strategy for building emotional and cultural connection with Jordanians. These signs carry both commercial and cultural weight, anchoring Arabic in shared memory, social convention, and national identity. Through interactional semiotics, Amman's LL emerges as a space where language, image, and social practice intersect. Such language choices are further acts of identity through which sign-makers publicly assert cultural membership. This accords with Ben-Rafael et al.'s (2006) presentation-of-self principle in the LL field, which explains how public signs strategically convey group or community identity both internally and externally.

While such signs convey emotional intimacy and everyday cultural proximity in colloquial forms, the broader national or cultural identity themes are constructed through formal language and spatial location (especially on billboards). These practices will be discussed further in the place semiotics part of the analysis.

VISUAL AND TEXTUAL SEMIOTICS: AESTHETIC AND SYMBOLIC
REPRESENTATION OF MEANING

Meaning emerges from the combination of visual and textual elements, which signal broader cultural notions such as hospitality, tradition, or other communal values, as illustrated earlier in Figure 1. This sign exemplifies multimodality, as text and image work together through the phrase and the visual icon of the house.

This interaction reflects the semiotic diversity of the LL, where interpretation is constructed through multiple communicative resources. This aligns with Jaworski and Thurlow's (2010) argument that the visual treatment of script itself carries symbolic meaning. A shop sign like Arafat Sweets (see Figure 4) illustrates this, where the salient Arabic surname visually highlights heritage identity while the smaller English initials "AS" add a subtle branding layer. The wheat stalks around the logo add to this significance by visually connecting the company to the traditional ingredients of its products. This balance shows how semiotic design can foreground Arabic as a cultural marker even within multilingual commercial settings (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010).

FIGURE 4. Shop sign highlighting an Arabic family name with subtle English branding

In Jordan, the use of personal and family names on signage appears to do more than simply identify businesses; it often signals trust, evokes cultural memory, and indicates community affiliation. The dataset comprises locally recognised business and brand names spanning sectors including retail, services, and food production. These naming practices seem to index local authenticity and social familiarity, thereby linking commercial spaces to community identity.

While family names often emphasise heritage and trust, corporate brands such as Orange tend to foreground innovation and globalisation, reflecting broader semiotic patterns commonly noted in multilingual urban signage. In these signs, meaning emerges from a combination of formal language, English, and visual design elements such as colour, scale, and layout. The use of Standard Arabic—illustrated by phrases such as "For the first time in Jordan," "Buy your service," or "Activate electronically"—appears alongside English in signage. This combination seems to visually reinforce authority and credibility at both local and national levels. These linguistic choices function similarly to formal English-language signage, where carefully structured phrasing conveys professionalism, reliability, and institutional or corporate identity. These effects are often noted in LL research, where formal language and multimodal design appear to reinforce both authority and credibility in public signage (Ben-Rafael, 2009; Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Scollon & Scollon, 2003; Shohamy & Waksman, 2009).

FIGURE 5. Bilingual visual semiotics of innovation and identity

Building on these broader patterns, Figure 5 illustrates how such semiotic strategies operate in a specific corporate case. The persuasiveness of Orange's message lies in its use of Standard Arabic as an inspirational slogan, which also reflects Orange Jordan's longstanding presence in the country. Additionally, the use of Arabic phrases stands out more than the Romanised English terms like "eKYC" and "Sajelni," which are perceived as markers of modernity and digital globalisation. This configuration demonstrates how global technological discourse is anchored in local linguistic legitimacy. This dynamic code-mixing aligns with Pennycook's (2010) vision of urban centres as metrolingual spaces where local and global languages flow together to express rich, multi-layered identities. These visual-textual strategies demonstrate how the Orange signage layers meanings of heritage and modernity. Crucially, these meanings also rely on where the signs are placed in the city, which calls for attention to the spatial dimension of geosemiotics.

PLACE SEMIOTICS: SPATIAL MEANING AND SYMBOLIC POSITIONING

The previous sections showed that emotional bonding is constructed through the use of colloquial language (Interaction Order) and that symbolic meaning emerges from visual composition (Visual/Textual Semiotics). This section examines how meaning is placed spatially and scaled socially within the city of Amman. From a semiotics perspective, signage helps construct symbolic hierarchies through its location, language register, and visual prominence. As Scollon and Scollon (2003) explain, where signs are placed is part of their meaning, connecting their linguistic content to the physical and social world. Signs are not merely communicative tools; they are embedded within space in ways that reproduce social power, identity, and hierarchy.

The placement characteristics of signage—its location, intended audience, and potential modalities of interpretation—all shape how its messages are received. Storefront signs feature everyday phrases and expressions to attract the attention of local residents. Standard Arabic is employed on billboards in Amman in large, bold letters, particularly in affluent, high-traffic urban areas. Such official signs function at a broader symbolic scale. For example, Figure 6 presents a billboard that combines bright urban imagery with an English phrase translated from Standard Arabic ("Happy Day, Amman"), framing the city as cheerful and forward-looking. The formal phrasing mirrors English-language billboards commonly found in urban settings worldwide, where such language is often used to signal civic pride or institutional authority, with visual features such as colour, scale, and layout reinforcing the message (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Scollon & Scollon, 2003). This illustrates a cross-cultural pattern in which formal

English language, together with visual design, contributes to the construction of authority and urban identity. Its placement in a high-visibility urban space amplifies its symbolic power, shaping public perception of the city as cosmopolitan and modern. As Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) argue, language in public signage functions as a symbolic marker of identity, group belonging, and power—an effect observable across languages, but one that is often articulated through English in global urban landscapes (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Seargeant, 2021).

