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Language Preservation through Public Signage: Analyzing the Linguistic Landscape of the Indonesia-Timor Leste Border

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ABSTRACT

The border between Indonesia and Timor Leste presents a rich and complex sociolinguistic landscape, shaped by centuries of historical, cultural, and economic interactions between communities on both sides. This study investigates the vitality of local languages in the border regions using a linguistic landscape approach, with a particular focus on the presence and function of public signage in urban centers and along cross-border routes. The research aims to explore three core aspects: (1) the presence and status of local languages in public spaces, (2) the influence of cross-border mobility and interaction on language use, and (3) the broader implications for language policy and efforts at cultural preservation. Fieldwork was conducted in the Indonesian towns of Kefamenanu and Atambua, as well as at the cross-border posts, where both government and privately installed signs were analyzed. The findings reveal that Indonesian overwhelmingly dominates public signage, while local languages such as Tetum, Dawan, and Kupang Malay are notably underrepresented despite their continued use in daily conversation and cultural expression. Factors such as urbanization, internal migration, national language policy, and educational priorities have contributed to the reduced public visibility of these regional languages. The study argues that public signage is a powerful tool that reflects broader linguistic hierarchies and power relations. To revitalize and sustain local languages, it recommends the integration of bilingual or multilingual signage, the incorporation of local languages in educational curricula and tourism programs, and collaborative cross-border initiatives aimed at promoting shared linguistic and cultural heritage.

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1. Introduction

The border area between Indonesia and Timor-Leste has a long and complex history, which continues to shape the sociolinguistic dynamics of the region. Historically, Timor Island was divided between Portuguese and Dutch colonial administrations, with the western part falling under Dutch rule (now Indonesia) and the eastern part under Portuguese rule (now Timor-Leste). Following Indonesia's independence in 1945, West Timor became part of Indonesia, while East Timor remained a Portuguese colony until 1975. In 1975, after a brief period of independence, Indonesia annexed East Timor, leading to a period of conflict and resistance. In 1999, following a United Nations-sponsored referendum, East Timor voted for independence, officially becoming the sovereign nation of Timor-Leste in 2002^[1].

The historical division and subsequent interactions between Indonesia and Timor-Leste have deeply influenced the linguistic landscape of the border region. While Indonesian remains dominant in public signage and official communication in Indonesia, Timor-Leste has adopted Portuguese and Tetum as its official languages, with Indonesian and English recognized as working languages.

East Nusa Tenggara, one of Indonesia's provinces bordering Timor-Leste, is home to numerous ethnic communities with diverse linguistic backgrounds. Frequent interactions between border communities for trade, social, and cultural exchanges create unique linguistic dynamics. Despite the historical division, cross-border movement and cultural ties remain strong, influencing language use and preservation in public spaces.

The vitality of local languages in these border areas is an essential issue, as various factors such as globalization, urbanization, and national language policies may threaten their survival^[2]. Border regions experience additional pressures on local languages due to frequent cross-border mobility and linguistic influences from both nations.

This study examines the visibility and vitality of local languages in the linguistic landscape of the Indonesia-Timor-Leste border. It aims to: (1) analyze the presence and status of local languages in public spaces, (2) explore the impact of

cross-border interactions on language use, and (3) discuss the implications for language policy and cultural preservation. A linguistic landscape approach is employed to investigate the representation of languages in public signage, as signage reflects power relations, language policies, and societal attitudes toward linguistic diversity. Linguistic landscape refers to the languages displayed visually in public areas, including signs for streets, shops, products, and even writing on walls^[3]. The linguistic landscape can reflect the status, function, and relative strength of the languages spoken in a region^[4, 5]. Examining the linguistic landscape in the border regions of Indonesia and Timor Leste provides insight into the everyday use and value of local languages, mainly as reflected in public spaces.

In the context of the vitality of local languages in the border areas of Indonesia and Timor Leste, three essential aspects are discussed to understand linguistic dynamics in this region. First, the use and status of local languages in the linguistic landscape in the Indonesia-Timor Leste border area. The linguistic landscape is an essential tool for understanding the dynamics of language use in public spaces^[4, 6]. Aspects of the linguistic landscape can be used to analyze how languages are displayed in different visual forms in border regions^[7]. This study collected data on signs, advertisements, and other elements that reflect the use of language in everyday life. Analysis of linguistic landscapes can provide insights into the relative status of local languages, the dominance of national or foreign languages, and people's attitudes toward local languages^[6, 8]. Second, the interaction between communities from the two countries affects the vitality of local languages because they are also related to identity and language use^[9, 10]. Border regions are places where interactions between communities from two different countries are intense. This aims to explore how these interactions affect the use and preservation of local languages. This interaction can create a condition of bilingualism or multilingualism, where individuals use more than one language daily. This study examines how the dynamics of interaction between these communities contribute to the vitality of local languages. Third, the implications of the findings of this study for language policy and local cultural preservation.

