

Analyzing Linguistic Commodification and English Usage in Non-Anglophone Tourist Destinations

Dr. Ravinder Sharma¹ and Dr. Shyam Maurya²

¹Assistant Professor, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India.

E-mail: ku.ravindersharma@kalingauniversity.ac.in, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9569-6351>

²Assistant Professor, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India.

E-mail: ku.shyammaurya@kalingauniversity.ac.in, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3442-8621>

Abstract: The global growth of the tourism industry has seen language evolve from a means of communication into an economic resource, otherwise referred to as linguistic commodification. The present study aims to analyze the use of the English language in tourist areas outside Anglophone territories through the investigation of the tension between the instrumental and symbolic nature of English in these locations. The identified issue of the study is the possibility of the marginalization of local language identity as compared to the marketing language that focuses more on economic benefits than cultural significance. As the research method, a qualitative multi-case design involving Critical Discourse Analysis of 150 language markers and interviews with 45 individuals will be applied. Some of the obtained results show that while English remains a crucial medium for navigation and safety, the main reason why it is used everywhere in commercial advertising and labeling is associated with its symbolic value as a sign of modernity and elitism. This study demonstrates that a major trend has been established in which there is a hybrid usage of translanguaging that entails the localization of English in order to achieve a cosmopolitan appearance. This study has theoretical implications within sociolinguistics because it establishes the empirical nature of language-as-product. The main implication is that an equilibrium between the teaching of English while preserving the cultural heritage of non-English speaking people is needed.

Key Words: linguistic commodification, english for tourism, non-anglophone destinations, sociolinguistic globalization, language as capital, linguistic landscape, global lingua franca.

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Introduction

The current global tourist scene sees the dominance of the English language as playing an important role in bridging the communication gap between the hosts and the tourists in a period marked by accelerated globalization processes. The growing number of tourists traveling outside their localities means that the English language has gone beyond being a mere vehicle for communication; rather, it has been recognized as a necessary element of touristic infrastructure (Yao, 2023). English-language usage in territories other than Anglophone regions not only indicates the necessity of traveling internationally; it symbolizes the readiness to embrace the global market economy by making the necessary international capital investments and using the related services (Manan & Hajar, 2022; Guo et al., 2020).

Linguistic commodification can be considered one of the terms studied within the scope of this thesis. Linguistic commodification represents the practice of turning languages into commodity skills, which carry economic value. In the case of non-Anglophone destinations for tourism, where English is not a native language spoken there, linguistic commodification works when packaging the language as an economic

service or commodity (Heller et al., 2014). It means that the language becomes deprived of its authenticity and re-branded as an economic skill and appears on menus, signs, and websites (Azwan et al., 2025).

Statement of the Problem

Nevertheless, the main problem addressed by the research is the dichotomy of the English language as economic and symbolic capital. It goes without saying that the fact of economic benefit deriving from mastering the English language does not prevent the marginalization of native language heritage by using English excessively in tourist destinations. The issue lies in the contradiction between the instrumental role of English as the means of achieving clarity of communication and its symbolic representation of modernity and prestige (Kholifah et al., 2021). The current study aims at analyzing how the hierarchy of prestige influences local identity and whether the commoditization of English functions as a facilitator of development or an obstacle to authentic culture (Sharma & Phyak, 2017).

Significance of the Study

From the point of view of sociology and linguistics, the research contributes to the academic discourse on sociolinguistics and documents the process of language development during late capitalism. In terms of education, the paper offers insights regarding the linguistic requirements of tourism practitioners, suggesting the development of a pedagogical model that balances the global benefits and local pride (Stainton, 2018; Vandenbroucke, 2016).

Research Objectives

- To evaluate the patterns of English usage within the linguistic landscapes of non-Anglophone tourist hubs.
- To analyze the socio-economic motivations behind the symbolic use of English in branding and service.
- To identify the impact of linguistic commodification on the identity negotiation of local stakeholders.

The structure of this paper consists of different important parts that are necessary for the full analysis. After the introduction, Section II contains the literature review part, which helps in understanding what is covered in the literature about the topic under investigation. Then Section III covers the theoretical background of the issue of language as capital. Further, in Section IV, the methodological part of the paper shows how the information is gathered using different qualitative methods of data collection. In Section V, the results are analyzed, in Section VI, the discussion is made, while Section VII is dedicated to conclusions.