Whereas Figure 6 emphasises urban joy and unity, Figure 7 broadens the scale to national tourism. The billboard uses a Standard Arabic message translated as "Dive into the depths of adventure", with pictures of Petra, Wadi Rum, and the Dead Sea. The message invites viewers to visit Jordan's popular destinations, linking local identity with international tourist interest. The insertion of a second, smaller English line—*www.visitjordan.com*—extends the invitation to international audiences, yet the Arabic wording anchors the message in shared national values and imagination. This juxtaposition illustrates how Standard Arabic continues to carry symbolic authority, while English, in this context, serves to extend the sign's international accessibility and communicative reach, particularly for non-Arabic-speaking audiences (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). Together, these linguistic choices position the billboard as both nationally grounded and globally oriented, reflecting a pattern commonly noted in urban and tourism-related linguistic landscapes (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010).

FIGURE 6. Billboard using Standard Arabic to promote joyful urban identity in Amman

FIGURE 7. Bilingual billboard framing local adventure with Standard Arabic and English

Beyond tourism, signage also communicates financial and corporate authority, as illustrated in Figure 8. A billboard for Jordan Kuwait Bank displays a Standard Arabic slogan translated as "The First Competition Wallet in Jordan", giving it an official, institutional tone. The bank name appears in both Arabic and English. Standard Arabic is therefore used to communicate the message of the billboard to a broad Arab audience and yet maintain institutional authority within the local context. Its placement in affluent areas, combined with an institutional register, further reinforces the bank's prestige by linking financial services to ideas of national progress and transnational belonging.

This practice is evident in billboards advertising international services such as Orange, Apple Store, Zain Cash, and Google Play, alongside national brands like KITCO, Smart Chemicals, Vimto, Ghadir Water Company, and McDonald's. On these signs, Standard Arabic slogans often appear in large, visually dominant fonts, signalling local linguistic prominence. In contrast, English brand names are often smaller and less visually prominent. Despite this, they function as global identifiers and retain significance due to their widespread recognition and familiarity among viewers. These features reflect broader dynamics of language visibility and symbolic hierarchy in public signage (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Scollon & Scollon, 2003).

FIGURE 8. Billboard for Jordan Kuwait Bank with Standard Arabic slogan

From a place semiotics perspective, billboards serve as markers of national vision, corporate strength, and social hierarchy. Formal languages, regardless of whether they are English or Arabic, are deployed in prominent sites to convey authority and ambition, whereas informal expressions on smaller signage index heritage and everyday cultural values. Together, these multimodal practices construct a layered semiotic hierarchy, linking language, identity, and space in ways that are comparable to urban signage in other global cities (Lazar, 2022; Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Therefore, the spatial layering of English and standard and colloquial Arabic not only shows social stratification but also frames Amman as a city where global aspiration, national belonging, and local identity intersect visibly within the cityscape.

DISCUSSIONS

This study examines how English and Arabic are visually, symbolically, and figuratively represented in commercial signage in Amman, focusing on how language variety and visual design contribute to broader social meanings. Using Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotic framework, the analysis shows how signs draw on multimodal resources—including bilingualism, imagery, spatial placement, and typography—to engage audiences, perform identity, and shape symbolic hierarchies within the urban landscape. A notable semiotic pattern emerges in the contrast between signage located at the pedestrian level (such as shopfronts) and that positioned in highly visible public spaces (such as billboards).

On this basis, colloquial Arabic frequently appears on shopfront signs, often in emotionally resonant forms that appeal to local sentiments and shared communal memory. These signs evoke familiarity through everyday expressions, playful slogans, and family or brand names, which signal social intimacy and reinforce local identity (Figures 1–4). In this study, these expressions are rendered in English (e.g., "fresh baked goods," "what's your coffee?" or "grab your essentials") to convey their informal tone and facilitate cross-cultural understanding. As observed in LL research, such playful slogans and naming practices in bilingual signage function as semiotic strategies that foster emotional closeness and a sense of cultural belonging within everyday social life (Ben-Rafael, 2009; Mahyuni et al., 2023). In this way, signage in Amman's commercial spaces might exemplify how languages function not only as a way to communicate but as a means of constructing social belonging and cultural proximity (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006). From an interaction order perspective, these signs, both in English and Arabic, operate within face-to-face communicative contexts, according to local values and conventions, to establish familiarity.