This aspect aims to link research findings with practical policies supporting the preservation of local languages. This research is expected to provide recommendations for policymakers, educators, and local communities on effective ways to preserve local languages and strengthen cultural identity. For example, recommendations could include the development of bilingual education programs, the development of inclusive language policies, and cultural initiatives that support the use of local languages^[11].

Using a linguistic landscape approach to study the vitality of local languages in the border areas of Indonesia and Timor Leste is anticipated to significantly enhance our understanding and support the preservation of these languages in the region. By answering the formulation of the problem that has been determined, this research will provide empirical data and in-depth insights that can be used to design more effective language preservation policies and programs. Hopefully, the results of this study can be helpful for local communities, policymakers, and researchers in linguistics and border studies.

2. Literature Review

The study of linguistic landscapes has gained significant traction in sociolinguistics as a means to analyze language use, visibility, and vitality in public spaces. Existing research highlights how linguistic landscapes reflect broader sociopolitical, economic, and cultural dynamics, particularly in multilingual and border regions. For instance:

Scholars such as Landry and Bourhis^[3] established the concept of linguistic landscape as a tool to assess ethnolinguistic vitality, while Blommaert^[4] expanded this approach to examine super-diversity and globalization's impact on language visibility. More recent studies by Kallen^[6] emphasize the sociolinguistic significance of public signage in reflecting power relations and language hierarchies.

Research on linguistic landscapes in border areas, such as Álvarez-Pérez's^[7] work on the Spanish-Portuguese border, demonstrates how cross-border interactions influence language choices and representations. Similarly, Dersingh, Tangkitjaroenkun and Thanarat^[10] explored multilingualism in public signage at the Nong Khai border, highlighting the interplay between local, national, and international languages in shaping linguistic landscapes.

Studies like those by Benu et al.^[5] and Halim and Sukamto^[12] have documented the marginalization of local languages in favor of dominant national or global languages, particularly in urbanized or economically dynamic regions. These works underscore the role of government policies, urbanization, and globalization in reducing the visibility of indigenous languages in public spaces.

Efforts to preserve local languages through policy interventions, such as bilingual or multilingual signage, have been advocated by researchers like Hovens^[13]. Additionally, Boon et al.^[11] argue for integrating local languages into education and literacy programs to sustain their use across generations.

Despite these advancements, there remains limited research specifically addressing the linguistic landscapes of the Indonesia-Timor-Leste border region. While earlier studies, including Sudarmanto et al.^[2], have touched upon language dynamics in this area, they primarily focus on broader sociolinguistic trends without delving deeply into the implications of public signage for language vitality and preservation.

This research contributes novel insights by uniquely focusing on the understudied Indonesia-Timor-Leste border, a post-colonial and post-conflict region marked by historical tensions, cross-border mobility, and competing national identities. Unlike prior linguistic landscape (LL) studies centered on stable urban or single-nation contexts, this work explores a dynamic borderland where language visibility is shaped by unresolved sociopolitical legacies, including Indonesia's annexation of Timor-Leste and its subsequent independence. The study innovatively integrates multidimensional factors—such as cross-border trade, national language policies, and economic migration—to analyze how spatial and functional contexts (e.g., urban hubs versus border crossings) reinforce linguistic hierarchies. By synthesizing rigorous fieldwork, qualitative interviews, and comparative analysis, it advances tailored preservation strategies, such as bilingual signage and cross-border cultural collaborations, specifically addressing the marginalization of Tetum, Dawan, and Kupang Malay. These recommendations transcend generic LL frameworks, offering actionable, culturally grounded solutions that bridge scholarly gaps while addressing the unique sociolinguistic realities of contested border regions.

3. Materials and Methods

This research employed a qualitative approach to investigate the linguistic landscape of the Indonesia-Timor Leste border region, focusing on the presence and status of local languages in public signage.