Literature review

Linguistic Commodification and Capital

The theoretical core of the study rests on the movement away from viewing language as an identity indicator to language as an economic resource. The concept of linguistic commodification refers to the situation when linguistic diversity and cultural uniqueness are commodified for consumption across the world (Heller, 2010; Gao, 2012). This type of thinking is highly motivated by the Linguistic Capital theory, which states that the mastery of a given language can be seen as symbolic capital that can be used for economic profit (Heller & Pujolar, 2010). In case this language is used in the tourism business, English gains the status of a monetary value, providing its users with access to wealth on a global level.

English as a Global Lingua Franca in Tourism

The dominance of English as the Lingua Franca has altered the communication setting of the non-English-speaking world fundamentally. Unlike the spread of languages in past times, the English language in tourism is being spread due to the demand for the neoliberal economy, where English becomes the means of connecting people with different language backgrounds (Wilson, 2018). In the process of this globalization of language, one doesn't just use the grammatical structure and vocabulary but rather takes on a service-oriented personality through using English to cater to the needs of the international traveler (Sharma, 2018a; Sharma, 2018b).

Signage, Branding, and Identity

A wide range of scholarly literature examines the Linguistic Landscape of tourism destinations, looking at the construction of tourist space through linguistic practices in advertising, branding, and service (Yan, 2019; Nie & Yao, 2024). The various studies conducted in a variety of environments, ranging from the online branding of Indonesian resorts to the historical sites of Macao, indicate that English is often used as a form of decoration to indicate modernity and global standardization (Muth, 2017). This practice is particularly significant in the construction of Identity as local actors try to construct an identity relative to the image wish to project internationally. Tourists service providers adopt commoditized identities in which switch between their native language and English (Krumm, 2012; Banda & Mokwena, 2019).

Research Gap

Even though the subject of commodification has received attention in various scholarly articles, it seems that there is a major area lacking in the research. Specifically, one might argue that there is a dearth of longitudinal studies dedicated to the sociolinguistic development of particular centers that are not Anglophone. Existing literature tends to be fragmented, being focused either on the visual dimension or the verbal side of things; there is also a lack of region-oriented research that considers both online and offline aspects. Moreover, there are no comparative studies which discuss how non-Anglophone cultures react to linguistic commodification, i.e. how reject or accept English.

By reviewing the existing literature, one may state that the commodification of English is a natural result of tourism within the capitalist economy. The theories of Bourdieu and Heller help comprehend why this happens. However, the gap shows that still do not know much about how the commodification occurs, i.e. how this transformation is taking place in the process of branding and interaction in emerging tourist markets. Hence, the combination of theory and field research is expected to give more insights into how exactly English becomes a commodity.

Theoretical Framework

Political Economy of Language

Language's political economy will be employed as the theoretical framework guiding the discussion, moving away from the cognitive aspect of language to treat it as a resource whose value is realized in exchange. Within this perspective, no two languages are equal because of the market environment in which the different linguistic varieties operate. Some, such as English, have the potential to generate revenue when used appropriately. English becomes a means of gatekeeping in non-English-speaking tourist areas due to the economic forces involved. According to this perspective, the worth of English lies in its power to ensure the movement of capital throughout the world. In this respect, the importance of the local varieties of English tends to be overlooked in favor of the dominant variety of English.

Sociolinguistic Globalization

Sociolinguistics of globalization examines the consequences of mobility and digital communications on language use. In regard to tourism, the theory tries to analyze how the English language, losing its territoriality, has become a globally recognized interactive language and no longer represents a language limited to only the inner circle states. In fact, it becomes a lingua franca where practice rather than culture becomes essential. It should be noted that the conflict between the "global" (universal language usage in order to accommodate tourists) and "local" (cultural identity represented by indigenous languages) is discussed in this theoretical framework.

