

**THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF A SOUTHERN JORDANIAN
CITY: EXPLORING SOCIOLINGUISTIC ASPECTS
OF THE USE OF ENGLISH ON STOREFRONTS**

OMAR ALOMOUSH

Tafila Technical University

***Abstract:** The article examines sociolinguistic aspects of the use of English on shopfronts in the linguistic landscape (LL) of Tafila, in Jordan. To attain this goal, a corpus of 143 signs on a wide range of shopfronts was gleaned from the LL, including food stores (e.g. supermarkets, butcher's shops, and grocery shops) and restaurants, mobile stores and bookshops, fashion stores, and others (commercial banks, pharmacies, and coffee shop corners). In addition, 25 interviews were conducted to identify the opinions and perceptions of Tafila Technical University English department students about the use of English in the LL of Tafila. The results indicate that English is not highly represented on shopfronts. This can be due to the economic, industrial, cultural, and educational marginalisation of the city. The same is true of the demographic structure of the population, which explains why English is minimally used on commercial signs.*

***Keywords:** Arabic, English, marginalisation, linguistic landscape, Tafila*

1. Introduction

The article examines how and why visual English is not highly represented in the linguistic landscape (LL) of Tafila, using the LL as a methodological tool for understanding the dynamics that construct language use in such a city (Albury 2018: 2). In addition to reflecting the language policy of state-related agencies and commercial businesses, it also plays a vital role in providing information about the sociolinguistic context of a particular geographical area (see Gorter 2006). In this context, despite the fact that English is not as highly visible on signs as in other cities in the country, it is not only found “to create a cosmopolitan and modern association”, but it is also used to create connotations “with UK and US American influenced popular culture” (Kelly-Holmes 2005: 71, 73).

The current study examines English in the LL of Tafila city. Typically, LL is associated with “the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings” (Landry, Bourhis 1997: 25). There are two main functions associated with LL studies: instrumental and symbolic (Hult 2009, 2014; Landry and Bourhis 1997; Yuan, 2019). The work of El-Yasin and Mahadin (1996) examines the pragmatics of shop signs in Jordan. Schlick (2003) studies English in commercial

life on storefronts in eight European city centres. Much more recently, Alomoush (2019) examines English in the LL of a northern Jordanian city, McKiernan (2019) studies how English is supported to thrive outside of the law in the LL of a Malaysian border town, Chen (2020) analyses English names of Taipei hotels, and Alomoush and Al-Naimat (2020: 102) investigate both Arabic and English in Jordanian shopping malls to assess the extent of sociolinguistic variation, and in order to identify “the social causes of the patterns of translingual and monolingual practices”.

Despite the fact that English is widely spread in many Jordanian LLs (Al-Naimat and Alomoush 2018; Alomoush and Al-Naimat, 2020), it has been noticed that English in the LL of Tafila is not highly visible as compared with other cities, such as Amman, Zarqa, and Aqaba. Hence, this article attempts to find answers to the low visibility of English on storefronts through LL quantitative data and non-traditional interviews and interactions with 24 Tafila Technical University English Department students.

2. Tafila in lines

Tafila is located in the southern part of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, about 180 kilometres away from the capital city. The governorate covers an area of 2,209 square kilometres. According to the last census in 2015, it has a population of about 100 thousand people, representing 1% of the total population of the kingdom; the population of Tafila governorate is distributed among 41 residential areas, the chief of which are the city of Tafila, Ein Al-Baydha, Al-Eis, Bsayra, and Al-Hisa. Some economic projects, particularly Dhana Nature Reserve and Tafila Technical University, were established to contribute to serving the local community.

Tafila is still regarded as one of the less privileged governorates in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Poverty, marginalisation and unemployment are problems facing the local community, so the Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development (JOHUD) in the city are keen on meeting the needs of members of the local community through providing good education and helping them to learn and develop the skills essential to the proper functioning of their own lives.