3.1. Research Design

The study adopted a linguistic landscape approach, which examines the visibility and representation of languages in public spaces through the analysis of signs, advertisements, and other written texts^[3]. This approach is particularly suited for understanding the sociolinguistic dynamics of multilingual regions, as it provides insights into the relative status and power dynamics of languages in public domains^[14].

3.2. Study Area

This research was conducted in the Indonesia-Timor Leste border region, covering Atambua City in Belu Regency and Kefamenanu City in North Central Timor Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. These two cities serve as the capitals of their respective regencies and share a direct land border with Timor Leste. Additionally, the study includes major roads connecting Atambua and Kefamenanu to the Napan, Wini, and Motaain Border Crossing Posts (PLBN). Another data collection area consists of the three Indonesian Border Crossing Posts (PLBN) of Napan, Wini, and Motaain, encompassing the entire border post areas, including sections inside the immigration offices.

3.3. Data Collection

Data collection in this study was carried out through observation and photography methods. Observations were made directly on public space signs in the border area. This observation allows researchers to understand more deeply what is happening in the LL situation on the Indonesia-Timor Leste border, especially the use of language on public space signs that can be found through interviews or questionnaires. Meanwhile, with the photography method, the research team used a digital camera and a cellphone camera to take all photos in the observation area, namely written language on public space signs in the form of signs (shops, restaurants, salons, hotels, institutions, etc.), banners or billboards, infor-

mation boards, notice boards, directions, inscriptions, including written language on moving objects (moving signs) such as on vehicles or culinary carts. The photography method in LL research is very effective for researching society and providing historical documents of a location^[14]. A total of 2,014 signs were documented and categorized as either top-down (government-issued) or bottom-up (private or community-generated) signage. It also considers the typical and marginal signs^[15]. The following criteria for public signage were applied to ensure consistency and relevance:

1. Permanent outdoor signs (e.g., street signs, advertisements, building names, informational signs, religious signs, graffiti, and writings on monuments).
2. Signs containing written text in local languages, Indonesian, or other languages.
3. Signs visible to the public and readable from a distance.
4. Temporary signs (e.g., magazine ads, writings on vehicles, brochures).
5. Duplicate signs (only one instance was recorded).

3.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis process followed a qualitative content analysis framework^[16], progressing through the following stages. First, data categorization was conducted by classifying signs based on language use, including Tetum, Dawan, Kupang Malay, Indonesian, and English. Additionally, signs were further categorized by domain—such as government, private, religious, and commercial—to understand the context of language use better. Next, thematic analysis was carried out to identify patterns and trends in language representation across different domains. Key emerging themes included language dominance, marginalization of local languages, and cross-border influences. A comparative analysis was then performed to examine differences in language use between urban areas (Kefamenanu and Atambua) and the cross-border posts (Napan, Wini, and Motaain). This analysis also contrasted top-down and bottom-up signage to explore the influence of government policies versus community practices in shaping the linguistic landscape. Finally, triangulation was employed to ensure the validity of the findings. This involved cross-referencing photographic evidence with interview data and existing literature on linguistic landscapes in border regions, reinforcing the credibility of the analysis.

3.5. Ethical Considerations and Limitations

This study adhered to ethical research standards to ensure responsible data collection and analysis. As the research focused on publicly available signage, no direct human subject participation was required. Additionally, photographic documentation of public signage was carried out in compliance with privacy laws, ensuring that no personal, private, or sensitive information was recorded. The study's data collection and analysis were conducted objectively, without any intent to influence or alter the linguistic landscape being studied.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. This study focuses primarily on written signage, omitting spoken language's role in shaping linguistic identity. Data collection was geographically limited to Kefamenanu, Atambua, and major border crossings, potentially overlooking broader linguistic diversity. Additionally, no formal interviews were carried out, restricting the depth of sociolinguistic insights gained. Future research should address these gaps.

4. Results

Analysis of 2,014 public signs across urban and border-crossing areas revealed a stark underrepresentation of local languages. The data show that only 10% of signage incorporated Tetum, Dawan, and Kupang Malay. Geographic variations in language representation were evident. In urban centers (Atambua and Kefamenanu), the Indonesian language constituted 90% of signage, with local languages appearing in fewer than 5% of signs. Dawan was restricted to village welcome boards, while Kupang Malay surfaced in informal shop advertisements. By contrast, the cross-border posts of Napan, Wini, and Motaain exhibited marginally higher use of Tetum (8%) and Portuguese (5%), particularly in tourism-related signage.