Conceptual Model

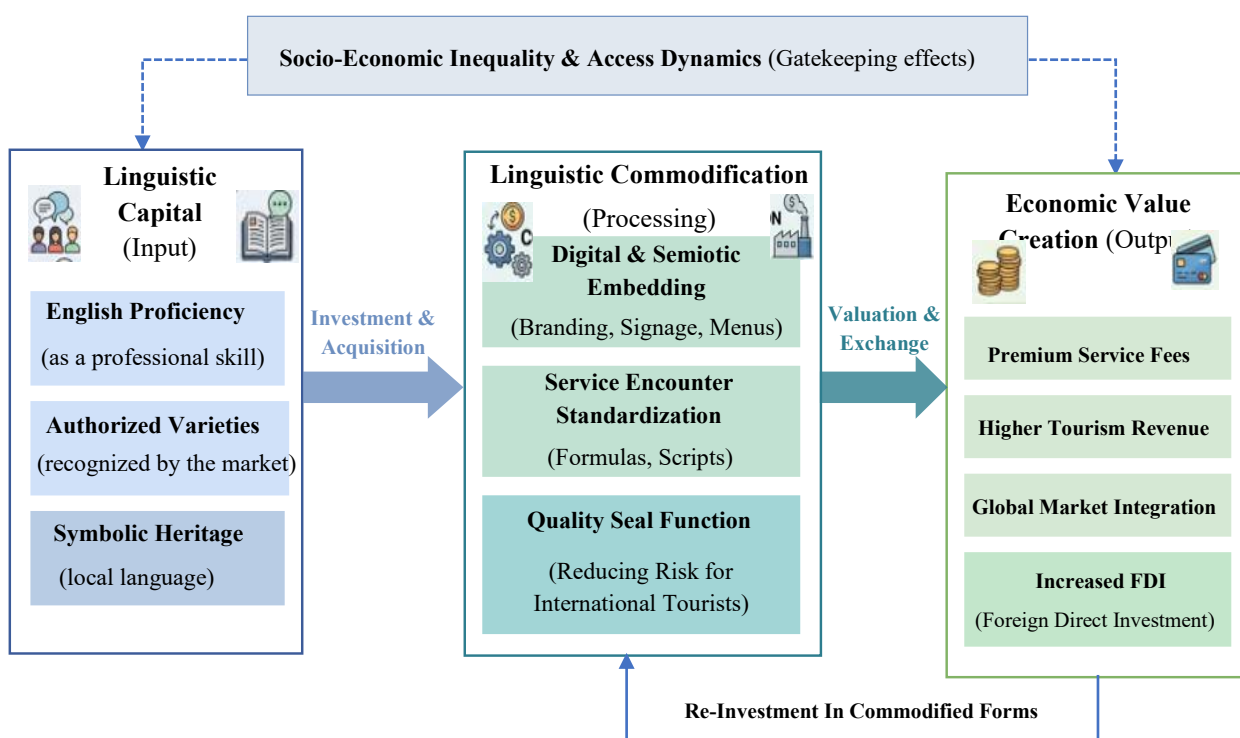


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Linguistic Capital Conversion in Non-Anglophone Tourism

Figure 1 presents the transformation of linguistic capital (input), including language skills and localized symbolic capital, to the economic product through commodification. Specifically, it highlights the two commodification processes – namely Digital & Semiotic Embedding and Service Encounter Standardization processes, which turn language into a saleable good. Such transformation yields some economic gains, which include high prices of service and access to the global market with further possibilities of recycling back into the production process. Most importantly, the entire process of commodification is carried out under the conditions of socio-economic stratification and gatekeeping.

The theoretical framework of this research integrates all the abovementioned theories to create a model based on three dimensions: Functional Utility, Symbolic Prestige, and Economic Exchange. As regards the tourism industry, English is useful for the following purposes. Firstly, it performs some functional purposes related to security and logistics. Secondly, English provides symbolic value as a marker of advancement and quality services. Thirdly, it is useful in terms of Human Capital since the knowledge of English makes one earn more.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative methodology will be employed for this study because of the nature of the phenomenon under consideration. It helps in examining reasons and mechanisms of changes in language use in specific socio-cultural settings. The methodology combines both descriptive and interpretive tools of investigation in order to identify specific socio-cultural dynamics, which can be difficult to observe through quantitative approaches. Basically, it guarantees that the research will be oriented towards understanding people's perceptions and self-identification within specific interaction settings in the tourism business.