Tafila is one of the smaller cities in Jordan that serves as a significant centre for ‘agricultural marketing’ (Shoup 2007: 4). The City’s economy is “dominated by agriculture and mining, with significant domestic, but not international, tourism”, where the flavour of rural life culture and activities are more dominant than the lifestyle of urbanised-industrial cosmopolitan cities (Alomoush and Al-Naimat, 2020). The city is not one of the main touristic destinations such as Jerash and Petra, so it rarely attracts tourists and business projects from outside Tafila; this is exemplified by the absence of luxurious hotels that attract many international and domestic tourists around the globe. As far as the economic activities in the governorate of Tafila are concerned, it does not have private commercial establishments with more than 250 workers (Jordanian Government 2013).

One of the problems facing the city is public transport, which may hinder the prosperity of domestic and international tourism, and consequently the development of the city. This is exemplified in the infrequency of public transport south of Qadsiyya (near Dhana) (see Bradley 2006). According to my fieldwork

observations and my own personal experience in the city, public transport, especially from Tafila to Amman and other cities near Amman, is one of the reasons that hinders the city from development.

3. Methodology

My research methodology is based on both quantitative and qualitative data: digital photographs, observational notes and interviews. In addition to street/site names and other state-related signs, the corpus of this study was gleaned from 143 signs on the fronts of food stores (e.g. supermarkets, butcher's shops, and grocery shops), restaurants, mobile stores and bookshops, fashion stores, and others (commercial banks, pharmacies, and coffee shop corners). Signs solely featuring international brand names, such as *Samsung* and *Huawei*, were excluded from the current study, but if they occurred within an English business name, they were considered as part of the English wording. Using a digital camera, we took cityscape photographs between December 2019 and January 2020. The two commercial main areas in Al-Eis and Tafila city centre were selected for examining the status of English in one of the least privileged cities and towns in Jordan. These two commercial areas are the most visited by Tafilians and people from outside the city, temporarily living in it for work or study, so a wide array of signs were found on the fronts of commercial businesses.

The second stage of data collection included 25 interviews with students from the Tafila Technical University English department. The interview data were collected from them in March 2020. The interviewees are male and female students of ages from 19 to 51, but most of them were in their early twenties. As far as their gender is concerned, they were 12 female and 12 male students, and one male tourist guide. I conducted different types of interviews, using non-traditional techniques, such as Google classroom platform, WhatsApp, and Gmail, as the outbreak of the coronavirus disease has made many governments around the globe, including the Jordanian government, close down universities, so face-to-face lecturing was replaced by online distance-learning.

The questionnaire designed was divided into three main sections. The first section was intended for collecting information about the students: occupation, age, and gender. The second section was mainly designed for the identification of the languages used by the students across a range of domains in and outside the city. Most importantly, the third section was aimed to elicit information about the LL of the city, with a view to understanding the reasons behind the low visibility of English in the visual marketplace of the city.

4. Quantitative data analysis

While reviewing state-related signs, the language policy is largely bilingual, in both Arabic and English, whereby the former represents the main medium communication of the country and the latter indexes the language of globalisation and communication with the world. The top-down LL of Tafila reveals, as Figure 1 shows, that Arabic and English are often used. The most commonly used linguistic pattern is Arabic-English-Romanised Arabic (3 signs, approximately 37% of all signs). Arabic-only signs constitute 24% of all signs (two out of eight signs).