Indonesian dominates 85% of signage, particularly in government and commercial domains (e.g., street signs, shop names). Foreign languages, including English and Portuguese, accounted for 5% of signs in tourism and trade-related contexts near border crossings. This suggests that Indonesian functions as the official language and serves as a national identity marker that marginalizes local languages. Furthermore, English and Portuguese signs appear in border

areas related to tourism and trade, highlighting the functional economic value of these languages while simultaneously reinforcing the marginalization of local languages.

Signage categorization highlighted divergences between government and private-sector practices. Top-down (government) signage, such as street signs and official notices, exclusively used the Indonesian language. Bottom-up (private/community) signage showed greater linguistic diversity, with 12% incorporating local languages. However, the Indonesian language still dominated private-sector signage (88%), reflecting its entrenched role in daily communication.

Tetum, for instance, can be found on bilingual signs in Atambua, particularly in healthcare facilities and on farewell message signs. This indicates that although efforts have been made to integrate local languages, their use remains limited to specific contexts and does not extend to broader aspects of daily life. Tetum appeared in bilingual healthcare and farewell signage, such as the phrase “lao dia-diak” (farewell) and the clinic name “Belu moris diak” (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1. Tetum language in public signage: (a) Farewell sign in Tetum language; and (b) Nameboard of Health clinic in Tetum language.

Tetum is an Austronesian language spoken by native speakers in the West Timor region, specifically in Belu Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. Additionally, it is the mother tongue of some communities in Timor-Leste^[17, 18]. Due to its geographical proximity to Timor-Leste, Belu Regency serves as a crossroads of culture and language. Tetum is spoken in both Belu and Malaka Regencies in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, while in Timor-Leste, it holds official language status alongside Portuguese. Meanwhile, Indonesian and English are recognized as working languages^[19, 20]. Thus, in Timor-Leste, Tetum functions as a lingua franca, akin to the role of Bahasa Indonesia in Indone-

sia. In Belu Regency, Tetum is used in daily communication and customary, religious, and educational ceremonies. Although the dialect of Tetum spoken in Belu differs slightly from that used in Timor Leste, it remains mutually intelligible^[21].

Dawan was found on three signs, namely a village welcome sign, a music studio sign, and bilingual signage at Tanjung Bastian Beach (Figure 2). Figure 2a is inscribed in the Dawan language with the phrase “*tkonektem teu kwan Napan*,” which translates to “Welcome to Napan Village.” Figure 2b is the name of a music course studio. The sign is bilingual, of “*ale*” (Dawan for “place”) and “*belajar musik*” (Indonesian for “learn music”), indicating that the establishment is a music learning center. Additionally, bilingual signage in Indonesian and Dawan was identified at the Tanjung Bastian Beach tourist site in North Central Timor Regency. The signs read “Welcome to Tanjung Bastian Beach” in Indonesian and “*tkoenok tem on Tanjung Bastian*” in Dawan, conveying the same message.



Figure 2. Dawan language in public signage: (a) Village welcome sign in Dawan language; and (b) Nameboard of music studio in Dawan language.

Dawan is also known as Uab Meto or Molok Meto^[22]. It is an Austronesian language spoken by the Dawan ethnic group residing in the border regions, particularly in North Central Timor Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. This region remains a stronghold for the Dawan language. However, this study identified only three instances of public signage featuring the Dawan language.

Meanwhile, Kupang Malay appears on informal shop signs and advertisements, but its usage remains unofficial and unrecognized in broader public contexts. Kupang Malay is a creole-based Malay language spoken in Kupang City and the East Nusa Tenggara Province^[23]. Linguistically, Kupang Malay has distinct features that set it apart from standard

Indonesian and other Malay dialects. It incorporates elements from various national, local, and foreign languages, reflecting Kupang’s history of cultural interactions^[24]. This study classifies Kupang Malay as a local language because it serves as the primary language of communication for most residents in Kupang City and its surrounding areas, including the border region with Timor-Leste.



Figure 3. Sample of signboards in Kupang language.

Kupang Malay is an effective communication medium across various social contexts, from everyday market transactions to familial and community interactions. It has become the mother tongue for children born and raised in Kupang City, making it a defining linguistic and cultural identity marker for its residents. The language fosters familiarity and solidarity among speakers and is frequently used in informal settings, such as peer interactions, casual workplace conversations, and traditional market exchanges. As a creole language, Kupang Malay functions as a linguistic bridge, facilitating intercultural communication among the diverse ethnic and linguistic groups in East Nusa Tenggara.