Study Area

The research will be conducted in selected non-Anglophone destinations characterized by a growing number of foreign visitors and an ongoing transition to the Anglophone service provision model. Selected as being especially important for local communities and having undergone changes related to the new language strategy used by companies in the region. They should be seen as small-scale manifestations of globalization, since they show how culture and business interact in practice.

Data Collection Techniques

There are three major data sources used for information gathering. First, Field Observations will be conducted to analyze the linguistic landscape in terms of signs, menu boards, and advertisement texts. This tool helps to reveal both officially declared government language policies and actual "bottom-up" language practices. The second channel of data collection involves Semi-structured Interviews of tourists, hospitality employees, and local small business owners regarding their personal views about language use and importance. And finally, Document and Media Analysis will be done of online tourism brochures and social media marketing materials.

Sampling Method

In this study, the purposive sampling technique was used in order to obtain data from individuals who take part in this linguistic exchange between tourist destinations. These individuals included the producers of the linguistic commodities, such as hospitality industry frontline workers; the consumers, such as tourists; and small business owners whose motivation for choosing a certain language policy is purely economic.

Data Analysis

This data is analyzed using the method of Thematic Analysis and the method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Thematic Analysis makes it possible to identify and categorize certain themes that can be recurrent. For instance, it might turn out that there is a theme of professionalism/wealth in relation to English. Then the method of Critical Discourse Analysis is used on the data gained through observations and interviews to find out how ideologies/power are involved in choosing a particular language.

Results

Functional Use of English in Communication

The main layer of English used in the surveyed destinations is purely utilitarian in nature, providing nothing more than an efficient means of executing basic transactions. Analysis of the data gathered from the menus, directions, and transactions suggests that English is used as the lowest common denominator when trying to communicate across diverse languages. In such instances, the language is devoid of its rich layers of meaning and exists only in a state of global English, meant to be clear and concise. As was seen from the analysis of regulatory and safety signs, English served as the second language used in tandem with native tongues in order to get important information across to the foreign tourist.

Table 1 presents the data where Commercial Branding is the leading factor that influences prestige, with a percentage of 65% for English-only use.

Table 1: Frequency and Function of English vs. Local Language in Tourist Signage (N=150 Signs)

Signage Category	English Only (%)	Bilingual (Eng + Local) (%)	Local Only (%)	Primary Function Observed
Official/Regulatory	15%	75%	10%	Navigational/Safety
Commercial Branding	65%	20%	15%	Prestige/Modernity
Menus/Services	40%	55%	5%	Transactional Clarity
Decorative/Artistic	80%	10%	10%	Aesthetic/Authenticity

Prestige and Modernity

In addition to the practical usage of English, it has been discovered that English is considered a prestigious language that signifies modernity. According to the results of the study, unique stores, expensive hotels, and upscale cafes prefer to utilize English only in their brand names even when targeting their local clientele, which speaks the official language. At such institutions, English is used symbolically instead of being used literally in order to create an atmosphere of cosmopolitanism and upscale quality of the service offered. It can be suggested that the utilization of English contributes to the improvement of the tourism product's quality perception. Firms that utilize English for marketing purposes were able to charge higher prices compared to others due to the symbolic representation of quality standards of the business.

Code-mixing and Translanguaging

The study revealed a considerable tendency towards hybrid linguistics, wherein English is fluidly mixed with the native tongue. Such a case of translanguaging can be seen in signs and informal interactions, like starting with a local greeting followed by instructions in English. Hybridity here serves a specific function, that is, giving tourists the feeling of safety from authentic culture in the form of a dash of locality with an assurance of comfort and safety through a universal language. The mixing of codes in advertisements, for instance, local nouns with English verbs, has been witnessed as an effective strategy to market products for their international appeal.

Inequality and Access: The Beneficiaries of English

Another key aspect of this research lies in socio-economic inequities that arise from linguistic commoditization. The gains from English do not accrue equitably but are disproportionately available to

linguistic elites, people who speak the language proficiently and gain access to better-paying jobs in hotels and management positions. On the other hand, native speakers of English, lacking fluency in the language, are restricted to backstage work that entails low pay and little exposure. This phenomenon is known as gatekeeping, whereby knowledge of the language becomes a gateway to prosperity. As demonstrated by the findings, while the use of English propels economic growth of the region through tourism, it also accentuates socio-economic imbalances through its inequitable distribution.