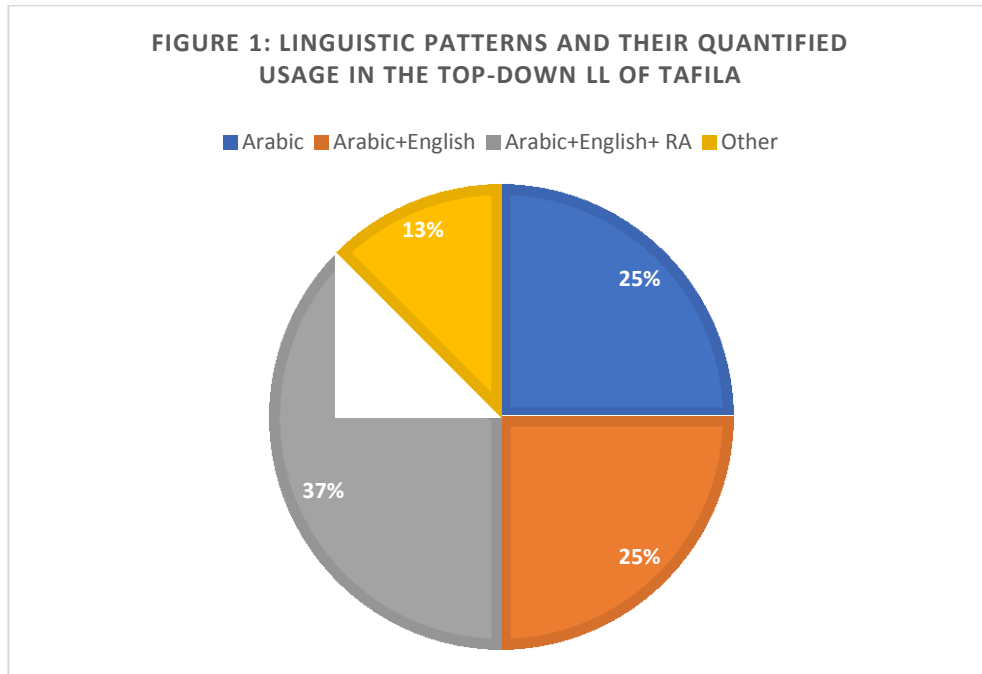


Figure 2. Tafila Technical University gate displaying both Arabic and English

In the bottom-down LL, as Table 1 shows, monolingual Arabic signs are largely the most visible ones, with an approximate percentage of 62.5 of all signs (85 out of 136), Arabic monolingual signs which include الراشد للاكسسوارات meaning 'Alrashid For Accessories' followed by elaborative information هدايا العاب meaning 'headscarfs, gifts, games, and Hijabs', حلويات السفير meaning 'Al-Safeer Sweets', and شاورما ع كيفك meaning 'As you like it Shawarma' followed

by elaborative information شاورما دجاج برغر سندويشات عصائر meaning ‘shawarma, chicken, burger, sandwiches, and (soft) drinks’.

The visual visibility of English is only reserved to a limited number of signs.

Language	Food stores & restaurants	Mobile stores & Book shops	Fashion stores	Others	Total	%
Arabic	44	9	9	23	85	62.5
Arabic-RA	4	-	-	-	4	3
Arabic+English	5	4	7	9	25	18.4
Arabic+Arabicised English	2	-	-	-	2	1.5
Arabic+English-Romanised Arabic	3	2	-	2	7	5.1
Arabic+English+AE	1	-	2	-	3	2.2
Other	2	8	-	-	10	7.3
%						

As far as the bi-/multilingual practices enacted on shopfronts are concerned, the Arabic-English pattern is the most used combination on storefronts (25 out of 136 signs, approximately 18.4%), as it appears on the storefronts of food stores and restaurants (5), mobile stores and book shops (4), fashion stores (7), and other stores (9) (see Figures 3 & 4).



Figure 3. A food store displaying English and Arabic



Figure 4. A fashion store featuring English in much larger font size

The Arabic+English- Romanised Arabic linguistic pattern is the second most used (7 out of 136, about 5.1 % of all signs), as shown in Figure 5. The remaining bi/multilingual patterns involve the use of mixed codes (Romanised Arabic and Arabicized English) alongside Arabic and/or English (See Figure 6).



Figure 5. A mobile store using The Arabic+English- Romanised Arabic linguistic pattern.



Figure 6. A newly established restaurant displaying AE in much larger font size

5. Attitudinal assessment of Tafila's commercial cityscape

In a response to the question whether English is widely used on shopfronts in the LL of Tafila, the vast majority of the interviewees gave a negative answer. Participant 25 elaborates on it, stating that:

I do not think so. I have been living at Tafila since I was born. I have only noticed the use of English on a few shop signs, especially on some fashion stores, where both English and Arabic are used for business naming, such as 'Jolly Chic' and 'Royal Home'. (Female student aged 20)

The explanations provided by many interviewees for the low visibility of English in the commercial cityscape include: (a) the low density of population in the city; the lack of high industrial and commercial activities as in other big cities; and a higher rate of English proficiency among the populations of other cities.