5. Discussion

5.1. Sociolinguistic Factors Influencing the Visibility of Local Languages

In the context of local languages, various sociolinguistic factors contribute to their limited representation in the linguistic landscape. One of the primary factors to consider is government language policy, which prioritizes the use of Bahasa Indonesia in public signage. This policy creates a linguistic hierarchy and contributes to the marginalization

of local languages. For instance, when the government mandates the use of Bahasa Indonesia as the official language for all documents and signage, society naturally tends to adopt it in daily interactions, often at the expense of local languages that should be an integral part of their identity.

Government language policies often reflect broader societal values and priorities^[5]. In many cases, the dominance of Bahasa Indonesia in public spaces creates the perception that local languages are less important or irrelevant^[25]. This phenomenon is evident in many regions of Indonesia, where signboards, advertisements, and various forms of public communication predominantly use Bahasa Indonesia. In this context, local languages, which should symbolize cultural and historical identity, are instead marginalized. This situation creates a generational gap, where older generations may still use local languages daily, while younger generations increasingly prefer Bahasa Indonesia, viewing it as more modern and practical.

A second significant factor is economic and social mobility. Migration from other regions often brings Bahasa Indonesia as the lingua franca for trade and daily interactions^[26, 27]. Within this context, local languages are frequently perceived as less relevant in broader economic settings. For example, in major cities such as Atambua and Kefamenanu, the use of Bahasa Indonesia and English increased in response to the need for communication among people from diverse backgrounds^[2]. Consequently, the use of local languages has declined, as they are often considered economically disadvantageous. As a result, local languages lose their place in everyday communication and the increasingly competitive business environment.

Urbanization is another highly influential factor. The movement of people to economic centers accelerates the use of Bahasa Indonesia and English in business contexts. As individuals focus on economic opportunities, they overlook local languages, which are perceived as less helpful in achieving their goals^[28]. For instance, in an increasingly global business environment, proficiency in English is often regarded as a more valuable asset than fluency in a local language^[29]. This perception further reinforces the idea that local languages lack economic significance, perpetuating the cycle of marginalization.

Cultural prestige also shapes societal attitudes toward language. Bahasa Indonesia and English are often regarded

as languages of high status, which, in turn, diminishes the perceived economic value of local languages. In many contexts, proficiency in English is seen as an indicator of education and higher social status. This creates a stigma against local languages, which are frequently considered outdated or irrelevant. As a result, younger generations tend to prioritize learning and using languages deemed more prestigious, weakening local languages' position.

A deeper analysis of these factors highlights that the marginalization of local languages is not merely a linguistic issue but also a complex social and cultural concern. Language serves as a reflection of a community's identity and values^[5, 28]. When a local language is marginalized, its cultural identity is also at risk. Therefore, efforts to revitalize local languages must adopt a holistic approach that considers linguistic aspects and broader social, economic, and cultural contexts.

In conclusion, sociolinguistic factors such as government language policies, economic and social mobility, urbanization, and cultural prestige play a crucial role in influencing the visibility of local languages. Addressing this issue requires collective awareness of preserving local languages as part of cultural heritage. Efforts to increase the use of local languages in public spaces, education, and media can help strengthen cultural identity. In doing so, local languages will survive and thrive in an increasingly globalized world.

5.2. Implications for Language Policy and Preservation

Policy intervention is a crucial step toward enhancing the visibility of these languages by addressing the challenge of the minimal presence of local languages in public spaces. One potential measure is the mandatory implementation of bilingual signage policies^[13]. Local governments should require the use of local languages such as Tetum, Dawan, or Kupang Malay, alongside Indonesian in public signage. This policy would provide well-deserved recognition of local languages and encourage the community to appreciate and use them daily.

Local languages hold profound significance for cultural identity. For instance, Tetum, spoken in Timor-Leste, is not merely a means of communication but also a symbol of a rich history and tradition. Including Tetum in public signage would foster a stronger connection between the community

and their cultural heritage. The presence of local languages in public spaces can instill a sense of belonging and pride, ultimately contributing to the increased use of these languages in everyday interactions.

