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Linguistic Landscape of Siargao Island: Language Use amidst Growing Tourism

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Article Info

Abstract
This study examined the linguistic landscape of Siargao Island, Surigao del Norte—recognized as the Surfing Capital of the Philippines—through the authorship framework proposed by Ben-Rafael *et al.* (2006) [2]. The research aimed to analyze language use in public signage and its implications for language policy in tourism-driven areas. Data was gathered in November 2024 from eight municipalities, covering public and commercial spaces such as parks, markets, government offices, restaurants, and tourist sites.

A total of 491 signs were documented, comprising 154 top-down and 337 bottom-up signs. Findings revealed that English dominated both categories, accounting for 72.8% of top-down and 83.4% of bottom-up signs. Bilingual combinations, including English-Surigaonon (14.3% in top-down; 5.9% in bottom-up) and English-Filipino (8% in bottom-up), were less frequent, while pure Surigaonon signage appeared minimally (5.8% in top-down; 2.4% in bottom-up). Additionally, a small proportion of signs featured foreign languages such as Chinese and Japanese.

These results highlight the prominent presence of English and the relatively marginal visibility of Surigaonon in Siargao's linguistic landscape. The study recommends the development of a localized language policy to promote cultural preservation and ensure linguistic inclusivity in the context of tourism-oriented development.

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1. Introduction

The richness of language currently surrounds us in textual form, whether displayed in shop windows, commercial signs, posters, official announcements, or traffic signs, as mentioned by Gorter (2006) [5]. The focus of this swiftly growing field, known as the linguistic landscape, is the introduction of language into the world around us, specifically the words and images that are exposed and displayed in public spaces, as stated by Gorter, D., & Cenoz, J. (2008) [6].

Nowadays, one of the most significant economic pillars is tourism, and the volume of visitors has a significant impact on the regions where they travel from and arrive. As an important part of the culture of the places visited, language is the medium of knowledge and a bridge for communication. It has made a great contribution to the continuous development of the tourist destination according to Lu, S. *et al.* (2020) [8].

In addition, tourism is believed to be an important tool for the revitalization of national languages and is important for the preservation of the culture of ethnic minorities, as cited in the works of Bruyel-Olmedo & Juan-Garau (2009) [3], Xu & Ren (2015) [14]. However, tourism development also poses a threat to language purity in tourist destinations according to Bao & Chu, (2014)) [1] because for example, large numbers of tourists bring various foreign languages into a local community and these languages are widely embraced and learned by residents cited in the works also of Pan & Li, (2004)) [9], and Xu & Lu, (2007) [13]. Therefore, this study aims to describe the linguistic landscape of the island amidst the expanding tourism in Siargao using the analytical thinking of Ben-Rafael *et al.* (2006) [2] through top-down and bottom-up authorship.

According to this scholar, all government signs are considered top-down signs, while commercial signs from citizens, such as Business and personal delivery of messages or information, are classified as bottom-up. Ultimately, it is expected that, based on the results of this study, it can assist local officials in developing concrete language policies or strategies that can be proposed to preserve the local language in conjunction with emerging tourism.

Problem Statement

This study aims to describe the linguistic landscape of Siargao using the analytical approach of Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) [2] through top-down and bottom-up authorship. To present the languages spoken on the island that can assist local officials in developing strategies that can help preserve local languages and culture amidst the growth of tourism on Siargao Island.

Methods

The study used a descriptive-qualitative design to explore and analyze the linguistic landscape of Siargao Island, observing language use in the community based on scientific methods. The study is a sociolinguistic approach that investigates the relationships between language and society. The procedure for this study is as follows:

Research Environment

The research area covers eight (8) municipalities: Burgos, Dapa, Del Carmen, General Luna, Pilar, San Benito, San Isidro, and Santa Monica, which have the most people or commercial centers on the island (restaurants or eateries, public places such as markets, parks, streets, and tourist spots). These areas are the most likely places to visit because they provide all kinds of services, including sightseeing, and many commercial services.

Ethics and Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher submits a letter of permission to the municipal mayor's office for the research to be conducted within the area under his/her supervision. The field survey was conducted in November 2024 to obtain data on the linguistic landscape in the Siargao Islands. The photographs of the linguistic landscape were taken using a camera. For the analysis of the photographic database, the following criteria were adopted.

To document the current state of Siargao Island's linguistic landscape, pictures of every visible public and private sign in the study area were taken. Every visible object or sign, regardless of size, is examined as a data point, and each sign is counted as a sample to properly evaluate Siargao Island's linguistic environment. Signs that are only outside the establishment or building are the sample to be selected. Signs that have a vague appearance are not included in the sample. If the sign has two or more sides, each side is collected as a sample.