The visual form of storefront signs, particularly the condensed layouts, colourful contrast, and expressive typography, enhances cultural engagement for local audiences. This corresponds with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) observation that typographic and colour choices are never neutral but are instead a form of visual rhetoric. Visual semiotics, in this case, reflects the idea that signs translate interpersonal, spoken interaction into visible form, thereby replicating interaction order (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Standard Arabic appears primarily on billboards, often alongside English, while colloquial Arabic is more common on storefronts, sometimes paired with English to appeal to local audiences (see Table 1). As seen in Figures 5 and 7–8, these patterns suggest bilingual signage that functions as a deliberate strategy in which the combination of Standard Arabic and English languages addresses national and global audiences, while colloquial Arabic reinforces local familiarity and cultural proximity.

Beyond language choice, colour functions as a key semiotic resource in shaping meaning, as illustrated in Figure 5. The billboard's use of orange can be interpreted as conveying energy, creativity, and technological modernity, thereby reinforcing corporate identity across cultural contexts. Such use of colour mirrors English-language signage strategies, where elements like font and layout help convey brand personality, target particular audiences, and improve legibility and recognition in global cities. According to the geosemiotic framework (Scollon & Scollon, 2003), visual semiotic choices often signal authority, institutional credibility, and aspirational messaging. Thus, the semiotic principles underlying signage in both Arabic and English contexts appear comparable, suggesting recurring cross-cultural patterns in visual communication. At the macro-communicative level, billboards move from interpersonal to institutional address. Here, the use of Standard Arabic indexes both official credibility and national unity. However, its frequent co-occurrence with English and Romanised Arabic amplifies its symbolic value and communicative potential. It thus becomes a semiotic resource indexing institutional authority and cosmopolitan orientation. This hybrid process is especially visible in signage targeting upwardly mobile, bilingual, or cosmopolitan-oriented publics, such as shoppers in affluent or business areas. This illustrates the idea that signs derive meaning from the specific social and spatial contexts in which they appear (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Scollon & Scollon, 2003).

Importantly, rather than diminishing the role of English, these multilingual billboard practices reinforce its significance and extend its communicative presence beyond national communication. The signs create a semiotic link between tradition and globalisation, whereby Standard Arabic remains culturally anchored but engaged with transnational flows of branding, consumption, and visual identity. This illustrates what Scollon and Scollon (2003) refer to as "semiotic cycles," when signs are both influenced by and react to the spatial and social practices that surround them. These findings clarify how Arabic varieties and bilingual practices through the interpolation of English symbolically shape sociocultural identities within Amman's LL.

In addition to language choice, spatial position also mediates symbolic meaning. Shopfront signs, encountered daily by local passers-by, facilitate casual and familiar forms of social interaction. Beyond local shopfronts, billboards take up salient positions on highways, at busy intersections, and in commercial areas. Within place semiotics, these spatial differences are not neutral; they encode symbolic hierarchies in which language, form, and positioning collectively create meanings of institutional power and aspirational modernity (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Accordingly, the principle that "situated semiotics override decontextualised semiotics" reinforces this argument, underscoring how the locations and forms are central to interpreting signs (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, p. 142). At the same time, visual semiotic features collaborate with language choices to reinforce these meanings. Institutional billboards typically adopt formal designs, preferring symmetry, large fonts, and standardised branding. In contrast, storefront signage tends to display compact, energetic layouts and playful typography to engage local audiences, as observed in Figures 1–3.

Taken together, the combination of bilingual language register (English and Arabic), visual composition, and spatial placement creates a dynamic bilingual and multimodal landscape. In Amman, this adaptability indicates that the symbolic vitality of language emerges not from resisting globalisation, but from being enacted through multimodal, spatial, and bilingual practices that shape identity and social meaning (Badwan, 2021; Ben-Rafael, 2009). These patterns align with those observed in other global cities, where local and global resources are negotiated through multilingual signage (e.g., Backhaus, 2007; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). The signage in Amman further highlights the wider implications of bilingualism (English and Arabic languages), revealing

how languages interact both visually and textually to maintain cultural identity while engaging in transnational communication.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings show that public signage in Amman functions not only as a means of communication but also as a visual and spatial expression of cultural identity, social hierarchy, and institutional authority. Arabic functions as a dynamic semiotic resource, grounded in local tradition yet interacting fluidly with English. Bilingual signage appears to negotiate cultural and social identities, reflecting patterns seen in other multilingual cities where colloquial language encourages local engagement and more formal advertising conveys institutional authority. These findings underscore the importance of bilingual urban communication in shaping complex semiotic hierarchies and cultural identities that reach both local and global audiences. Focusing on three major commercial streets means that linguistic patterns in other areas, such as rural or lower-income neighbourhoods, remain underrepresented, as do signs produced by government or non-profit institutions. Moreover, the qualitative methods employed do not include direct perspectives of business owners or consumers, leaving open the question of whether the intended symbolic meanings are perceived as such by the public. To address these limitations, future research could incorporate rural and lower-income areas, along with governmental and non-profit signage, to better capture linguistic practices across socio-economic contexts. Ethnographic methods, such as interviews or surveys, could further explore language ideologies and audience interpretations. Such work could deepen our understanding of bilingualism and visual semiotics in urban landscapes, within Jordan and in similar written, cross-cultural, English-Arabic contexts.

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