However, the implementation of bilingual signage policies is not the sole solution. Community-led language revitalization initiatives can also be highly effective. Public awareness campaigns and incentives for businesses to integrate local languages into their signage can encourage language use. For example, local governments could offer awards or recognition to businesses that actively incorporate local languages in their communications. This approach enhances community engagement and fosters a sense of responsibility in language preservation.

Community involvement in the preservation of local languages is essential. By engaging the public, individuals will feel a sense of ownership in maintaining and safeguarding the languages that form part of their identity. For instance, a small business that features Dawan in its menu attracts local customers and raises awareness of the importance of the language. In this way, local languages are preserved in written form and actively practiced in daily life.

Educational and literacy programs also play a vital role in strengthening the use of local languages. Integrating local languages into formal education curricula can help younger generations appreciate and utilize these languages. Furthermore, literacy programs emphasizing local languages can enhance comprehension and practice within the community. For example, language classes that teach local languages can help students develop a deeper connection with their cultural identity. By learning their native languages, students do not merely acquire speaking skills but also gain insight into their culture's cognitive and emotional dimensions.

The importance of teaching local languages in schools cannot be understated. Children learning local languages from an early age are more likely to continue using them in the future^[30]. Additionally, implementing school programs that support local languages, such as speech or poetry competitions in local languages, can create platforms for students to express themselves and celebrate their cultural heritage.

Digital documentation initiatives can also be powerful tools for supporting local language use. Developing online archives and linguistic landscape mapping can document and promote the use of local languages. These efforts would al-

low communities to assess the extent to which their languages are used in public spaces and motivate them to participate in language preservation efforts. For example, an online platform that enables users to upload photos of signs in local languages could raise awareness and encourage active participation in language preservation initiatives.

With such platforms, communities can visualize the presence of local languages in various locations, inspiring them to engage more actively in language use. Additionally, digital documentation can serve as a valuable resource for researchers and language advocates seeking to understand the dynamics of local language use within society. Despite the significance of these measures, challenges in preserving local languages persist. One such challenge is the stigma often associated with local languages, which are frequently perceived as inferior to the national language. Therefore, continuous awareness campaigns are necessary to highlight the value and beauty of local languages. The public must be encouraged to recognize that local languages are not merely communication tools but also windows into rich cultural and historical legacies.

Preserving local languages in public spaces requires a holistic and collaborative approach. A supportive environment for local language use can be created through bilingual signage policies, community initiatives, educational programs, and digital documentation. Each step taken will not only provide well-deserved recognition of local languages but also strengthen the cultural identity of the community. Consequently, local languages will survive and thrive in everyday life. The responsibility for language preservation does not rest solely with the government; instead, it is the collective duty of every individual in the community to appreciate and celebrate their cultural heritage.

5.3. Cross-Border Dynamics

The contrast between the official status of the Tetum language in Timor-Leste and its symbolic use in Indonesia's border regions highlights a striking linguistic power imbalance. On one hand, Tetum is officially recognized in Timor-Leste, signifying acknowledgment of the country's cultural and historical identity. On the other hand, in Indonesia's border areas, Tetum is often relegated to a mere symbolic role. This creates a significant gap in the recognition and appreciation of the language, which should ideally

serve as an integral part of the regional identity.

One compelling aspect for analysis is the use of language in border signage. As noted by Álvarez-Pérez^[7], that the presence of Portuguese and English in these signs reflects economic pragmatism. This suggests that the languages displayed in public spaces are often chosen based on practical needs, such as trade and international relations, rather than cultural or historical considerations. For instance, when a visitor from Indonesia enters Timor-Leste, they are greeted by signs predominantly in Portuguese and English, which may create a sense of alienation from the local context. Meanwhile, local languages such as Tetum, which could serve as a cultural bridge, are marginalized.

In this context, exploring how cross-border collaboration can help address these inequalities is crucial. Joint cultural festivals involving both nations could serve as effective platforms for promoting Tetum and Dawan. Such festivals would showcase traditional arts and music and provide spaces for discussions on the significance of local languages in shaping a shared identity. For example, a border festival featuring traditional dance performances from both sides, where performers use Tetum and Dawan in their narratives, could reinforce a sense of unity while elevating the status of these languages.

Bilingual education initiatives are another essential step in enhancing the visibility of Tetum and Dawan. By integrating these languages into the school curricula in border regions, children can learn to appreciate and use their languages while also understanding their neighbors' linguistic heritage^[31]. For instance, schools that offer instruction in Tetum and Dawan alongside Indonesian would foster a generation that is not only bilingual but also more culturally aware. Through education, children can develop a deeper understanding of the broader significance of their languages and how they can serve as bridges between two distinct cultures.