Data analysis

After thorough data collection, the researcher used frequency counts and percentages to quantify the data to describe and analyze the data properly using the analytical approach of Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) [2] through top-down and bottom-up authorship.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the presentation, discussion, and interpretation of the data. The data is presented through tables from the 491 images collected for the study of the linguistic situation on Siargao Island in the Province of Surigao del Norte, based on the observation of the linguistic landscape in the vicinity.

Table 1: Top-down Signs

Language	N	%
English	112	72.8
English-Surigaonon	22	14.3
English- Filipino	5	3.2
Filipino	2	1.3
Cebuano	4	2.6
Surigaonon	9	5.8
Total	154	100%

Table 1 shows the data collected from the signs in public images from the government and municipality of Siargao Island. From one hundred and fifty-four (154) signs, it can be noted that a large percentage of the English language is used, 72.8% based on providing information to residents or tourists visiting the Island. This includes signs found on the street, warnings or reminders, names of establishments, greetings from leaders, posters about tourist attractions, directions, and other information about the Island.

The signs seen in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 indicate the provision of information or warning to communities. This public notice is clear and authoritative. Its linguistic landscape reflects formal and functional communication, which aims to warn the public (fig. 8), enforce parking regulations within a specific public space (fig. 9). The use of English language and universal symbols ensures that the message reaches a wide audience, including tourists and locals. At the same time, the respectful tone at the end seeks compliance through respect and understanding.

Fig 1   **Fig** 2

However, Fig. 3 shows an example of a bilingual banner, where the local language, which is Surigaonon, and English are used together to convey a message. The main message is written in Surigaonon: *"KALIMPYO KAHIPSAY HENERAL LUNA."* The message is a call for maintaining cleanliness and order, specifically targeting the town or municipality of Heneral Luna, Siargao Island. It serves as a direct invitation to the community, emphasizing unity and cooperation in keeping the town clean and tidy. The use of English extends the reach of the message to individuals who may not speak the local language.

Fig 3

In examining the top-down signages, the researcher found the use of English and Surigaonon in the bilingual method. Although the Surigaonon language was used in the studies as a regional language, the English language still had a large share as a means of communication, using posters or pictures in public places. Also note that the Filipino language, as a national identity, obtained 1.3% and the Cebuano language 2.6% of the total data from the island; the low percentage of the two languages, based on the studies collected, is notable.

Table 2: Bottom-up Signs

Language	N	%
Surigaonon	8	2.4
English-Surigaonon	20	5.9
English- Filipino	27	8.0
Filipino	1	0.3
English	279	82.9
Cebuano	-	-
Other Languages	3	0.9
Total	337	100%

Table 2 shows the data collected from signs in public images in the bottom-up section. From three hundred and thirty-seven (337) signs. It can be noted that there is a slightly higher percentage of English language use, 83.4% of the images collected.

This includes signs found on the street, warnings or reminders, names of establishments, restaurants, sights, and advertisements that use English, as well as posters in tourist areas, giving directions and other information about the Island.

In Fig. 4 the word *BELCRIS- The Home of Good Food* is written, a brand that emphasizes the quality or reputation of the products they offer. The text used is directly in English, even additional information about their business, for example, the owner's phone number and email.

Meanwhile, in Fig. 5, the word Sweet Pain Paradise Tattoo Studio is seen, a sign representing a tattoo studio, which focuses on the art and personal expression of an individual.
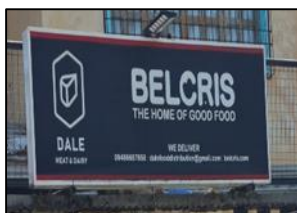

Fig 4   **Fig** 5

Both signs are in English, which may reflect the dominance or importance of English in the business sector of Siargao Island when it comes to tourism. The signs reflect the different industries that show the diversity of services found in the area. The linguistic landscape shows how businesses use language not only for communication but also for branding and creating a particular customer experience.

Fig 6   **Fig** 7

Fig. 6 to Fig. 7 are examples of visual signs that contribute to the LL of the area by addressing the proper management of property and the orderliness of vehicles. The text is written in formal English and uses capital letters for emphasis, especially in phrases such as "PARK AT YOUR OWN RISK" (Fig. 6) and "NO PARKING OUTSIDE" (Fig. 7) to reinforce the caution of the message. The formal tone indicates a legal or contractual context, making it clear that responsibility is shifted to the individual.

Next is the use of English-Filipino language at 8% of the total data, which is mostly found in the operation of businesses, such as the name of an establishment, from the name of a restaurant and entertainment, and also seen in posted advertisements.