Participant 1 commented on why she thought that English was not so widely used as other big cities in Jordan:

I said no, because the area is not highly populated, so there are not many stores as in other cities such as Amman and Zarqa. In addition, many famous domestic brand names, such as Habibieh and Al-Najmeh are not available in the city. There is a store selling desserts called Al-Qaisar, but it is well-known that this store should sell pizza rather than sweets, as in other provincial cities in Jordan. It should be noted that English appears on 5 % of all signs in Tafila's commercial cityscape. (Female student aged 22)

According to Participant 6, the demographic structure and rural life of Tafilians may lead to the low visibility of English on shopfronts in the city:

In comparison with other cities, such as Amman and Zarqa, Tafila is relatively thinly populated, so we can notice that Tafilians do not belong to diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, which play a key role in the spread of any language or dialect other than the local ones. Most of the people living in the city are local residents who did not come from outside or from any other governorate in the country. One of the important reasons is that the demographic structure still maintains its rural life, which leads to resisting any change in its linguistic concepts that have been rooted in the lives of Tafilians for a long period of time (Male student aged 20).

According to many participants (e.g. participant 24 & 10), tourism is also one of the reasons that may determine commercial businesses to use English on shopfronts. Participant 10 commented on that:

I think that the use of English directly relates to the number of tourists. In other big cities, the number of tourists is much higher than in Tafila, so the high number of tourists in Amman, for example, significantly contributes to the higher visibility of English on shopfronts. (Male student aged 21)

Some participants (13 & 14) refer to other reasons: the distance from the capital city and lack of job opportunities in the city, as opposed to other cities in northern Jordan. Participant 17 thinks that the government do not offer proper educational services, as provided in other cities:

I think that we cannot compare the LLs of Amman and Zarqa with that of Tafila. The government takes much more care of Amman and Zarqa than of Tafila in the domain of education. Other things to blame are the local culture and the cultural diversity that exists in big cities, as opposed to Tafila. (Male student aged 22)

It can be assumed that the low visibility of English in the city is a direct result of the marginalisation of the city at economic, industrial, cultural, and educational levels. The demographic structure of the population may also explain why English is minimally used on commercial signs.

6. Conclusion

The quantitative results indicate that visual English is infrequently used on food stores, only sometimes on mobile store fronts, and to a small degree on fashion stores and other establishments. The use of English on shop signs is so significant that some sign initiators in the city have included the most dominant language in the world on their storefronts as a means of publicising their businesses and building up a considerable size of clientele; however, many businesses, as Table 1 shows, have used Arabic much oftener than English.

“The minimal display of English is linked to less modernity in the cities (Ma’an and Tafila) and the relative absence of non-Arabic speaking citizens”; this seems to be one of the reasons behind the low visibility of English inside shopping malls (Alomoush, Al-Naimat 2020: 113), but there are other reasons related to the non-mobile LL of the city, as displayed in the different types of interviews conducted.

It seems that the people living in the province of Tafila remain relatively disadvantaged in their access to public transport, employment opportunities, and

education, which explains why English is minimally displayed on its shopfronts. The improvement of facilities in the city (e.g. better intercity public transportation) would increase the chances of more cultural diversity; the same is true of tourism that functions as one of the major drivers of the local economy of urban environments, where it maximises the visibility of foreign languages, especially English (cf. Du Plessis 2010: 9).

Based on what has been established so far, the area of Tafila has a low degree of visual multilingualism, and consequently a low level of multilingual vitality. This sharply contrasts with the LL of visual touristic Jordan, where “tourism industry has turned the city into a multilingual and multicultural urban centre”. (Al-Naimat, Alomoush 2018: 3).

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