As shown above, the English of non-Anglophone destinations occurs along multiple lines of inquiry to cater to the practical and aesthetic considerations of travelers. Whereas functional English facilitates the logistics of international tourism, its use symbolically constructs value hierarchies within the destination. These thematic outcomes serve as the backbone of further discussions in the sociolinguistics of globalization.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings via Theory

The domination of the English language in the studied linguistic landscape proves the appropriateness of the Political Economy of Language approach. The choice of English as the main language for signage at local businesses is associated with calculating benefits, where the local language is considered less valuable than the universal role of English. It is consistent with the notion of symbolic power when the use of English serves as a key to the economic sphere. In addition, under the Sociolinguistic Globalization theory, hybrid forms of English known as Tourist English indicate the process of re-territorialization of the English language. Thus, it does not belong to native speakers anymore and is adapted by local agents to serve local purposes.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The conclusions of this study correspond to previous research on the prestige role played by English in Europe beyond Anglo-American countries, which highlights how English can be used for aesthetic purposes without being functional in communication. Yet this study differs from previous work because it highlights how the commodification process is more radical when it comes to digital platforms. Unlike past research, which focused on static signs in the real world, this study shows how English-only branding is even more prominent in the digital realm.

Role of English in Economic Value Creation

The function of English as a facilitator for Economic Value Creation is through reduced transaction cost and increased reliability perception of a service offered. The local business enterprises that use quality English are likely to charge premium prices since the tourists tend to see accurate use of English as an indicator of professionalism and safety. Thus, English is not merely a means but rather an added value of the tourist services. The local business enterprises can thus afford to step out of the local market circle and directly address the international consumers. Language, in this case, becomes a value-added factor.

Identity Negotiation

The commoditization of English requires negotiation of Identity by the local practitioners. Local workers have been noted to operate on a duality whereby use their mother tongues in order to belong within the community but put on the costume of a cosmopolitan self in English in order to survive in their profession. This study has shown that the use of English is performative in nature. It does not imply that

local workers are losing their cultural identities, instead, putting on English as a uniform in the professional context.

Authenticity vs. Globalization

The main contradiction here is that of Global Standardization versus Local Authenticity. As destinations try to cater to the needs of international visitors by making themselves more English friendly, run the risk of losing the linguistic appeal which originally made them attractive.

Marginalization: Clearly, there is a tendency for the native language to be pushed into backstage zones such as the kitchen, while English is used exclusively in frontstage areas.

Tourism's Uncanny Valley: If a destination that does not have English as its native tongue becomes linguistically standardized in English, then the exoticness of that place would be lost in the eyes of tourists and may result in a decline of the destination's appeal in the future.

This analysis makes it quite clear that linguistic commodification has two sides to it – while it opens up avenues for both integration and mobility within the globalized world of tourism, at the same time, it poses pressures on local languages. This is the topic that the next section, titled Implications, will explore.

Conclusion

The research undertaken has provided a critical examination of the multifaceted role of English in tourism industries in non-Anglophone destinations, concluding that language commodification is the key driver for integration and prestige. Through a re-examination of the key questions asked at the beginning of the research process, it can be concluded that although English plays a critical functional role in international communication, its symbolic use as an icon of modernity is more important than its communicative function in brand marketing. It is evident that the process results in the creation of unique tourist English, which, although profitable in terms of economics, poses significant threats to the identity of indigenous languages and may lead to socioeconomic exclusion of those who lack linguistic capital. The most valuable contribution of the research lies in the identification of the transition of language from tool to product. But the main limitation of this qualitative research lies in the fact that this particular aspect cannot be explored through the lenses of geographically specific hubs only, since linguistic features vary from region to region. Thus, more attention needs to be given to longitudinal studies that would reveal the impact of English-based marketing on indigenous languages. It will also be interesting to see whether authentic commodification can be achieved by elevating local dialects to the same level as global languages. Overall, the article reveals the importance of balancing tourism and linguistics in terms of policy development.

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