Fig 8

The signs in this image reflect a combination of commercial advertisements and messages welcoming the local community and visitors. In Fig. 8, the use of a mixture of English and Filipino, reflecting the bilingual nature of the linguistic landscape also evident in Siargao Island. English is used for a wider audience, while Filipino is used to create a sense of community and local connection.

The image in Fig. 8 uses a mixture of English and Filipino. *"Welcome to* Siargao*"* is in English, suggesting a broad appeal to both local and international visitors, while *"*Mga kuya, ate at bunso*"* is in Filipino, making it more familiar to the local audience. The language conveys a universal idea, appealing to people of all ages and family roles.

Meanwhile, the use of English-Surigaonon in the bottom-up

data is 5.9%. The images in Fig. 9 and 10 show more signs that contribute to the linguistic landscape through the use of languages, cultural messaging, and socio-economic implications. Both signs in this image are primarily written in English and use the Surigaonon language as a secondary language.

Fig 9   **Fig** 10

The word ″Kanaway″ in Fig. 9 reflects the geographical location of Siargao, where this word describes the direction of the wind at sea.

In Fig. 10, the word ″Katig″ is the Filipino term that describes the part of a boat, commonly found on traditional Filipino vessels. The boat symbol on the sign visually reinforces this, which may be a subtle nod to local maritime traditions, even though the hotel caters to local and international expatriates.

Fig. 11 and 12 show the type of science that uses translation into Chinese and Japanese, where even a small percentage, its contribution to the linguistic landscape of the area is still noteworthy and proves the dynamism of the area from its language and culture.

Fig 11   **Fig** 12

The first sign in Fig. 11 reads "Siargao Seasky Resort" with the name written in both English and Chinese. Meanwhile, Fig. 12 is a Japanese restaurant with posters also in Japanese. The images reflect not only the people who are not only visiting the Island but also those who have chosen to live in the area alongside the local Siargaonons.

Overall, the use of English as the dominant language reflects the role of English as a global lingua franca in tourism, especially in destinations like Siargao, which is popular with international visitors. The inclusion of Chinese refers to the increasing presence of Chinese tourists in the region, as businesses adapt their signage to attract and accommodate this growing market.

From the eight towns that were the source of initial data for the study, it was found that the town of General Luna has the highest concentration and the most science, which can be considered the center of tourism in Siargao, while it was followed by the town of Dapa, which is considered the center of commerce on the island.

The high proportion of English in most linguistic signs in tourist areas is due to the purpose of communication. English

has emerged as a symbol of social flow, linking modernity and globalization. It can be said that the English language has shaped an international environment in most tourist destinations. However, it is feared that the dominance of the English language will lower the value of local languages. As part of modern capitalism, multilingualism and tourism imply that language, which was previously recognized as a cultural asset and symbol to build community unity, now also represents the community to tourists and its commercial products and brands. Apart from being inseparable from locality and identity, the presence of different languages has been considered to add value to the tourism industry (Hasni *et al*., 2022) [7].

However, as Datang (2022) [4] studied, using English as a language in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, which also has a strong tourism attraction from a social and cultural perspective, the high use of foreign languages, such as those related to business, is gradually eroding local culture and national identity. It is not impossible that if this situation continues, the image of a place's identity will be completely lost. However, as stated by Wearing et.al (2020) [12], travelers today are prepared to spend money and frequently travel to distant locations. They no longer merely visit a resort and snap photos; instead, they want to bring "something" home with them, such as wonderful experiences and unforgettable moments that involve their senses, emotions, and opinions expressed through their interactions with the locals, locals, culture, and local language.

Conclusion

Based on the result of the study, a large proportion of the use of the English language, both top-down (72.8 %) and bottom-up (83.4%). It is based on providing information to residents or visiting tourists and reflects the dominance or importance of English in the business sector of Siargao Island when it comes to tourism. The use of English-Surigaonon is followed in the overall data for both top-down and bottom-up. Finally, it is also notable that the small proportion of signs using other languages, such as Chinese and Japanese characters, is noteworthy for its contribution to the linguistic landscape of the area and attests to the dynamism of the area.

It is a fact that the global development of the tourism industry is largely driven by economic needs. The tourism industry's ability to highlight the area's resources, including the local dialect, which is frequently disregarded, should not be undervalued in the rigorous preservation of the environment in popular tourist locations. In addition to providing both local and foreign visitors with experience, it makes a significant contribution as a symbol of the cultural legacy that can be experienced (Pujolar 2013) [10].

Recommendation

Other researchers may use other variables and research approaches not found in the current study to describe the LL of the Siargao Islands to secure more results that will be the baseline of the development of a localized language policy to promote cultural preservation and ensure linguistic inclusivity in the context of tourism-oriented development.

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