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Resistance often arises from certain groups who may question the value of teaching local languages amid the dominance of more global languages. In response, an inclusive approach that involves local communities in the decision-making process is essential^[5]. By engaging these communities, policymakers can ensure that implemented programs align with their needs and aspirations. For example, if the community perceives Tetum as a crucial part of their identity, support for bilingual

education initiatives will likely be more vigorous.

A deeper analysis should also consider the long-term impact of these efforts. Strengthening the presence of Tetum and Dawan in public spaces and education does more than reinforce regional identity; it also contributes to cultural preservation. Language is not merely a tool for communication but serves as a vessel for a society's values, traditions, and historical narratives. When these languages gain broader recognition, they become more resilient and capable of thriving amid the pressures of globalization.

6. Conclusions

This study examined the linguistic landscape of the Indonesia–Timor Leste border, highlighting the visibility and vitality of local languages in public signage. The findings reveal that despite the region's multilingual environment, local languages such as Tetum, Dawan, and Kupang Malay remain underrepresented, while the Indonesian language dominates public signage due to national language policies and sociopolitical influences. Additionally, English and Portuguese appear in specific economic and tourism-related contexts, reinforcing the marginalization of local languages. Urbanization, economic migration, and government language policies significantly shape linguistic representation in public spaces, reflecting broader sociolinguistic power dynamics in the region.

The study contributes to linguistic landscape research by offering empirical insights into the interplay between language policy, cultural identity, and public space representation in a Southeast Asian border area. The findings suggest that bilingual or multilingual signage policies, the integration of local languages into education and tourism sectors, and cross-border collaborations could help sustain linguistic diversity and strengthen cultural identity.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. First, the research primarily focuses on written signage, without considering the role of spoken language in shaping linguistic identity and communication in public spaces. The spoken linguistic landscape—such as oral interactions, announcements, or conversations in commercial and government settings—could offer additional perspectives on language vitality in the region. Second, the data collection was limited to specific locations (Kefamenanu, Atambua, and

cross border posts), which may not fully capture the linguistic diversity across the entire Indonesia–Timor Leste border area. Future research should consider a broader geographic scope, including rural communities and lesser-documented areas. Finally, while informal interviews provided valuable qualitative insights, they were not systematically structured, potentially limiting the depth of sociolinguistic attitudes analyzed in the study.

Building on the current findings, future research should explore the role of spoken language in public spaces, investigating how linguistic interactions in commercial, governmental, and social contexts contribute to the maintenance or shift of local languages. Additionally, longitudinal studies could track changes in the linguistic landscape over time, assessing the impact of language policies, migration patterns, and economic shifts on public signage. Further studies might also incorporate ethnographic approaches, including participant observations and in-depth interviews, to gain a nuanced understanding of language attitudes, identity, and community perceptions regarding linguistic representation. Lastly, comparative studies with other border regions in Southeast Asia could provide a broader perspective on how linguistic landscapes shape multilingual interactions and cultural identity across different geopolitical contexts.

Ensuring the continued visibility of local languages in public spaces is critical for preserving cultural identity and linguistic diversity. This study serves as a foundation for future research and policy initiatives aimed at promoting inclusive, multilingual public spaces that reflect the rich linguistic heritage of the Indonesia–Timor Leste border region.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, B.A.S. and N.N.B.; methodology, T.W., B.A.S. and N.N.B.; data collection, B.A.S., N.N.B., T.W., E.N.W.A., N.K., A.M., A.P., S.D., I.I.I. and R.E.U.; data analysis, B.A.S., N.N.B., T.W., E.N.W.A., N.K., A.M., A.P., S.D., I.I.I. and R.E.U.; writing—original draft preparation, B.A.S. and N.N.B.; writing—review and editing, N.N.B. and B.A.S.; visualization, T.W.; supervision, N.N.B.; project administration, B.A.S.; funding acquisition, B.A.S., N.N.B., T.W., E.N.W.A., N.K., A.M., A.P., S.D., I.I.I. and R.E.U. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical approval was not required for this study, as it involved the analysis of publicly available signage and informal interviews with voluntary participants. Verbal consent was obtained from all interviewees.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained verbally from all participants involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [Naniana Nimrod Benu], upon reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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